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Why Does a Russian Cat Weep?

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Leopold the Tomcat "**Ekran**"

Кот наплакал: a little bit

Writing about bears last week got me thinking about other animals and their images in the Russian collective consciousness, and other animal expressions, and other animal stereotypes and how they differ from animal stereotypes in other countries and languages... and before you know it, down the rabbit/snake/fox/mole/rat hole I fell.

It's really interesting down there, even if it is a bit dark and damp.

Take cats, for example. First of all, there isn't an animal called "cat" in Russian, that is, a feline that is either or male or female. You need to decide — or see — if you are talking about кот (tomcat) or кошка (female cat), because historically and culturally, they have different characters and characteristics in Russian. In fact, there are entirely different figurative feline expressions depending on gender and age.

This week we'll consider коты (tomcats). Коты (toms) can be found in folklore. They are associated with sleep — because a tomcat sleeps so soundly and sweetly? — domestic comfort, and family happiness. On the other hand, when human men are described as коты, the associations are different, although generally positive. A cat-like man has an independent character; he takes care of his appearance or has feline features, such as long whiskers or green eyes; or he has fast reactions and is quick to attack for gain.

There are a variety of toms: жирный кот is apparently a calque from the English "fat cat," although I think жирный (greasy, obese, fatty) is much more expressive. There is also мартовский кот (March tomcat), who is renowned for screeching and chasing the ladies. Кот Леопольд (Leopold the Cat) is a beloved cartoon character from the 1970s, a peace-loving, friendly creature who never fights.

Russian and English share some similar expressions involving — sometimes — cats. But while the image is the same, the animals may be different. Кот в мешке (cat in a bag) is an unknown quantity, something you generally should not buy. In English this is a pig: Они продают годовую подписку новой газеты, то есть, кота в мешке (They're selling a year's subscription to a new newspaper, or rather, they're selling a pig in a poke.)

In case you are wondering, a “poke” is an old word for a sack.

A tomcat licking his chops is an image of hunger and desire in both Russian and English, but in Russian he’s looking at something from the creamery — смотрит как кот на сметану (like a tomcat looking at sour cream), but his English-speaking counterpart already ate the canary and is very pleased with himself.

In Russian, toms have fun. The expression тащиться как кот по помойке (literally, to traipse about the dump like a tomcat) means to have a grand time. But не всё коту масленица (literally, it’s not Cheese Week all the time for a tomcat) means that good times don’t last forever — Cheese Week is followed by 40 days of Lent.

Toms don’t seem to have many tears, or don’t shed many tears, or don’t get teary-eyed — actually, I’m not quite sure about the original observation that gave us the expression кот наплакал (literally a tomcat wept). It means: there isn’t much of whatever is under discussion. I used to find this expression completely baffling, appearing as it did in contexts without a cat: Это было трудно: опыта у меня тогда было ◙ кот наплакал, веры в свои силы ◙ еще меньше (It was hard. My experience at that point — next to nothing, and belief in my abilities — even less.)

If you stretch something out, you can say тянуть кота за хвост (literally, to pull a cat by his tail). This is something a parent might accuse a slow-poke child of: —Ну что ты тянешь кота за хвост? ◙ Ма, я не тяну кота за хвост, я носки найти не могу. (“Why are you dragging your heels?” “Ma, I’m not dragging my heels. I can’t find my socks.”)

A clever, fast, enterprising tomcat catches mice. Мышей не ловит (he doesn’t catch mice) means he isn’t the sharpest knife in the drawer. As someone once said about the basic rules of corruption: Если министр мышей не ловит, за что завод будет ему деньги отчислять? (If the minister isn’t doing his part, why would a factory pay him money?)

Good question. Next week, we’ll look at female felines for some answers.

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