The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Mind Reader

By Michele A. Berdy

July 19, 2015



Скани́ровать мы́сли: to scan thoughts

A while back an interesting new Russian phrase caught my eye: сканировать мысли (to scan thoughts). After some research, I discovered that there are three separate usages floating around. The first is actually сканировать мозга (to do a brain scan), a medical procedure you do while hoping the technicians won't find anything interesting.

The second is the sci-fi сканировать мысли, as in "американские ученые научились сканировать мысли человека" (American scientists have learned how to scan a person's thoughts). The kind of person who writes this wears a tinfoil hat to keep those Nosy Parker Americans from invading his brain.

But the third usage is fun — сканировать мысли as a kind of high-tech way of describing mind reading. Most of this kind of usage is a bit fey, and a lot of it has to do with former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's purported belief that Russia's mineral wealth is too

important to belong to one country.

This bit of nonsense was traced back to a 2006 article in Rossiiskaya Gazeta, in which the author joked that he and his colleagues "провели сеанс подключения к подсознанию госсекретаря Олбрайт" (conducted a session of tapping into the subconscious of Secretary of State Albright). While they were roaming around her brain, they "discovered" Albright's view of Russia's mineral resources.

Nine years later, this joke got raised to status of truth, only now in spectacularly garbled form: Nikolai Patrushev, secretary of the Security Council, reminded everyone that Albright once said, "России не принадлежит ни Дальний Восток, ни Сибирь." (Neither the Far East nor Siberia belongs to Russia.) So we started with what several pundits called сканирование мысли and ended with what I call испорченный телефон (broken telephone).

In Russian, tapping into someone's mind is more formally called телепатия (telepathy). Judging by dictionaries, attitudes towards телепатия have changed over the decades. In 1910 it was defined as "маловероятная способность некоторых лиц ощущать события,отдаленные от них временем и местом" (the improbable ability of some people to sense events taking place far away in time and place). But in 2009 another dictionary defined it as "научно не объяснённое явление передачи на расстояние информации о состоянии одного человека другому" (the scientifically unexplained phenomenon of transferring at a distance information about the state of one person to another). That is, it exists, but scientists just haven't figured out how it works.

Of course it exists. When you best friend calls you just as you are picking up the phone to call her, you both shout: телепатия! (It's telepathy!)

More colloquially this is читать мысли (to read someone's thoughts). This is what you insist you can't do when arguing with your significant other: Откуда я мог знать, что ты не хочешь пойти в ресторан сегодня вечером? Читать мысли я не умею. (How was I supposed to know that you didn't want to eat out tonight? I'm not a mind reader!)

A slightly more legitimate form of this is разгадать мысли (to intuit someone's thoughts). This is the sort of parlor trick you teach at conventions at $500 a pop: Психологи объяснят как разгадать мысли деловых партнёров по их телодвижению. (Psychologists will explain how to figure out what your business partners are thinking based on their body language.)

Of course, this doesn't work on everyone: Западные эксперты безуспешно пытается разгадать мысли Путина. (Western experts have had no success trying to gauge what Putin is thinking.)

But just in case — tinfoil hats all around.

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

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow

Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2015/07/19/mind-reader-a48244