

Catastrophes, Geopolitical and Otherwise

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Крупнейший: the biggest, major

About once a year, like the leaves falling in autumn or the daffodils coming up in April, there is yet another discussion of how best to translate Vladimir Putin's assessment of the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Or, to be more exact, someone – never a translator — insists that it has been mistranslated and, in the process, President Putin's character and worldview have been maligned.

If you've forgotten, this was said in April 2005 at Putin's address to the Federation Council: Прежде всего, следует признать, что крушение Советского Союза было крупнейшей геополитической катастрофой века, which is literally: Above all it must be recognized that the fall of the Soviet Union was ... biggest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.

As you see, I haven't put in the article before the word "biggest," and that's one of the two difficulties when translating this sentence. Russian doesn't require the speaker to differentiate between the indefinite "a" or the definite "the" — although, of course, a speaker can make that distinction if he or she wants by using тот (that) or этот (this). English does require it, so you have to make a choice: is it one of many big geopolitical catastrophes or the biggest one?

Since I love grammar, I look at the grammatical construction of the entire sentence.

In Russian, like in English, adjectives have three forms: the base form like крупный (big); the comparative form: крупнее (bigger); and the superlative form, which can be formed by adding the word самый to make самый крупный (the "most big") or by changing the base form to make крупнейший (the biggest).

Here's the second difficulty: while words like самый and наиболее (the most) indicate the one and only most X (handsome, mean, rich), words formed with -ейш or -айш in the

middle are defined like this in grammar-speak: предмет (набор предметов) обладает неким признаком в большей степени, чем все остальные предметы той же группы (an object [or selection of objects] that have some quality to a greater degree than all the other objects in the group).

In other words, you can have one biggest or several biggest. Here are many biggest: В последнее десятилетие группа 10 крупнейших производителей алюминия была весьма устойчивой (Over the past decade the group of the 10 largest producers of aluminum has not changed.)

Here is one biggest: Это было грандиозной сделкой, целью которой было создание крупнейшей в России и четвёртой в мире нефтяной корпорации (It was a grand deal which had the goal of creating the biggest oil corporation in Russia and the fourth biggest in the world.)

Because of this ambiguity, крупнейший is often used in hype. A company will write: Промпашмаш является крупнейшим производителем штуквин в России. So is that “Prompishmash is the biggest producer of widgets in Russia” or “Prompishmash is a major producer of widgets in Russia”? How do you know? Well, if you have the time — and let’s take a pause here so that all the translators reading this can have a good laugh — you do a reality check. You google “российские производители штуквин” (Russian widget manufacturers) and eventually discover that there are at least five manufacturers that are bigger. So you happily write “major,” very proud of yourself for your conscientious ingenuity.

So back we come to Mr. Putin and his major/greatest geopolitical catastrophe. On the one hand, he didn’t say самый (the most), but on the other hand, neither did he use одна из (one of the...). So we do a reality check. Has Vladimir Putin ever cited any other geopolitical catastrophe of the 20th century?

Well?

Need more time? Anything?

The only other evidence we have is what Mr. Putin told Oliver Stone in a 2017 interview: Я часто слышал критику в свой адрес по поводу того, что я сожалею по поводу развала Советского Союза. Во-первых, самое главное заключается в том, что после развала Советского Союза 25 млн русских людей в одну ночь оказались за границей, и это реально одна из крупнейших катастроф XX века (I often hear criticism addressed to me over the fact that I regret the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In the first place, the main thing is that after the break-up of the Soviet Union 25 million Russian people turned out to be living abroad overnight, and that is really one of the major catastrophes of the 20th century.)

But the problem with this is two-fold: he is clarifying after years of criticism -- when one might want to cast one’s words in a different light -- and he only speaks of “catastrophes” in general, not geopolitical ones.

Finally, the other reality check — duh — is to ask native Russian speakers. Almost everyone I’ve asked find the question odd, since the context is clear. In fact, many people remember the quote as “самая крупная геополитическая катастрофа” (the biggest geopolitical

catastrophe).

So how would I translate it? I don't see any evidence, grammatical or otherwise, that makes this wrong: The break-up of the Soviet Union was the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the century.

But if I were being really, incredibly, utterly nit-picky, I might translate it this way: In the last century, the break-up of the Soviet Union was an utterly egregious geopolitical catastrophe.

But, you know, it really doesn't matter. In the end, actions will speak louder than words.

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