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Lavrov, Donbass and the Duties of Translation

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Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov **Fabrizio Bensch / Reuters**

Ввязаться: to meddle, get involved , get entangled, take on

A couple of▣weeks ago Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov made a statement about Russia's▣involvement in the war in Donbass. Several correspondents and commentators▣immediately wrote that he had admitted military involvement, but then a chorus▣of Russian speakers and translators said he hadn't.

So did he▣or didn't he? You'd think it would be simple. But it's not — and it's a good▣example of the difficulties and duties of translation.

Lavrov was▣speaking at the second Primakov Lectures in Moscow. In response to a question▣about Russia "punching above its weight" in international relations, Lavrov▣said: Я читал и▣до сих пор▣слышу критику о▣том, что мы▣зря ввязались в▣конфликт на

Донбассе, зря ввязались в Сирийский конфликт (I've read and continue to hear criticism that we shouldn't have gotten involved in the conflict in Donbass, we shouldn't haven't gotten involved in the Syrian conflict.)

There are two key words in this statement. The first is конфликт (conflict), which can mean anything from a disagreement over paint color for the kitchen to a world war.

But it's the second word that caused most of the difficulties: ввязаться. It comes from a verb that means to tie and has the sense of getting entangled, tied up and stuck in something.

You can get involved in just about anything with this verb, like a conversation: Я пожалел, что вообще ввязался в этот разговор (I was sorry that I even got involved in that discussion.) Or a big task: Засучив рукава он ввязался в организацию института (He rolled up his sleeves and took on the task of setting up the institute.) Or a risk: Он удивился, что мы ввязались в эту авантюру (He was amazed that we jumped into such a risky project.)

In general, ввязаться is used for involvement in something difficult or unpleasant. Надо было спешно уходить, чтобы не ввязаться в дурацкую историю (We had to get out of there fast to avoid getting caught up in some idiotic situation.) Простите, что ввязался в бессмысленную дискуссию (Forgive me for getting involved in that pointless discussion.)

And then ввязаться is also used to describe getting into any kind of fight — with a person, group or nation. Он ввязался в потасовку с полицейскими (He got into a fight with a policeman.) Ввяжусь в драку, мне набьют рожу (If I get into a fight, they'll smash my face in.) Князь Дмитрий Донской ввязался в вооруженную борьбу против Крымского ханства (Prince Dmitry Donskoi took up arms against the Crimean Khanate.) Зря Китай ввязался в эту войну (China shouldn't have gotten involved in that war.) Ввязаться в войну легче, чем из неё выйти (It's easier to get into a war than it is to get out of one.)

Now we go back to what Lavrov said: мы зря ввязались в конфликт на Донбассе, зря ввязались в Сирийский конфликт (... we shouldn't have gotten involved in the conflict in Donbass and shouldn't have gotten involved in the Syrian conflict.) Since Russia is involved militarily in the Syrian conflict, by using the same verb about Donbass, it seems clear that he is admitting military involvement there, too.

Could he mean involvement in negotiations or discussions about Donbass? That's how his statement was spun by the ministry the next day. But it's unlikely, first because negotiations are a good thing and ввязаться is generally used with bad things. And second, that interpretation doesn't make sense within the context of the entire sentence — and reality. The sentence begins: Я читал и до сих пор слышу критику о том (I've read and still hear criticism about...) Is the world criticizing Russia for being a party to negotiations over the conflict in Donbass? No, the criticism is over military involvement.

So he admitted it, right?

Alas, no.

Without a word that unambiguously means military action, Lavrov's statement is open to interpretation. As the lawyers say, you can make a case that he meant something else. Besides, to be fair, he was speaking off the cuff. People get tired, they misspeak, they use the wrong word, they call their wife by the name of their daughter or say they are going to Brazil when they mean Brazaville.

So here translators have to be as non-specific in English as Lavrov was in Russian: "involvement in the conflicts."

What did he really mean? Only he knows.

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