

Slacking Off

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Сачок: net, lobby, slacker

A couple of weeks ago, President Vladimir Putin made a joke about Pussy Riot and group sex — or rather he quoted an old Soviet joke about group sex. Like all old jokes, there are about 25 versions of it, but the punch line is always something like this: групповой секс лучше, чем индивидуальный, потому что можно сачкануть (group sex is better than individual sex because you can —).

Rats! Just when it gets interesting, the poor foreigner is slayed by slang.

Out come the reference books. Search engines are set in motion. Phone calls are made. In researching this tantalizing word, I have learned a tremendous amount about ancient Russian games, the habits of university students, the joy of fishing and butterfly hunting and the extraordinary fantasies and speculations of an army — and navy — of armchair etymologists.

It all starts with сачок (or сак), which is a net used to catch butterflies or fish. And also, according to one serious etymologist, a dialect word for a bone used in an ancient game called бабки — something like skittles.

But more to the point — and the original Soviet joke — сачок is a goof off, loafer or slacker. It's also a place where students hang out between classes or go to skip them. For example, the humanities building of Moscow State University has большой и малый сачок (big and little hang-outs).

Сачковать/сачкануть is the verb from сачок. In some contexts, it means to catch something in a net. Я ловила рыбу, а муж её сачковал (I reeled in the fish, and my husband netted it). In slang, it means to play hooky, goof around, slack off or avoid doing whatever you are supposed to be doing.

This slang meaning seems to have appeared in the 1960s, or at least that's the earliest I can find it in print. The mystery is how a net morphed into a way to ditch work.

One etymology is the ancient game theory: бить or давить сачка (hit or crush the bone) was what you did in the game of бабки. And since you played бабки instead of working, the phrase morphed into a verb that became a synonym for goofing off. The only problem with this theory is that it took at least five centuries for the linguistic metamorphosis to occur.

Another is the summer camp theory: catching butterflies with сачок was such an easy activity it became synonymous with slacking off. The problem with this version is that racing over fields, up hills and over dales for butterflies is not my idea of relaxation.

Then there is the army theory. This has some textual evidence: Сачковать — значит уклоняться от боевой и политической учёбы (Goldbricking means skipping combat and political lessons). However, the justification sounds a bit contrived. Supposedly, in the post-war Soviet army, one guy shot his rifle while the other caught the shell in a net, hence netting = not shooting = goofing off.

In the navy theory, сачок was the hammock sailors slept on, hence давить сачка (crushing the net) = not swabbing the deck = goofing off.

In any case, in the old joke the verb that sounded so intriguing in the context of group sex turns out to be anything but. I'd translate the punch line this way: Group sex is better than individual sex because you can skip out on the heavy lifting.

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