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Being Knowledgeable in Russian Is Harder Than You Think

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Знание: knowledge

September 1 is big deal in Russia and the other countries that once made up the Soviet Union. Первое сентября — красный день календаря! (The first of September is a red-letter day!) It's the first day of school, when parents spend thousands of rubles on big bouquets of flowers for their children's teachers, and boys and girls march off to school in their suits and hair bows and shiny shoes.

The day is actually a state holiday, what I thought was День Знания (Day of Knowledge) until I looked it up and discovered that I was wrong. It's День Знаний — the genitive plural of knowledge. Since knowledge and знание contain, as it were, a great number of facts, skills, understanding, expertise, and experience, a plural form seems like gilding the lily.

But apparently the plural form знания has the notion of "the arts and sciences," usually in the phrase области знаний (fields of knowledge). So День Знаний is Knowledge Day, but with the added connotation of "a day celebrating all fields of knowledge."

Век живи, век учись! (Live and learn.)

This got me thinking about kinds of knowledge and words for them in Russian. Знание is fairly straightforward — it is knowledge of almost any kind. When someone wants to assert his or her authority, they start off with Говорю со знанием дела (I know what I'm talking about, literally "I'm speaking with knowledge of the matter"). Основная цель образования ⊠ дать практические знания (The main goal of education is to provide practical knowledge.)

Знание is slightly different from познание, which is more the process of learning something. For example, the tree of good and evil in Russian is древо познания добра и зла (literally the "tree of the comprehension of good and evil"). Научное сообщество основано на принципе свободы информации и исповедует идеал стремления к познанию (The academic community is based on the principle of freedom of information and propagates the ideal of striving to acquire knowledge.)

The highest form of knowledge is эрудиция (erudition), a word and phenomenon that you don't come across very often. Он сразу производил впечатление своей манерой общения и богатой эрудицией (One was immediately struck by his social manner and erudition.)

And finally there is вежество, one of those words that is much more commonly used in its negative form: невежество (ignorance, backwardness). The positive form, вежество, is wisdom in the Biblical sense and is used rarely, often in quotes: Забота родителей в отношении дочерей ⊠ обучение их "вежеству," сохранение их целомудрия (Parents took care of their daughters, teaching them "wisdom" and to be chaste.) Here "вежество" might be interpreted as "old-fashioned morals, house-keeping, cooking and other occupations for the fairer sex."

Russians also talk about просвещённость (enlightenment), образованность (being well-educated) and начитанность (being well-read) as qualities to strive for.

A simpler level of knowledge is осведомлённость, which has more of the sense of being informed or aware of something. Подавляющее большинство опрошенных демонстрировало удивительную осведомлённость в вопросе пенсионной реформы (The overwhelming majority of people polled were amazingly well-informed about the issue of pension reform.) This is a bit deeper than информированность, which means being informed about something, but perhaps not terribly deeply: Цель этого мероприятия: повышение информированности населения о проблемах психического здоровья (The objective of the event is to raise the population's awareness of mental health issues.)

The moral of all this? Russian culture, as reflected in the language, makes many distinctions among kinds of knowledge, learning, and comprehension and holds them all as very high values. As one writer explained: Для того, что мы называем "интеллигентностью" и "культурностью", в XVIII веке синонимом была "светскость", в средние века — "вежество", в древности — humanitas... это, во-первых, разум, а во-вторых, умение

держать себя в обществе. (What we call being “highly cultured” was called “bon ton” in the 18th century, “wisdom” in the middle ages, and humanitas in antiquity... it meant, first of all, “reason” and second, the ability to behave correctly in society.)

A good thought for the start of the school year.

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