The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

The Year of Living Toxically

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

December 07, 2018

Pixabay

Токсичный: toxic

As the year winds down to its inevitable end, I start winding up to the grand language finale– the winners of the Words of the Year competition. I start by perusing lists of contenders, seeing if I've missed anything important, word-wise, during the year, or can get a sense of which way the Russian judges are leaning. The suspense mounts.

Part of this end-of-the-year ritual is the Russian media coverage of Oxford Dictionary's choice for their Word of the Year. The announcement is presented in touchingly great detail, and the word is accorded the same awed respect as, say, the winning horse at Ascot.

This year Oxford chose "toxic," and now everyone is wondering how токсичный will do in Russia.

Токсичный (toxic) and токсичность (toxicity) are by no means new words in Russian. They've been around for well over a century in their primary meaning. У большинства аконитов ядовиты все части растения. Однако токсичность разных видов далеко не одинакова. (In the majority of species of aconite, all parts of the plant are toxic. But the toxicity of various species is by no means the same.)

The secondary meaning of the word appeared along with the stock market and its various disasters, specifically the disasters of 2007-2009: токсичные активы (toxic assets). These are assets that can't be sold because they appear to be guaranteed money losers. One Russian headline announces, grimly: 10% пенсионных накоплений инвестировано в токсичные активы (10 Percent of Pension Funds Have Been Invested in Toxic Assets). But, of course, given editors' love for punning headlines, you also find examples like this: Токсичные активы Нижнего Новгорода (Nizhny Novgorod's Toxic Assets), about the city's unsuccessful attempts to clean up toxic waste sites.

And finally, there is the "newish" meaning of toxic that got it awarded Word of the Year in English: any person, event, activity that is harmful and hurtful – someone or something that

makes you emotionally ill.

Russian has borrowed this meaning, too, and it has become kind of an "in" word, although it appears that speakers have a hard time defining it. One source defines токсичные люди (toxic people) like this: Люди, которые испытывают удовлетворение, когда создают проблемы и злят окружающих. Они превращают любую ситуацию в стрессовую (People who are pleased when they create problems and anger the people around them. They can make any situation stressful.) I can think of a lot of other words for people like that.

People are having a hard time getting a handle on what exactly makes someone токсичный. There are dozens of headlines like this: 15 признаков токсичных людей (15 Signs of Toxic People); 10 линии поведения, выдающих токсичность людей (10 Behaviors That Give Away Toxic People); and 5 оправданий, к которым всегда прибегают токсичные люди (5 Justifications that Toxic People Always Use). Or this one, a kind of крик души (cry of the heart): Что такое "токсичный человек" на самом деле? (What Exactly is a "Toxic Person"?)

Good question!

Meanwhile, Russian now has токсичные отношения (toxic relationships); токсичная тусовка (toxic crowd); токсичное поведение (toxic behavior); токсичный мужчина (toxic man) and his nasty girlfriend, токсичная девушка (toxic girl). And if you didn't know this already, you ought to ditch all that toxicity and begin экологические отношения (ecological relationships). Экология отношений – это уважительное отношение к партнеру (Relationship ecology is respecting your partner.)

This is also called: уважительное отношение к партнеру (respecting your partner).

Russian has its own version of toxic: ядовитый, which is literally poisonous, from the word яд (poison). This refers to stuff that will probably kill you if you eat it – or if it tries to eat you: ядовитое растение, ядовитый гриб, ядовитая змея (poisonous plant, poisonous mushroom, poisonous snake).

Since well before the end of the 19th century, when captured in Mikhelson's Phraseological Dictionary, ядовитый has had the figurative meaning of acerbic, mean, sharp-tongued, mean-spirited, ill-tempered. You know — the kind of emotion that inspires a poison pen letter. Обе стороны в споре красноречивы, ядовито остроумны (People on both sides of the argument are well-spoken and poisonously witty.) You can speak poisonously, too: Он произнёс с ядовитой вежливостью (He said, with poisonous politeness); Она ядовито спросила (She asked, poisonously). Here in English we'd probably say "acerbically" or "acidly."

But are ядовитый and токсичный synonyms? Not quite. Токсичный might hurt you; ядовитый will probably kill you.

One commentator explains the difference using the example of Russia: Россия в представлении большей части мирового сообщества стала ядовитой. Не токсичной – есть такое слово, оно употребляется в финансовых и политических текстах, обозначает что-то высокорискованное, опасное, к чему не стоит иметь отношения, –

нет: именно ядовитой. (A large part of the world community perceives Russia as poisonous. Not toxic. The word toxic is used in financial and political texts to mean something that is high-risk and dangerous — something you should avoid. No – it's not that. It's poisonous.)

Yowza. I know what word that commentator would vote for as слово года (word of the year).

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.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/12/07/the-year-of-living-toxically-a63750