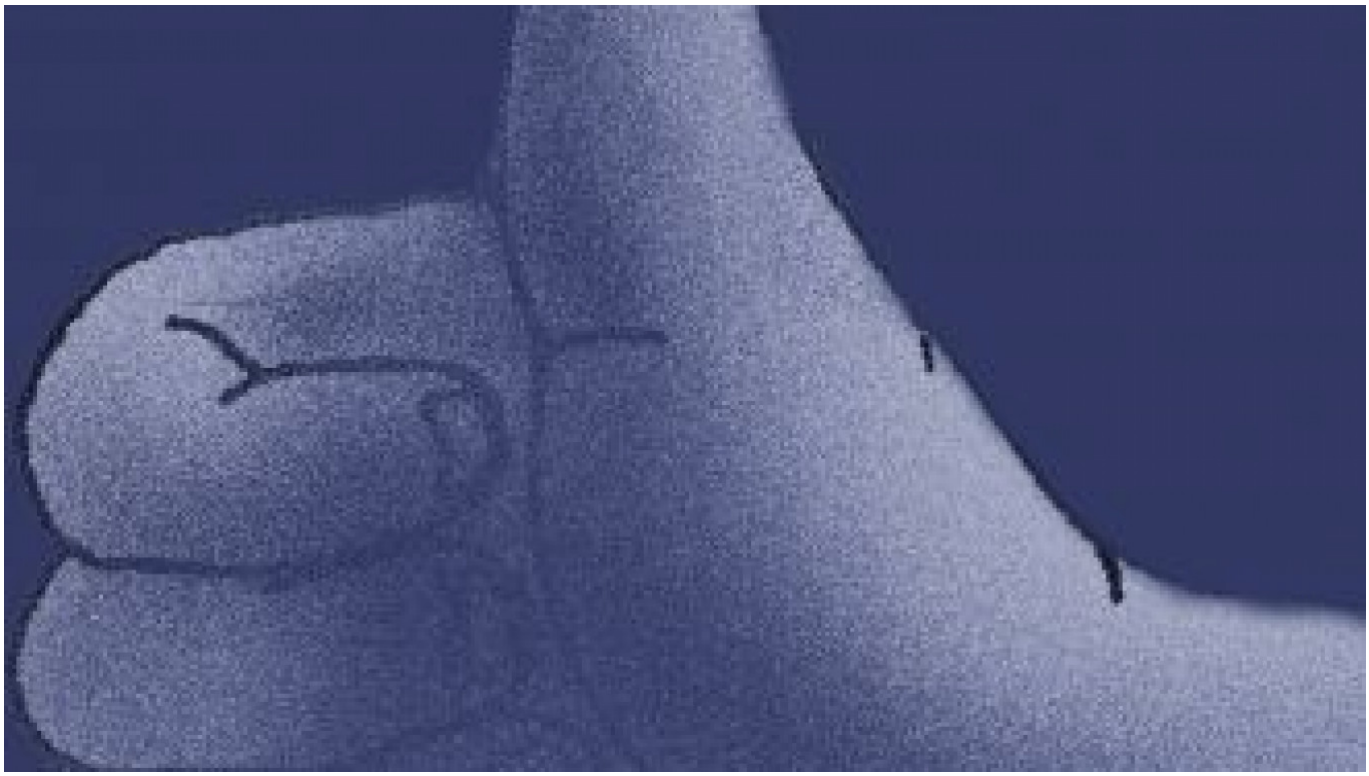
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Mistranslating Hollywood

By Michele A. Berdy

April 14, 2011



Ищейка: tracking dog, detective (slang)

It's late Saturday afternoon, and having finally accepted that spring has been canceled this year, the downcast expat trudges to the local shopping mall. Loaded down with booze and bags of high-calorie food (why not, if you're never going to take off your parka?), you (downcast expat) trudge to the video store. You stand in front of racks of DVDs, conveniently — for the non-native speaker of Russian — divided into genres like комедия (comedy), мелодрама (melodrama) and триллер (thriller).

You're thinking "Wag the Dog" would fit your dark mood. Only the film titles are in Russian, and you have no idea where to start looking. Of course, some titles are a snap to recognize: "127 Hours" is "127 часов"; "The Black Swan" is "Чёрный Лебедь." But the puns, connotations and associations in film titles make them tricky to translate. Glancing at racks of DVDs, I find both hits and misses — and another opportunity to expand my Russian.

Take "Wag the Dog." The title in English is an idiom that describes a situation when a small group or part of something (the tail) controls the whole (the dog). In Russian, the film is

called “Плутовство,” a deliciously gloppy-sounding word that refers to petty deceptions or cons. Although this conveys the deception at the center of the film — a political spin doctor manufacturing a fake war in Albania to distract voters from the president’s sexual dalliances with a minor — it misses the point of the title. I’d give it a thumbs-down. But I do recommend watching the film, especially in light of a certain European leader’s current legal woes. Life imitates art, you know.

I give a thumbs-up to the clever Russian title of the television series “The Closer.” In English, the phrase refers to a cop who nearly always closes her cases by getting the perp to confess. In Russian, it’s called “Ищейка.” From the verb искать (to search), ищейка is a tracker dog and, figuratively, a detective who hounds criminals. While the images are somewhat different, it’s terrific cop slang.

Thumbs-down on the title of this year’s Oscar winner, “The King’s Speech.” The title is a play on words referring to the British king’s speech defect and his radio speech that culminates the film. Russian has the exact same punning possibility: дефект речи (speech defect) and речь (public speech). So why did they call it “Король говорит!” (The King Speaks!)? It’s as if some film distributor misheard the title — and the rest was mistranslation history.

I’d give a thumbs-in-the-middle to the Russian title of another Oscar contender, “True Grit.” In Russian, it’s called Железная хватка (literally, “iron bite”), which conveys the image of an animal that clamps down on something and won’t let go. The title misses the sense of indomitable spirit in the word “grit” and is a bit tougher than the original, but it does convey the heroine’s perseverance. Close but no Oscar.

My Oscar for the best improvement in a film title goes to “Блондинка в законе” (“Legally Blonde”). A play on вор в законе (top dog, crime boss), the title makes more sense in Russian than in English.

But I give a double thumbs-down to “Мисс Конгениальность,” a supposedly literal translation of “Miss Congeniality.” Americans know that the Miss Congeniality award at a beauty pageant goes to the friendliest and sweetest contestant. In the movie, the joke is that the irascible FBI agent working under cover gets it. But in Russian, the false friend конгениальность means a similarity in spirit or talent. Miss Similarity? Miss Kindred Spirit?

Ironically, you might find this word’s adjectival form, конгениальный, in the phrase: Перевод конгениальный оригиналу (The translation is close in spirit to the original). In this case — not.

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