

Like a Pig in a Poke

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СВИНЬЯ: pig, swine, literally or figuratively

What do I know about pigs? I know that some are more equal than others, that you shouldn't cast pearls before them and that only when they fly will my apartment house management company fix the roof. And now, thanks to President Putin, I know that shearing them is a useless waste of time.

Pigs — or rather a piglet — came up in a comment about whether WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange and NSA-leaker Edward Snowden should be jailed. Putin said he'd rather not deal with the matter because "это всё равно что поросёнка стричь — визгу много, а шерсти мало" (it's like shearing a piglet — lots of squealing but little wool.)

I didn't quite see why this expression, which I thought was transparent in meaning, got so much media attention. Maybe journalists latched onto it because it was the first folksy

expression from Mr. Putin after a prosaic dry spell, or maybe because they were city folks. News flash for urbanites: pigs aren't furry.

In any case, in the Russian world, the pig (свинья), aka хрюшка, хавронья, свинка, пятачок and свинюшка (oinker, porker, piggy, porky, and piglet), doesn't have a good rep. When the word is applied to a person, it means someone with the habits of a pig — either gluttonous or filthy or both. Вчера вечером я наелся как свинья (Last night, I stuffed myself like a pig). Он живёт в грязи как свинья (He lives in filth like a pig). When surveying your teenager's room, you might use a pig related word: Твоя комната просто свинарник! (Your room is a pigsty!)

Свинство, the quality of being pig-like, can mean messiness. На столе было типичное свинство. Пепельница разбухла от окурков. (The table was a typical sty. The ashtray was overflowing with cigarette butts.) But more often свинство refers to the allegedly low and vile character of pigs.

Свинство is lowdown, nasty, contemptible behavior. It could be translated neatly as swinishness, but unfortunately no English speaker has actually used that word since 1929. When my house management company refused to look at my water-stained ceiling because I might have climbed up on a ladder and defaced the ceiling myself, my Russian "Какое свинство!" is something like "can you believe the gall of these people?" in English. Well, actually my response in both languages was colorfully obscene, but for the purposes of this column, let's pretend I called it свинство.

And then there are some nice little piggy expressions.

Подкладывать/подложить свинью (literally, to place a pig), an expression of obscure and highly contested origin, means to do something nasty to someone. Когда Сноуден остался в транзитной зоне аэропорта Шереметьево, он на самом деле подложил свинью России (When Snowden remained in the transit section of Sheremetyevo airport, he actually pulled a nasty trick on Russia).

Разбираться, как свинья в апельсинах (literally, to make sense of it like a pig about oranges) turns out to a standard comparison module in Slavic languages. The pattern разбираться, как домашнее животное в человеческой еде (to make sense of something like a domesticated animal in human food) is used across the Slavic-language world, with variations of animal and food. But it always means that someone doesn't know bupkis about something. Я разбираюсь в международных нормах о политическом убежище, как свинья в апельсинах (I know as much about international norms of political asylum as a pig about pineapples).

It looks like Snowden is like a pig about pineapples, too.

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