

Beware That 'Goochi' Bag in Moscow

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

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Фейк: fake (duh)

Usually when a foreign word is picked up in Russian, it's because there isn't an exact native equivalent for what it denotes, like дедлайн (deadline). Or because Russians want a word with different connotations, like менеджер (Western-style manager) instead of управленец (Soviet-style manager). But sometimes a word gets borrowed because Russians seem to appreciate the range of meanings it has, or how easy it is to say and use. Such is the case with фейк (fake).

Фейк or the adjective фейковый can refer to anything ersatz. For example, it's what you call those great deals on brand-name clothes and accessories. Мы купили фейковые кроссовки, сделанные в ближайшем подвале — бренд Абибас. (We bought fake sneakers made in some cellar nearby. The brand name was Abibas.) Фейк can refer to drugs. Под видом дорогого препарата лоху впарят дешёвый фейк. (Under the guise of an expensive drug, they pass off cheap fakes to the unsuspecting public.)

But lately it is used most frequently to describe falsified news stories, photos and videos.

Some of these false stories seemed to be designed simply to draw traffic to a site. Фейк месяца: "новость" о свадьбе 12-летней норвежской девочки и 34-летнего мужчины. (Fake of the month — "news report" about the marriage of a 12-year-old Norwegian girl to a 34-year-old man.) Some have to do with events around the world, in various times and places. A glance at the Internet will inform you that, for example: Высадка американцев на Луну в 1969 г. — это фейк. (The American landing on the moon in 1969 was faked.) But most фейк examples have to do with the war in Ukraine: Очередной фейк российских СМИ о событиях в восточной Украине. (The latest fake report from the Russian media about events in eastern Ukraine.)

There are plenty of native Russian words for various kinds of fakes. When official Moscow responds to a fake news report, they don't use the borrowed English word: МИД России назвал фальшивкой сюжет телевидения Латвии. (The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called the Latvian television report a fake.) Фальшивка also seems to be slang from фальсификация (falsification) and refers to a document, report or other paper fake. It made its appearance on the language scene right after the 1917 Revolution. I was amused — in a sad sort of way — to see how little has changed over the years. An old Soviet dictionary uses this example to help define the word: антисоветские фальшивки империалистов (the imperialists' fake anti-Soviet documents).

But фальшивка can also be counterfeit cash. Pay attention if you see a newspaper announcement like this: Внимание, фальшивка! Участились случаи выявления поддельных денежных купюр достоинством 5 000 рублей. (Watch out for counterfeit bills! More fake 5,000 ruble notes have been discovered.)

The standard Russian word for a fake of something made or manufactured is подделка. This is nicely deciphered as под (in imitation of) and the noun from the verb делать (something made). Как отличить оригинал от подделки? (How can you tell an original from a fake?) It's also the word used to describe a forged signature. Как защитить подпись от подделки? (How can you keep your signature from being forged?)

Reading about fakes can make you a bit paranoid. One blogger plaintively asked: Как защищаться от фейков? (How can you protect yourself from fakes?) The answer was a new twist on an old Russian expression: Никому не доверяй, а проверяй всё. (Don't trust anyone, and double-check everything.)

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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