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Russian Words of the Year for 2017

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Слово года 2017: 2017 word of the year

Every year a group of linguists and language-lovers headed by Mikhail Epstein votes on слово года (word of the year) or rather слова и выражения года (words and expressions of the year). The nominated words are gathered throughout the year — the words on everyone's lips, the phrases that you heard a million times and that characterize, in some way, the year gone by.

In most years the nomination list and winners are a combination of the comical, sad, and positive, ranging from полиция (police, the year the law enforcement agency had a name change) to брекзит (Brexit) — one of the most talked-about topics in 2016.

But this year I found the list to be rather depressing. Epstein described one of the key leitmotifs of the year to be эмоциональное состояние общество (society's emotional state), and listed the nominated words that reflected it, such as: тьфу на тебя! (phooey on you! what billionaire Alisher Usmanov said to Alexei Navalny in his YouTube reprimand); нелюбовь (loveless, name of a film by Andrei Zvyagintsev); баттл (battle, as in rap contest); and токсичный (toxic, as applied to relationships and personalities).

Another word in the list was обеззлобливающее, a neologism invented by Sergei Arkavin that means "a spite-killer, i.e., a drug that reduces spitefulness." This is a positive thing, right? Put it in the water supply and get heaven on earth! But it's also a downer: the world really, really needs it.

This year the winning word was the Moscow-centered реновация: renovation, or rather Renovation, Mayor Sobyanin's program to tear down older low-rises and put up high-rises in their place. This project set neighbor against neighbor, as some people hoped for improved housing в шаговой доступности (walking distance) from their current apartment, and others pointed to the violation of personal property rights and the fact that "walking distance" for a babushka and marathon runner are different concepts.

The runners-up were биткоин (bitcoin); хайп (hype); and токсичный (toxic) — the year in a nutshell.

In the category of выражение года (expression of the year), first place was Он вам не Димон (He's not Dimon to you!), what Dmitry Medvedev's press spokesperson once told journalists — let's have some respect for the prime minister! — and then the name of Alexei Navalny's film about corruption in very high places.

In second place was вмешательство в выборы (election meddling), which was almost but not quite as important as local socio-political issues.

The third category is антиязык (anti-language) – or rather the language of anti: the language of propaganda, lies and aggression. There isn't much to say about these words. First place: иностранный агент (foreign agent), what people and organizations are when they accept foreign funding — or when someone doesn't like them.

Second place: Можем повторить! (We can do it again!). This assertion was plastered on car bumpers and windows in honor of the annual May 9 celebration of Victory Day in what Russians call the Great Patriotic War. So why is it in this category? In social media this phrase somehow stopped being a statement of self-defense and morphed into something aggressive.

Third place went to пьяный мальчик (drunk little boy), about a six-year-old child who had been hit and killed by a car. The driver insisted — backed by "forensic evidence" — that the child had been drunk and at blame. Society was outraged.

And finally: альтернативные факты (alternative facts), a phrase made famous by KellyAnne Conway to defend Donald Trump's insistence that more people attended his inauguration than Barack Obama's.

But it isn't just a Trump-phrase. It's the world-wide winner for the year.

The last category is протологизмы (proto-logisms), an invented word to describe linguists' word inventions — a category where the word-smiths get to have fun. This year the winner was домогант, a new word in Russian to describe a harasser: тот, кто домогается (one who harasses).

I liked the second-place winner, invented by Epstein. Actually, it's the prefix гоп- from the word гопник (a cretin, thug, lowlife). Through the joy of Russian word creation, we get гоп-политика, гоп-журналистика, гоп-религия, гоп-государство (moron-politics; moron-journalism; moron-religion, and moron-state). Very apt for a number of countries.

Well. Not the cheeriest way to end the year. But this is when we square our shoulders and say: Next year is bound to be better!

С Новым годом! С новым счастьем! (Happy New Year! Happiness in the New Year!)

The Word's Worth will be on hiatus until Dec. 12. Check back then for Michele's column and Jan. 17 for the Word's Worth podcast.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy

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