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Plugging Your Product

By Michele A. Berdy

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Продукт: product (more or less)

Lately it seems that every time I turn on the radio or television, I'm hearing the word продукт (product). And it's not just that I'm hearing the word, but I'm hearing it in unexpected contexts. Like a show about tourism where the guest talked about her company's новый туристический продукт по Америке (literally, "new tourism product for America"). After listening awhile, I realized that this продукт is nothing more than a new tour route.

And then there was a theatrical impresario on a talk show, yammering about how the public would love his new продукт, which turns out to be nothing more mysterious than a new production of an old play.

What's up with продукт?

Продукт is a loan word that means pretty much what product means — the result of some form of human endeavor, a creation of some sort or a substance resulting from a chemical or

other process.

In economic terms, it can sometimes be a synonym of товар (commodity, good). It's this sense that has turned продукт into a модное словечко (fashionable little word). We're all so jaded and world-weary, you know. The grand result of human creativity — be it a play, concert, a work of art or even an innovative tour route — is nothing more than продукт to be sold on the marketplace of life.

Thank heaven, not everyone in Russia is crazy about this usage. One actor asserted: Я больше не хочу чувствовать себя продуктом на рынке (I no longer want to feel like a product on the market).

You also come across продукт in banks, where you might be offered such unfathomable options as высокотехнологичные банковские продукты (high-tech banking products). This is nothing more than loans applied for online or access to your account via your cell phone. I have to say that whenever I see the word продукт with banks, I shudder as I recall all those innovative "mortgage products" that were so popular in the United States pre-2008. We all know how well those продукты worked out.

In "normal" Russian, продукт can be used like good old product — the result of something. Это лишь болезненный продукт его воспалённого воображения (This is merely the sick product of his fevered imagination). Or: Русская интеллигенция с её своеобразным моральным обликом есть наиболее характерный продукт послепетровской истории страны (The Russian intelligentsia, with its unique moral character, is the most characteristic product of the post-Petrine history of the country).

People can be products, too — not goods to be sold, but the product of their time and place. For example: Он типичный продукт Петербурга (He is a typical product of St. Petersburg). Sometimes it seems that Russian speakers are uncomfortable with the new "commodity" sense of продукт and put the word in quotes even when using it in the standard literary sense. For example, on a blog for new mothers, one wrote: Как я могу разочароваться в "продукте" своего воспитания? (How can I be disappointed in the "product" of the way I raised him?)

There is one meaning of the Russian word that differs from English — the plural form продукты, which means groceries or foodstuffs, sometimes redundantly rendered as продовольственные продукты (food groceries) or продукты питания (foodstuffs for eating).

What with all these tours, food, actors, plays and people, Russia's валовой внутренний продукт (gross domestic product) should be huge. Where is all that продукт going?

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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