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The Secret of Russian Mysteries

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Секрет: secret

The other day on social media someone asked about the difference between the words тайна and секрет, both of which mean, in part, "secret." I thought: Oh! What a great question! The difference is actually quite simple... well, one is native Russian and one is borrowed from ... um... somewhere, though originally, um, from the Latin... but of course there is a distinction... mutter, mutter... sound of dictionaries being pulled off shelves and frantic flipping of pages.

What a perfect way to spend a snowy evening!

Indeed, тайна is the native Russian word and had a few meanings way back in the mists of time. It seems to have been connected with the notion of hiding and with the notion of stealing and crooks. Keep that second meaning in mind, since we'll get back to it in a few

paragraphs.

Now the word тайна has two related meanings: something mysterious and unknowable and something known but hidden.

The first meaning is used in relation to love, beauty, poetry, nature, emotions, and some human beings. When you use тайна in this sense, it helps to be wearing a lot of gauzy scarves or be gesturing artistically with a long cigarette holder. Настоящая поэзия связана с тайной. В ней остаётся резерв неразгаданного (True poetry is connected with mystery. It retains something of the enigmatic.) Общение со старым мастером позволяло начинающим актёрам постигать тайны ремесла (Meetings with the old master let actors who were just starting out start to grasp the mysteries of their craft.)

In this sense it is often used in religious discussions: Одна из глубочайших тайн христианства - символ Святой Троицы (One of the most profound mysteries of Christianity is the symbol of the Holy Trinity.)

The second meaning is the more pedestrian notion of secrecy. This is used in many professions to describe confidential information: врачебная/банковская/адвокатская тайна (privileged medical/banking/legal information). This is also the word you use to describe confidential police work: тайна следствия (secrecy of the investigation). Often we express this a bit differently in English: Он ничего не говорил журналистам, ссылаясь на тайну следствия (He didn't tell journalists anything, citing the ongoing investigation.)

This is also one word used for the much less pedestrian but not mysterious concept of a state secret: Перечень сведений, составляющих государственную тайну, определяется федеральным законом (The list of information that is considered a state secret is determined by federal law.)

But you might also use тайна to talk about every day matters: Не тайна, что он давно хотел уйти из фирмы (It's no secret that he wanted to leave the firm for a while now.) Я обещала не раскрывать тайну моей подруги – она врала, что закончила университет, а на самом деле не получила диплом (I promised not to tell anyone my friend's secret — she lied and said she had graduated from the university, but actually she didn't get her degree.)

When something is super-secret and no one will ever reveal it, you can call it тайна за семью печатями (a secret under seven seals). In this expression, which is originally from the Bible, the печать is not a stamp but a kind of wax or similar seal, and seven is used to mean "a lot" and to invoke a mystery: seven is a very spiritual and mysterious number. Эти данные держатся, кем положено, за семью печатями (That information is held under lock and key by the appropriate authorities.)

Since we're on a spiritual riff, a synonym of тайна is таинство (mystery): Он раскрыл все таинства природы (He revealed all the mysteries of nature.) More often, however, таинство is a sacrament, as in one of the seven sacraments of the church. Брак является церковным таинством. (Marriage is a church sacrament.)

The adjective таинственный is used with both meanings: something mysterious and something secret, although the former is much more common: Лучшего места для этого

таинственного праздника не придумать (You couldn't come up with a better place for this mysterious holiday.)

And then there is the verb pair утаивать / утаить, which most of the time means to conceal something or keep silent about something: От Николая поначалу утаили всю историю о романе (At first they hid the whole story about the affair from Nikolai.) А вот попытайтесь-ка утаить четырехметровую скульптуру (Just try and hide a four-meter sculpture.)

But remember the notion of stealing? That's in this verb pair, too — I suppose from the idea of taking something тайком (in secret, stealthily). This usage seems less common today, but you can find it in older texts and sometimes even in the newspapers: Он утаил часть денег от сделки (He made off with part of the money from the deal.)

It's also used in a common expression: Шила в мешке не утаишь! (the truth will out, literally "you can't hide an awl in a sack")

Секрет, on the other hand, is a foreign import. It appeared during the time of Peter the Great either from Polish or French, but ultimately from the Latin *secretus*. While it can mean something mysterious — секрет его успеха (secret of his success) — most of the time it's not the unknowable but the hidden.

Often it is interchangeable with the pedestrian meaning of тайна: Мы с ним не обсуждали документы, отнесенные федеральным законом к перечню секретных (He and I didn't discuss materials that were classified as secret by official decree.)

And it can be quite informal: Я скажу тебе по секрету, кто станет новым начальником. (I'll tell you who the new boss will be, but it's a secret.)

Вот и весь секрет таинственных русских фраз. (And that's the whole secret of mysterious Russian phrases.)

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