The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Fun Fact Friday

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August 18, 2017



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На все корки: harshly, through and through

I've been so caught up in false friends and politics — and if that isn't tautology, I don't know what is — that I'd forgotten some of the finer pleasures of language acquisition: fun facts.

Today's fun facts are about weird expressions that mean strongly, fast, intensively, all out, passionately, or loudly. They are often, though not always, used to intensify criticism of people, objects or events. For example, you might use this curious expression: во всю ивановскую (loudly, literally "on to all of ivanovskaya"): Родители отругали пацана во всю ивановскую (His parents yelled at the boy at the top of their lungs.)

There are two explanations for the origin of the expression, both connected with the Kremlin. One is that scribes read royal decrees on Ivanovskaya Ploshchad, the square in front of колокольная Ивана Великого (the Ivan the Great Bell Tower), and they had to

shout▪them on to all of Ivanovskaya (во всю ивановскую) so everyone could hear. The other▪explanation is that it comes from bell-ringers' professional slang. Apparently▪the full complement of bells in the tower is called ивановская, and since there are 22 of them,▪with the largest weighing over 65 tons, ringing all of them —во всю▪ивановскую — makes▪a deafening racket.

You can do lots▪of activities loudly: Девка тут▪сидит и храпит во всю ивановскую (The girl is sitting right by us and snoring loud enough to wake the▪dead.) Я хохотала во▪всю ивановскую (I laughed so hard you could hear▪me in the next county.) But the expression also means doing something all out,▪even if it's silent: Ребёнок спит во▪всю ивановскую (The child is sound asleep.)

To make▪criticism even more critical, add the expression на все▪корки. Although there▪is some squabbling among etymologists about this, it seems that here корки comes from the verb корить (to scold, criticize), so на все▪корки means you▪really let someone have it. This isn't a very common expression these days, but▪you might find it in literature and it's quite satisfying to say: Литературный критик разругал молодого автора на все корки (The literary critic▪gave the young writer a real tongue lashing.)

Next up is▪the phrase почём зря. I wish I could tell you the fun▪fact of where this expression came from, but I'm at a loss. If you translate▪the words literally, you get nonsense: how much in vain. Forget that. The▪phrase means: lots of, strongly, harshly, fully. В▪этом городе стреляют почём зря (In this city, people shoot off▪their guns all over the place.) Прошлым летом он посадил её за руль автомобиля, и уже▪к концу отпуска Катя гоняла почём зря (Last▪summer he put her behind the wheel, and by the end of her vacation Katya was▪driving all over like crazy.)

Here's a fun▪expression with undisputed origins. It's definitely from the animal world: в хвост и в гриву (literally "in the tail and▪mane"). These are the two places a rider slaps a horse to make it go faster. You▪can do just about anything this way, although you really shouldn't: Прораб▪эксплуатировал мужиков в хвост и в гриву (The foremen brutally exploited his▪workers.)

Another▪strange expression is на чём свет стоит — also▪from the animal world, in a way. It literally means "what the world stands on."▪Etymologists think this came from the pagan belief that the world is hurtling▪through space on the back of an enormous beast. It is an adverbial phrase that▪means through and through and usually modifies shouting, criticizing, or▪cursing: Отец ходил по▪саду и ругал грозу на чём свет стоит (My father walked in the garden and cursed▪the thunderstorm with all his might.)

Or, in the▪case of odd Russian expressions: ▪Я▪кляла▪себя на чём свет стоит, что ввязалась в это дело (I cursed myself on all that was▪holy for getting involved in this matter.)▪▪▪▪

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/08/18/russian-fun-fact-friday-a58699