

The Cheek! Some Useful Russian Insults

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

March 12, 2015



Бесстыдник: shameless reprobate

Lately I have taken to sputtering. As I read or listen to or watch the news, I find myself uttering strange staccato sounds and making odd tsking noises, like an old teletype machine clicking out the headlines.

Ah, how I envy native Russian speakers. Russian is great for expressing indignation. First, intonation patterns let your voice rise to a crescendo of outrage and then fall, like the hammer of the gods, on your exclamation mark. Just try shouting Ты что? Спятил? (What? Are you out of your mind?) Feels great, doesn't it?

And then there are loads of damning adjectives you can use. In that curious way of Russian, most of the derogatory adjectives are not about being some variety of Bad, but rather of being various kinds of Not Good. That is, some of the most insulting Russian adjectives begin with the prefix без (without).

For example: бесстыжий (without shame). This adjective has several related nouns —

бесстыжесть, бесстыдство (shamelessness) and бесстыдник (a shameless reprobate, someone with no sense of shame). In the old days and sometimes today in some circles as well, the lack of shame has a sexual connotation. Бесстыжая женщина is a shameless hussy. But lies are often uttered without shame, too: Бесстыжая ложь, увы, стала нормой нашей жизни. (Alas, brazen lies are now a social norm.) And shameless people do all sorts of nasty things, even though there isn't a convenient name for them in English: Город весь разорили, всю Россию нашу разорите, бесстыдники! (You robbed the city blind and now you're going to do the same to all of Russia. For shame!)

Another adjectival insult is to be without conscience — бессовестный. This is a very common Russian insult, applied to naughty pets and children as well as criminals and miscreants. When applied to a dog who just tore a pillow to shreds, it's a bit hard to translate literally. Dogs in English-speaking environments don't seem to have consciences that they can lose. So бессовестный пёс is the more generic bad dog. Politicians, however, are believed to have consciences, at least in theory: В преддверии выборов власть особенно бессовестна и цинична. (Just before elections the authorities are especially unscrupulous and cynical.)

Another cutting insult is беззастенчивый (without embarrassment), often applied to lies and any kind of legal or moral violation. Это было беззастенчивым нарушением международных соглашений и норм международного права. (That was a flat-out violation of international treaties and the norms of international law.)

Then there is the interesting adjective беспардонный (without apology), which does not have a positive antonym — that is, the word пардонный doesn't exist. Here the notion is someone who is unapologetically bad. На смену руководителям 90-х пришли ещё более беспардонные и циничные начальники. (The leaders of the 1990s were replaced by men who were even more remorseless and cynical.)

All of these insults are based on the touching belief that human beings have a conscience and a sense of shame when they go against it. Unapologetic, conscienceless and shameless behavior can be expressed in one vivid Russian expression: хоть плюй в глаза — всё божья роса. (literally, "they/he/she can spit right in your eye and call it God's dew.") In English this might be conveyed by a combination of body parts and products. Официальное сообщение об убийстве? Плюют в глаза, а говорят, что божья роса. (The official statement on the murder? It's a bald-faced lie. Can you believe the gall!)

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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