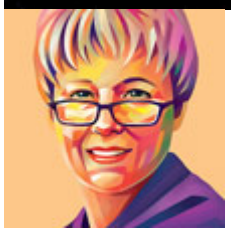
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Russia Discovers America, Snarkily

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Здра́вствуйте!: Puh-lease!

Most of the time when America comes up in the Russian news or conversations these days, it's not in a nice way. There is an accusation, a slur, or a wild claim. I mean, these days if a cat got hit by a KamAZ in Kazan, it's Barack Obama's fault.

But here's the small linguistic light at the end of the dark tunnel of snark: an expression about

America that's, well, okay. It's snarky, but it's not snarky about the U.S. Amazing.

And it's a very handy phrase to know, simple in construction and pleasant on the tongue: открывать Америку (to discover America). Sometimes it's just a statement of fact that means what it says: Итальянский путешественник Марко Поло мог открыть Америку за два столетия до Христофора Колумба (The Italian explorer Marco Polo might have discovered America two centuries before Christopher Columbus.)

Or it's a bit jokey, like this sign in a travel agency: Открываем Америку! Полезная и занимательная информация по Северной Америке (Let's discover America! Useful and entertaining information about North America.) Or like this plea: Может быть, вместо того, что бы открывать Америку и придумывать новые программы, стоит взять старые и чуть-чуть осовременить? (Maybe instead of discovering America and thinking up new programs, it makes sense to take something old and update it a bit?)

This discovery of a new world can even be a bit romantic: Влюбленные открывали для себя Рим, как Колумб когда-то открывал Америку (The lovers discovered Rome the way Columbus once discovered America.)

But most of the time, since America's already been discovered, it's a snarky way of saying: you're saying or doing something that's already been said or done a million times before you, what English speakers call reinventing the wheel.

Here's a guy who goofed: Я изобрёл однолинзовый окуляр. А через пятнадцать лет я узнал, что точно такой окуляр уже был изобретён и описан полвека назад. Оказывается, Америку открыл. (I invented a single-lens eyepiece. But 15 years later I found out that exactly the same eyepiece that I invented had been invented and described 50 years before. I had reinvented the wheel.)

But most of the time you don't use the phrase to admit your own failure. Your friends, family and colleagues use it to point out how behind the times you are. A good way to sneer is: "Тоже мне, открыл Америку!" In English this might be a few words dipped in sarcasm: That's all you've got? You're about a century late.

Since this is usually what English speakers call reinventing the wheel, you can also just say something like that in Russian: изобретать велосипед (to invent the bicycle). Он сотрудник новый, придумает что-нибудь, а окажется, велосипед изобрёл — всё это давным-давно придумано (He's a new employee, so he comes up with an idea and it turns out that he just reinvented the wheel — everything had been invented ages ago.)

If all of this is too hard to remember, you can resort to one of the first words you learned in Russian: Здравствуйте (hello). Here tone is crucial. Say it with deadpan or a sigh of exasperation and it means: You just figured that out? So when your significant has been driving in circles and finally suggests asking for directions, all you have to say is: Здравствуйте! Translation: Hellloooo! What have I been telling you for the last two hours?

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