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Putin's Language (R)Evolution

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Путинки: Putinisms

Last week I listened to President Vladimir Putin's inaugural speech and then I read it, thinking I hadn't done a linguistic analysis of a leader's speech in a long time. But after listening and reading, I remembered why.

With all due respect, I must say: Vladimir Putin has turned into a boring speaker.

Not a bad speaker. No misplaced stresses or other deviations from the strict Russian grammatical norms. No rambling or unclear thoughts. Good diction, punchy delivery, well-constructed speeches. And of course at his televised Q&A with the nation he rattles off statistics and facts "off-the-cuff" so convincingly you'd think they were really, well, off the cuff.

But the 2018 VVP is the elocutionary opposite of the VVP of the early 2000s, when every press conference, public announcement or speech was a party for language lovers. Journalists waited for the new Putin zingers and rushed off to be the first to quote them — or figure them out. He was famous for his salty language that verged on — or tipped over into — truly bawdy sayings and expressions. He used folk sayings that even Russians had to look up. Every once in a while he used prison camp or criminal slang.

I called his public speaking "Mr. Putin's Language Lessons" since I learned more non-standard Russian usage in a few years of listening to him than in the previous three decades. He produced so many memorable comments that they were gathered into a book called Путинки (Putinki), published in 2004.

Putin could be counted on to call a spade a spade. In fact, his early popularity in Russia was due, in part, to this straight-forward, "everyman" style of talking. Even before he was president, in the autumn of 1999 when he was prime minister during a terrifying spate of apartment house bombings, Putin told journalists: Мы будем преследовать террористов везде. В аэропорту — в аэропорту. Значит, Вы уж меня извините, в туалете поймаем, мы и в сортире их замочим, в конце концов (We're going to go after terrorists everywhere. If they're in the airport — then in the airport. And forgive me, but if we catch

them in the toilet, we'll waste 'em in the outhouse, if that's what it takes.) No one had heard a public official talk like that before.

Chechnya was the topic of discussion again in 2002 at a Russia-EU summit. When a French journalist asked a sharp question of the Russian president, he shot back testily: "Если вы хотите совсем уж стать исламским радикалом и готовы пойти на то, чтобы сделать себе обрезание, то я вас приглашаю в Москву. У нас есть специалисты и по этому вопросу. И я порекомендую им сделать это таким образом, чтобы у вас там ничего уже не выросло". (If you want to completely become an Islamic radical and are ready to undergo circumcision, then I invite you to Moscow. We've got specialists in that. And I'll recommend that they do it so that nothing can grow back for sure.)

This case got a lot of attention because one Russian interpreter fumbled and didn't know what to say. While the Russian audience hooted with laughter, the foreign audience heard silence and then the sound of the microphone being dragged across the table to the other interpreter, who mumbled something about Moscow welcoming everyone regardless of their nationality. It didn't take long for the original quote to make the rounds.

The other reason it got attention was, of course, the fascinating information that something might grow back if the operation was not done properly.

The third incident that secured Vladimir Putin's reputation as a lively speaker took place in 2003 during a visit of British Prime Minister Tony Blair. President Putin was discussing some of the horrors of the war in Chechnya, trying to convey the contemptuous attitude of the Chechen terrorists to Russians. He described what was written on the walls of terrorist hide-out: Аллах над нами и козлы под нами, which was translated dutifully as "Allah is above and the goats are below us." Blair looked on blankly, waiting for the punchline. Putin added helpfully, "Они имели в виду русских." (They meant the Russians.) Blair looked like he was sorting through his mental file of folk expressions or trying to recall diplomatic school tips on what to do if you don't get a foreign joke. Finally there was a whispered explanation, Blair looked appropriately appalled, and journalists scribbled madly.

The straight-talking VVP who threw out vivid expressions that came from the village, urban backstreets, or prison camps existed at least up to 2006 or 2007. This was the leader who said: Надо исполнить закон всегда, а не только тогда, когда схватили за одно место (You've got to follow the law all the time, not just when they've got you by the short and curlies.)

Or commented on the futility of trying to find Russian money in offshore accounts: Вы замучаетесь пыль глотать бегая по судам (You'll just make yourself sick gulping down dust as you run from courtroom to courtroom.) Or criticized the current Russian political situation: Почему у нас так не получается? Потому что, извиняюсь, все сопли жуем и политиканствуем (Why aren't we successful? Because, excuse me, everyone is just chewing their snot and playing at politics.)

And once when asked about foreign observers at elections, Putin replied with the testy: Пусть жену свою учит щи варить там! This is literally: They ought to teach their own wives to make cabbage soup. Or: They ought to mind their own beeswax.

His straight-from-the-village expressions were sometimes even too obscure from city-

slicker journalists to make sense of. For example, when asked what he'd do in retirement, Putin replied: Конечно, можно, как у нас в некоторых местах говорили, шило в стенку – и на боковую залечь (Of course, I could, as they used to say in some parts, put the awl in the wall and lie on my side.) Say what? Some digging in reference books revealed that cobblers used to stick their awls in the wall to keep from losing them, and that the expression means something like "hang up my hammer and put my feet up."

The most obscure expression Putin used involved a dance, the полька-бабочка (butterfly polka), and no one was certain they got his meaning. He was complaining about school textbooks supposedly funded by the Soros Foundation. He complained: Они исполняют польку-бабочку, которую заказывают те, кто платит (Literally: they dance the butterfly polka paid for by the folks who order the music.) It seems to be a mix of expressions that basically means: They dance to the tune of whoever pays the piper.

When was the last time Putin broke away from his script or text this way? My dictionaries of folk expressions have gotten dusty. There hasn't been even a tinge of the risqué from his lips in years.

Why?

Did he or his advisers decide that those folksy, man-on-the-street expressions are inappropriate? Does he want to sound more decorous and presidential? Has he lost his sense of humor? Is he tired?

If the way a person speaks is an indicator or his inner life, then I have to ask: What has happened to Vladimir Putin?

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