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The Russian-Language Generation Gap

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Паста: paste, pasta

Scene: dinner time in the Moscow apartment shared by an expat and the expat's Russian significant other. Both have just walked in the door and are very hungry. The significant other is pouring two glasses of wine, while the expat forages in the refrigerator and cupboards. Pickings are slim. The expat sighs and says: Давай я сделаю пасту.

Depending on the age and language sophistication of the significant other, that sentence is either complete nonsense: I'll make some paste; or delicious: I'll make pasta.

So what's going on here? It's interesting: The word паста has simply entered Russian several times. Once it came from Italian and meant fake jewelry or sculpture. Once it was imported from the French and meant any kind of creamy mass. This is probably the most common meaning: зубная паста, томатная паста (toothpaste, tomato paste). And now it's been brought back for a repeat performance to replace a previous Italian food import: макароны

(macaroni).

You might also have some kitchen confusion with the word бройлер, although here the confusion is in English, too. For most Russians of the older generation, бройлер is a young chicken, sometimes called цыплёнок-бройлер — which is a bit like calling it "young chicken young chicken." In any case, you can find all kinds of recipes for them: Решила запечь бройлера с яблоками. (I decided to cook a broiler with apples in the oven.) But if you have a modern imported oven, your modern domestic cook may use бройлер — that is, the open flame or heating element in the oven used for grilling. You have to know that to make sense of this recipe instruction: Нанесите соус на рыбу и выпекайте под бройлером. (Cover the fish with sauce and bake it under the broiler.) Fish under a chicken might be a bit protein-heavy.

Another word that has been imported twice sometimes makes it hard to understand the news. Шизофрения (schizophrenia) appeared in Russian decades ago and means a specific kind of psychological ailment. But smarty-pants Russian readers of English have figured out that schizophrenia informally means having two opposing opinions or positions, or vacillating between them. So when you see a headline, you don't immediately know what is meant. For example, one newspaper article is entitled: Французские власти впали в шизофрению на почве Мистралей. (The French authorities have gone schizophrenic over the Mistrals.) To older Russians, that might be a very strange headline that suggests the French leadership is experiencing severe psychological difficulties, perhaps even a psychotic break. But a younger reader familiar with the second imported meaning will understand that the leadership is vacillating in its approach. This is clarified by the second line: В Париже не могут определиться — выполнять контракт или нет? (In Paris they just can't decide — should they fulfill the contract or not?)

Travelers to the New World bring back some bad linguistic habits. They might call up a hotel in Tula and ask: Вакансии есть? (Are there any vacancies?) To which the older person who answers the phone might reply: Да, мы ищем шофёра. (Yes, we're looking for a driver.) Confusion ensues. The older person understands вакансия as a word borrowed from French a long time ago that means a job opening. The younger folks understand it as a word they borrowed from English after seeing it on a thousand motel signs meaning "available room."

Talk about the generations just not understanding each other!

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