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How Sweet It Is in Russian

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Сладости: sweets

If there is one kind eatery Moscow has in abundance — besides burger joints, Georgian restaurants, and sushi bars — it's coffee houses. They are big, small, foreign, local and pop-up. They all seem to offer the same head-spinning list of coffees brewed in dozens of different ways and served with everything from heavy cream to nut milk. They even have the coffee menu scrawled on a wall-sized chalkboard.

The feeling of being anywhere in the world is intensified when you are handed your Американо с миндальным молоком (Americano with almond milk) and the server cheerfully says, "Наслаждайтесь своим кофе!" (Enjoy your coffee!)

I thought that phrase was an obvious calque from English, but some of my Russian friends aren't so sure. Our speculation was hampered by the fact that Russians have a set phrase to use when someone is about to eat or is already eating — Приятного аппетита (Bon appetit!). But they don't have a set phrase for drinks.

Наслаждайтесь ужином (Enjoy your dinner) sounded fine to my mini focus group, as did наслаждайтесь кофе. But in Russian, the phrase seems to be used most commonly for food or drink that is really special.

One person recalled a trip: Мы так наслаждались пивом в Чехии! (We really enjoyed the beer in the Czech Republic.) Someone else recalled digging into a spectacular cake: Какое-то время было тихо, все жевали, наслаждаясь вкусом (For a while it was quiet as everyone chewed and enjoyed the flavor.)

After more Russian coffee-drinkers joined in the conversation, a tentative consensus was reached. There's absolutely nothing weird about the phrase наслаждайтесь своим кофе. But its usage and register — tone that can be formal, colloquial, etc. — differs from "enjoy your coffee." The English phrase is a polite cliché, a standard phrase the server says when handing over a cup of coffee. Russians in the Soviet past didn't use the phrase in that way (as a standard cliché) in that situation (which didn't quite exist, in any case). Now they do. Check back in 10 years and see if has become a standard, throw-away line or has largely remained a

special wish.

Whew. Now that we settled that, I moved on to clarify other uses of наслаждение (enjoyment). And I discovered more questions and more oddities.

It all begins with the word солодкий, which originally meant a surprising combination of tastes: “солёный, вкусный, пряный” (salty, tasty, spicy). Солёный is clear, as is вкусный — something that tastes good. But what’s пряный? It’s the adjective from the noun пряность, which refers to a spice or seasoning. Everyone agrees on that. But the Russians I polled had a hard time describing what the flavor was.

One person said: it just means “zesty”: Блюдо было сильно приправлено пряностями (The dish was highly seasoned).

Others said that пряный means “seasoned” in any way, including with salt, pepper, and herbs. Others strongly disagreed with salt, pepper or herbs being part of пряный.

Another group said that пряный refers to non-herbal spices like мускатный орех (nutmeg); корица (cinnamon); имбирь (ginger); гвоздика (cloves); душистый перец (allspice) and куркума (turmeric). These are some of the spices used in making пряники, hard cakes similar to gingerbread. So пряный is spicy in the sense of “being made with lots of spices.” Пряный is not spicy in the sense of hot: that’s острый. If something is пряный, it is more sweet than sour, and it is not hot, salty or bitter.

This swayed a lot of my focus group, but not all of them. Now I see the origin of the phrase “о вкусах не спорят!” (To each his own, literally “you don’t fight about tastes.”)

But a thousand years ago, give or take a century or two, Russians didn’t seem to make any of the distinctions we are now tussling over. I imagine Russians digging into a plate of food and saying: Вася! Попробуй! Очень солодкое блюдо! (Vasya! Try this. It’s a real salty-tasty-spicy dish.)

Maybe солодкий was the Slavic version of umami? Or perhaps it just meant “flavorful,” not bland?

We’ll never know. After a while either their recipes changed or their sense of taste did. Солодкий split into two streams: the sweet stream (сладкий) and the salty stream (солёный).

The salty stream gave us соль (salt); солёный (salty) and солить (to salt).

The sweet stream gave us сладкий (sweet); сладость (a sweet); посластить (to sweeten); and наслаждение (enjoyment — a kind of sweetness) and наслаждаться.

Наслаждаться is not, of course, only used for the enjoyment of food. You can enjoy just about anything. Ребята гуляли по городу, впервые наслаждаясь полной свободой (The kids walked around the city, enjoying complete freedom for the first time.) Уважает он дедушку за умение наслаждаться жизнью (He admired his grandfather for his capacity to enjoy life.)

You can also enjoy things that you shouldn't: Я, каюсь, наслаждался его полным поражением (I am ashamed to say that I enjoyed his complete defeat.)

I learned a lot about sweet pleasures in my investigation but still hadn't determined how common the word наслаждаться has been over time. I decided to check with the Google N-gram to see how usage has changed over the centuries.

I was shocked. Use of the word наслаждаться peaked once in 1806, again in 1825, then crashed in 1829. There it lay, on the bottom of the graph, for decades. It was almost at zero in the 1980s — not much to enjoy then —and has just begun a tiny rise in the new century.

No wonder there are so many coffee shops in Moscow. If the last time your nation had fun was 200 years ago, you need something to stay awake.

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