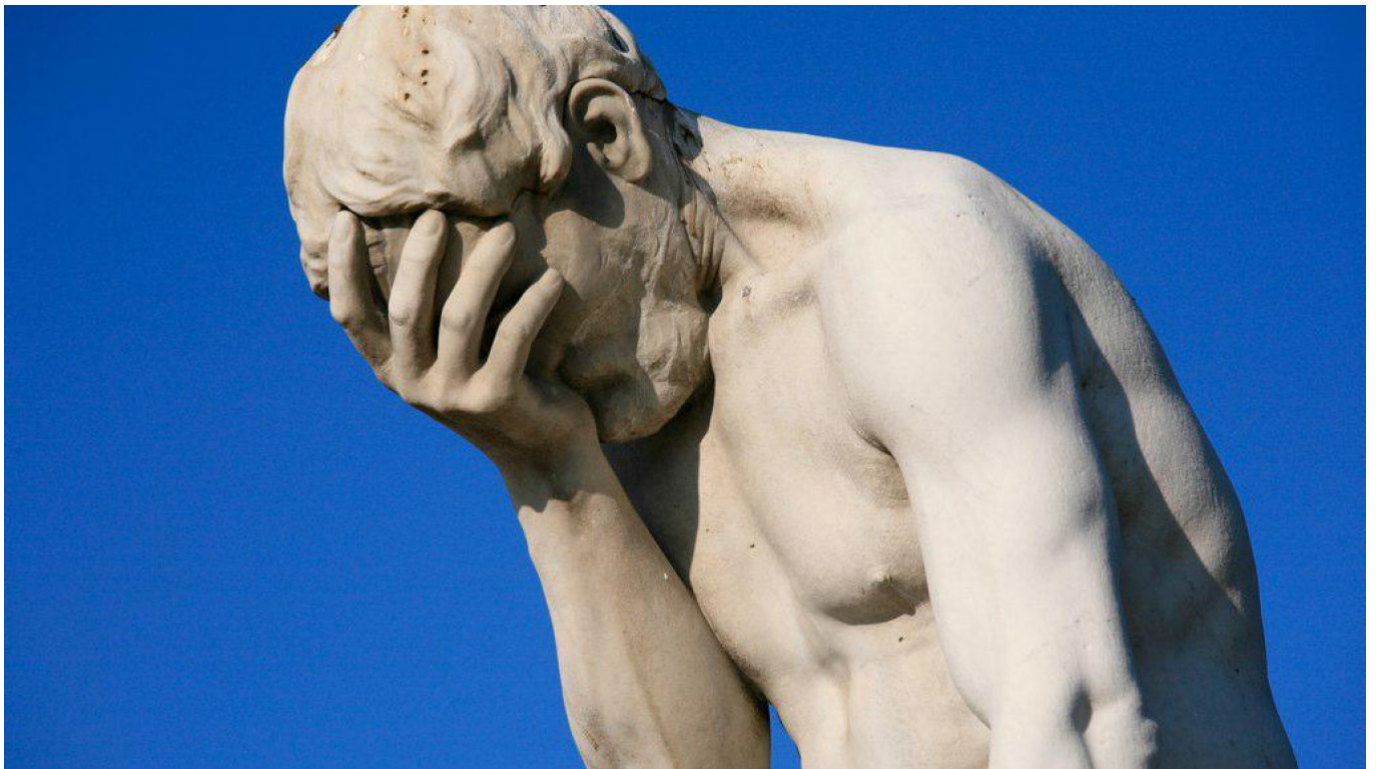


The Russian Shame Game

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September 15, 2017



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He к месту: at the wrong time

The other day I got together with some friends, and after some general catching up with each other's news, we started talking about mutual acquaintances, including a friend who had behaved very badly. The interesting bit for me — well, other than the juicy details of the scandalous behavior — was how many words my friends had to describe inappropriate behavior.

For example, it was *неудобно* (awkward). This is a word that can be used to describe something physically awkward, like this: *Добираться до этого сибирского города туристам дорого и неудобно* (It's expensive and inconvenient for tourists to get to this Siberian city.) Or it can be figuratively awkward, like this: *Выйти из зала во время спектакля было неудобно* (It was improper to leave during the performance.) Or a faux pas, like this: *Нет, не знаю, женат ли он или нет. Неудобно спросить* (No, I don't know if he's married or not. It didn't seem appropriate to ask.)

Another word for this is неловко (clumsy, uncomfortable). It can be uncomfortable to speak: Мне неловко об этом говорить (It's awkward to talk about it.) And uncomfortable to say nothing: В машине, оставшись наедине, мы неловко молчали (When we found ourselves alone together in the car, there was an uneasy silence between us.)

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Sometimes the words or silence aren't the problem — it's the timing. In Russian words or actions can be literally in the wrong place (не к месту) or at the wrong time (некстати, не ко времени), although both mean more or less the same thing. Моя глупая тётя не к месту вспомнила про первого мужа соседки, который только что женился (My silly aunt put her foot in her mouth recalling my neighbor's first husband, who just got married.) Он сказал это в простоте сердца, но вышло весьма некстати (He spoke simply from the heart, but his timing was terrible.)

Similar to this is невпопад, which literally means “off the mark.” It is often used when you blurt something out at the wrong time: Все примолкли. А Зиночка сказала, как всегда, невпопад: Знаете почему? (No one said anything. And then Zina put her foot in her mouth as usual and asked: “You know why?”) But it can also be used to describe any action that's out of place: Извините, если невпопад, но хочу сделать вам подарок (I'm sorry if I'm being out of line here, but I want to give you a present.)

Among the slangier and rougher set you might hear западло. Западло was originally prison slang for something that broke the convicts' rules, but now it has entered the lexicon of the non-prison population. It has several meanings, among which is “it's inappropriate” — usually in the sense of being a bit humiliating. Ей западло принимать у меня из рук деньги (She thought it was beneath her to take money from me.)

Higher up on the scandal scale are actions or words that are shameful. I personally love to use these words because I get to channel my inner schoolmarm. For example, there's совестно from the word совесть (conscience), most effective when shouted indignantly: Ну как вам не совестно! (You ought to be ashamed of yourself!) Or you can use зазорно, which is to be disgraceful in some way. For example, зазорный дом is a rather old-fashioned phrase for a house of ill repute. But you can use it to describe anything you might be ashamed of: Ошибиться не зазорно, с кем не бывает (Making a mistake is nothing to be ashamed of — it happens to everyone.)

Close to topping the scandal scale is позорно, from позор — a very strong word for shame, disgrace, or even infamy. If you are utterly scandalized, you can just spit out: Какой позор! (What an utter disgrace!) Everyone has his or her own sense of what is shameful: Когда меня клали на носилки, я кричала — позорно кричала (When they put me on the stretcher I screamed — it was just disgraceful.) But everyone would agree that some behavior is shameful: Когда на них напали, они позорно бежали, теряя по дороге убитых, пленных и раненых (When they were attacked, they were completely dishonorable — they ran, leaving the prisoners, dead and wounded on the road.)

Our mutual acquaintance didn't behave that badly. But we still got to tsk-tsk, shake our heads, and sigh: Как позорно! Как ему не стыдно? (That's awful! He ought to be ashamed of himself!)

Is there any emotion more satisfying than righteous indignation?

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/09/15/the-russian-shame-game-a58958>