

The Really Cool People Say 'Dot'

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Хомяк: hamster, home page

What do soap, a hamster, a doggie and a little mouse all have in common?

In English, not much. In Russian, they are all slang terms connected with your computer and the Internet.

They are also wonderful illustrations of the clever and diverse ways in which the Russian language claims, transforms and reinvents words from English.

Take мыло (soap). When e-mail appeared, Russians decided to use this similar-sounding native word to describe it. E-mail and мыло can be the message that is sent (also called сообщение, месседж or месара), or the way it's sent (also called электронная почта —

electronic mail).

When sending e-mail in Russian, slangy speakers use either по and the dative (по мылу) or на and the accusative (на мыло). Отправь мне его телефон по мылу (Send me his telephone number by e-mail). Пользователь может рассылать на мыло опросы, приглашения и прайс-листы (The user can send surveys, invitations and price lists by e-mail).

Sadly, it seems that whimsical мыло is being pushed out by the loan word имейл, aka e-mail, эмеля, е-мейл, емейл or емайл.

Russians apparently didn't like saying хом (home — a web site's home page), so they wittily transformed хом into a similar and familiar Russian word: хомяк (hamster). This is not to be confused with English computer slang, in which the hamster is a wireless (tailless) mouse.

And speaking of mice, here Russians use a calque — that is, they translated the slang word "mouse" into the Russian equivalent мышь or мышка. If you want a wireless one, ask for беспроводная мышь. And remember that the mouse may sit on a pad in Des Moines, but in Tula the мышка runs along a коврик (a small rug).

The most interesting of the computer creatures is собачка (sometimes собака). In standard Russian, собачка is a little dog. In the world of modern communications, собачка denotes @ — the "at sign."

If you're curious, in standard Russian, @ is called коммерческое at or эт (the commercial "at"). When giving your e-mail address, you say or spell out your юзернейм (user name), sometimes called ник, and then say: "собачка мейл точка ру" (at mail dot ru). The really cool people say дот instead of точка.

No one knows why @ is called собачка. Some speculate that the sign looks like a little dog with a curled tail to Russians, probably because other languages have taken to calling it a snail, pig's tail, elephant's trunk or monkey's tail. But in other languages it's a pretzel, roll-mop herring, strudel or a cinnamon roll. And if we're going for analogies with foreign tongues, Russians could have called it anything from улитка (snail) to баранка (wheel).

I have another theory, which is probably absolutely wrong. But since it can't be proven either way, here it is: Собачка has several meanings other than a small dog. It's the pull-tab on a zipper, the trigger of a rifle, the locking device that prevents a gear from moving backward and any sort of small wedge. In other words, собачка is bit of a thingamajig.

The word has also generated the nice slangy verb присобачить, which means to attach or stick something onto something. The not-very-handy do-it-yourselfer might ask: Как присобачить молдинг? (How do you stick molding on?)

In my theory, through various linguistic associations in Russian, that thingamajig odd sign that gets wedged or stuck between your user name and your server became собачка.

Or not. In any case, at least you know how to say your email address in Russian.

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