

The Sweet Smell of Russian Money

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Живые деньги: cash, ready money

In Russian they say “о вкусах не спорят” (to each his own, literally “people don’t argue about tastes”). In English the rule for polite conversation is quite broad — don’t talk about money, religion or politics. In the old days money wasn’t a taboo subject among Russians because there wasn’t much to say: salaries were the same for everyone and the price of a pound of beef was the same in Kaliningrad and Kamchatka. But now it’s probably improper to discuss money with anyone but your closest Russian friends and family.

But that’s not to say you don’t need to talk about money sometimes in Russian. If you want to do it right, here are some tips.

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First of all, you need to get the stress right. The word for money in Russian is деньги, a plural word borrowed from the Tatar language. It's ДЕНЬги and ДЕНег (genitive case), but the stress changes in other cases to деньГАМИ (instrumental); деньГАМ (dative) and о деньГАХ (prepositional). If you forget, don't worry — the old pronunciation of ДЕНЬгами, ДЕНЬграм, and о ДЕНЬгах are still acceptable, if markedly old-fashioned. Just say that your first Russian teacher was a countess who fled the 1917 Revolution and that's how you learned to say it.

And while we're on the subject, there is one expression that always uses the otherwise outdated stress pattern: не в ДЕНЬгах счастье (money doesn't buy happiness, literally "happiness isn't in money"). I guess it's an old saying, so you use the old pronunciation.

Once you've got that straight, next you have to learn about different kinds of money. There are a remarkable number of adjectives that are used with деньги, some similar to English phrases but some not. Бумажные деньги (paper money) is clear, but what does the cashier at the local shop mean when she keeps asking you for мелкие деньги (literally "small money")? She wants small denominations, not that 5,000-ruble note you are thrusting at her. However, in your office мелкие деньги is something else — the company's petty cash.

If мелкие деньги are small denominations, are большие деньги (literally "big money") large denominations? Of course not. Большие деньги are a lot of money: Её сын наконец-то устроился на хорошую работу и зарабатывает большие деньги (Her son finally got a good job and is earning lots of money.) This is also хорошие деньги (literally "good money"): Хорошим врачам надо платить хорошие деньги (You have to pay good doctors good money.) A whole lot of money is сумасшедшие or бешеные деньги (literally "crazy or wild money"). Они платили бешеные деньги за квартиру в центре (They paid a huge amount of money for their apartment in the center.)

Lots of money can also be conveyed with the set phrase куча денег (a pile of money): Что касается ветровки... у тебя же куча денег — поезжай и купи (About that windbreaker — you've got a pile of money, just go and buy it.)

On the other end of things, a moderate amount of money is приличные or неплохие деньги (decent or not bad money): Мы потратили приличные деньги на ремонт машины, а всё равно она плохо заводится. (We spent a fair amount of money on car repairs, but the ignition is still off.) Карманные деньги are pocket money, not much — just enough for daily expenses, often doled out by the family bookkeeper: По понедельникам моя жена выдаёт мне карманные деньги на неделю (Every Monday my wife gives me pocket money for the week.) And at the very bottom are последние деньги (literally "last money"): Он пошёл и купил бутылку пива на последние деньги (He went and bought a bottle of beer with the last of his money.)

There are three other kinds of money you ought to know about. Живые деньги (literally "live money") is cash — money that's freely available. In English cash isn't live, it's cold and hard. Ему не надо брать ипотеку — он предлагал живые деньги за квартиру (He didn't have to take out a mortgage — he offered hard cash for the apartment.) Кровные деньги (literally "bloody money") is a false friend — not blood money, but money earned by the sweat of your brow: Когда провинившийся муж вернулся домой, жена крикнула:

“Лучше бы в Фонтанку бросился, чем кровные деньги пропивать!” (When he guilty husband came home, his wife screamed at him, “You should have jumped into the Fontanka instead of spending all your hard-earned money on drink!”) And then there’s грязные деньги (dirty money), which has to be laundered: В офшорных зонах Кипра отмываются грязные деньги из России (Russia’s dirty money is laundered in Cyprus’ offshore zones.)

The thing about cash is — you can’t tell if it’s hard-earned, clean or dirty: деньги не пахнут (literally “money doesn’t smell”). It’s interesting that this expression — a loan from Latin — wasn’t borrowed into English, too. English speakers just say: Who cares where it comes from? Money is money!

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