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All the Russian Words You Need to Whine About Work

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Вка́лывать: to bust your gut

The other day I was reading an article about Russian words and expressions for working. The author pointed out that almost all the words and expressions for working hard in Russian have to do with physical labor. And while I'm not at all convinced that this is a purely Russian thing, as the author suggested, it did remind me of some useful words that should be in everyone's vocabulary. Because without them, how can you whine effectively?

Complaining about how hard you are working is an essential skill, especially when conversing with your significant other.

And you really need it when you are trying to get out of doing some chore, which, by the way, is отмазаться от работы. Remember that phrase so that you can feign indignation when you

are accused of it.

Back to work. It's not enough to say: Я так много работал! (I worked so much!) That's sissy work. To intensify it, you might add a time frame. In Russian, these are various versions of a 24-hour shift: Я работаю (I work) от зари до зари (literally, from dawn to dawn); от темна до темна (literally, from darkness to darkness); and от петухов до петухов (literally, from rooster [crow] to rooster [crow]). You might notice that these expressions already give you better I've-worked-too-much bragging rights than their English equivalents. English speakers just work "from dawn to dusk." Wussies.

Трудиться (to labor, work hard) is a nice word, although it's a bit too literary for home use. However, if you add a comparative — как (like a ...) — you may get some mileage out of it. Work up a good head of steam and begin: Я всю неделю трудился ... (All week I worked ...) как лошадь (like a horse); как вол (like an ox); как ишак (like a mule); the borderline improper как негр на плантации (like a slave [negro] on a plantation); or even the borderline weird как одержимый (like a man possessed).

Or go very Russian and say: Я тружусь с утра до вечера как папа Карло. (I work from morning to night like Papa Carlo.) So who is this guy? He's the organ-grinder who carves a talking wooden boy Буратино (Buratino) in the Russian version of Pinocchio. As I recall, in the original story папа Карло was kind of a lay-about and drinker, but who are English speakers to say? I mean, if English people put their noses to the grindstone and use some elbow grease, Russians can say anything they want about an old guy with a talking puppet.

Another strong verb for working is вкалывать, which originally meant to stick in something, like a needle or a nail. Now it's mostly slang for working your butt off: Нужно засучить рукава и вкалывать. (You need to roll up your sleeves and really put your back into it.)

My favorite work-hard word is пахать, which once upon a time meant to plow a field. But now it means to work your fingers to the bone doing anything at all. You come home from the office and moan: Статью пишу, пашу, как каторжный! (I'm writing an article! I've been working my butt off, literally "working like a convict.")

The only slight problem with that sentence is when your clever significant other sees through the slang and jokes: Да, да, да. Пот проливаешь. (Yeah, right. You're just dripping with sweat.)

That means: You're cooking dinner.

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