The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Word's Worth: Fussing With Russian

By Michele A. Berdy

July 22, 2016

Щепетильный: meticulous

The other☒day in an Internet discussion, someone mentioned the word
щепетильность, and
I thought: Oh, I hate that☒word. Great idea for a column, though.

So here I☒am on Day 3 of Me vs. Russian Word.

The problem☒with the noun
щепетильность or the adjective щепетильный is that there
isn't one word in English that covers☒the range of meaning and also has the same connotations and associations. The☒words come from the root of
щепа (splinter, sliver), and
so they have the sense☒of being concerned with every little splinter, that is, every little detail of☒something. They suggest a scrupulous honesty and precision in any matters of☒money or behavior. So someone who is щепетильный will not only calculate a business deal with precision☒and attention to every detail, he'll also count out the money he owes you down☒to

the last cent or kopek.

Щепетильный человек is close to obsessive and sometimes even a little fussy. But in a good way.

And when you hear the word, you run to your thesaurus because not one word, and not even two or three words, fit all the contexts it's used in.

Sometimes it might refer to modesty.
Дырчатый
металл скрывает тебя от шеи до
колен, поэтому щепетильным женщинам, наверное, пользоваться этими туалетами не слишком удобно (Metal with lots of holes in it covers you from neck to knees, so prudish women probably wouldn't find it that comfortable to use that toilet.)

In other cases, it refers to someone who is very proper, the kind of person who knows exactly what clothes to wear on what occasion, always writes thank you notes — hand written and posted by mail, of course — and would never slip up and use
ты
(informal you) with someone who is clearly
вы (formal you).
Она была принципиальна и
щепетильна в
отношениях с людьми (She was principled and utterly proper and correct in her dealings with people.) Она была чрезвычайно щепетильной женщиной и
никогда без стука не входила ко
мне (She was extraordinarily meticulous in her behavior and never came into my room without knocking.)

Sometimes I solve the translation problem by using the word scrupulously with an adjective.
Он был щепетильно чистоплотен и менял белье, как только
переодевался (He was scrupulously hygienic and changed his underwear every time he changed his clothes.)
Он не учил их порядочности, но так получилось, что всех его
учеников отличает щепетильная порядочность (He didn't teach them to be decent people, but it turned out that all of his students were renowned for being scrupulously honest.)

Or sometimes you can get away with just one word:
Лучше бы
фильмы про немцев снимать самим немцам, они к истории относятся щепетильно (Germans should make films about themselves — they are meticulous about their history.)

And in other cases
щепетильный is used not to describe someone who is scrupulous, but
about an issue or problem that requires scrupulous attention:
Извините, что анонимно

пишу, но вопрос щепетильный (Forgive me for writing anonymously, but this is a delicate issue.) This might, in some contexts, be touchy, thorny, or sensitive:
Её пенсия
дело щепетильное (Her pension is a tricky issue.)

And in still other cases you just throw out every word you've ever used and grab another word altogether: Я неприхотлив в
пище, но очень щепетильно отношусь к
незнакомым блюдам (I'm easy-going about food, but really picky about unfamiliar dishes.)

See why I hate this word?

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

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2016/07/22/the-words-worth-fussing-with-russian-a54695