

Fighting Words

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September 04, 2014



Чмарить: to bully (slang)

Although I adore most things about the Russian language, there is a group of verbs I detest. Чмарить, угнетать, обижать, издеваться and притеснять all mean to persecute, bully, make fun of, oppress, torture or defile. Obviously I don't like the activities they express. But I especially loathe them as a translator, since the meaning almost always depends on context. In some cases, the word издеваться can mean to tease someone. In other cases, it means to defile. And in still other cases, it means to torture.

So every time I see one of these words, my fingers twitch over the keyboard as I try to determine where the author is on the scale of atrocity.

Let's start with чмарить (also чмырить, чморить), a slang word that means to make fun of someone, to bully, to harass. It seems to be youth slang — in any case, almost all the examples I found are connected with schools or schooldays. Мальчик не понимает, что

лузер в этом коридоре не очкарик, которого он чмарит, а он сам (The kid doesn't get that he's the loser in the hallway, not the nerdy guy in glasses he is bullying).

Угнетать means to oppress. Often it is used to describe a psychological state caused by an emotion: Безвыходность ситуации нас угнетала (The hopelessness of the situation weighed heavily on us). Circumstances can oppress, too: Домашняя тишина стала угнетать его (The quiet at home began to oppress him). But the oppression can also be external. One woman blogger laments the workplace pattern of bonuses going only to her male colleagues. When she and her female cohorts complained to their boss, he said: "Я никого не угнетал!" ("I didn't discriminate against anyone!") In the end, she writes: "остаётся только мысль, что угнетают нас какие-то инопланетяне" (we're left with the thought that we are discriminated against by some kind of aliens from outer space).

Притеснять is also often used to describe oppression, persecution or discrimination of classes, races or religious groups. Новый король сильно притеснял пуритан (The new king brutally persecuted the Puritans). Or what Russians call друзья по интересам (interest groups): Владельцы кафе настаивали, что они не вправе притеснять своих курящих посетителей (Cafe owners insisted that they didn't have the right to discriminate against their clients who smoked). But it can also be personal and vicious: Недалёкий и мелочный отец жестоко притеснял сына (The stupid and petty father cruelly tormented his son).

We all know that обижать means to insult someone. When you ask your significant other whether he's really sure he can fix the dishwasher all by himself, he might respond: Обижаешь? (Don't insult me!) And then he might continue: В умении работать руками Бог меня не обидел (God didn't begrudge me the ability to work with my hands).

In other contexts, обижать is much darker and can mean emotional, physical or sexual torture: А этот подонок припёрся из своей деревни, чтобы детишек тут обижать (That lowlife crawled over here from his village to abuse our children).

Издеваться also has a wide range of meaning. When someone is joking around, you can say: Издеваешься? (Are you teasing me?) But at the other end of the spectrum, when police are vicious, you use the same verb: Менты издевались над ни в чём не повинными людьми (The cops tortured completely innocent people).

Язык издевается над нами? (Is the language tormenting us on purpose?)

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/09/04/fighting-words-a39078>