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Shifting Gears, Russian-Style

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Даунши́фтинг: downshifting, sort of



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Last week German Gref, the head of Sberbank, created a sensation at the Gaidar Economic Forum — and not by scaring the pants off everyone in the audience with his scathing picture of the state of the Russian economy.

No, he created my favorite kind of sensation — linguistic — and the most fun kind of linguistic sensation, too: the confusion caused by a foreign word being adopted

into Russian and undergoing changes in meaning.

The word in question popped up fairly early in Gref's speech, right after his first dire economic pronouncement: Нефтяной век уже закончился (The oil age is already over.) Then he continued: "Мы проиграли конкуренцию... и мы просто оказались в стане стран, которые проигрывают, в стане стран-дауншифтеров." (We didn't beat the competition ... and we've simply ended up in the camp of losers, in the camp of downshifter countries).

The general Russian response to this seems to have been: Huh?

Only one of the three meanings of downshifting made it into Russian: дауншифтинг means to drop out of high-stress, high-paying jobs for a simpler lifestyle. This is defined as отказ от традиционных ценностей ... таких, как карьера и материальные блага (rejecting traditional values such as a career and material well-being).

But дауншифтинг по-русски is sort of the reverse of what it is in the West. Russian downshifters rent out their apartments and live on the money in cheaper and warmer countries, like Thailand or India. So instead of cutting back, they crank it up: Уезжая в теплые края, они, как правило, повышают уровень жизни (When they go to warmer shores, for the most part they raise their living standards.)

In any case, a lot of Russian commentators couldn't match up this definition with Gref's comment. One person thought he might be flashing around English to show off. Another commentator really struggled to make sense of it: Дауншифтинг как многолетний отдых на иностранном курорте ... воспринимается обществом скорее положительно. Вероятно, Герман Греф имел в виду деградацию личности, которая может наступить при таком образе жизни. Судя по речи банкира, синоним слова "дауншифтер" — лузер. (Downshifting — many years relaxing at a foreign resort ... is most likely to be viewed positively by society. German Gref probably meant the personal degradation that might happen with that kind of lifestyle. Judging by the banker's speech, the synonym of "downshifter" is loser.)

But at the end of his speech, Gref returned to downshifting: кто хочет остаться в тренде и не хочет быть дауншифтером ... для этого не надо ехать в Индию, дауншифтером можно быть здесь ...если мы не хотим остаться страной-дауншифтером, нам нужно бежать очень быстро (Whoever wants to stay on track and not become a downshifter — you can be a downshifter here, you don't need to go to India to be one — if we don't want to be a downshifter country, then we have to get a move on it.)

Judging by the rest of Gref's speech, which was peppered with English, I think he might know another English meaning of downshifting: to slow down economically and fall behind. It looks like he melded two meanings and came up with his own Grefian meaning of downshifting: to opt out — of the rat race or the world economy.

Next he'll say we all need to lean in.

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