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Russian Magical Thinking

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Сказочный: magical, incredible, unreal

I was planning on writing about something else this week, but at the office we got into a discussion of how best to translate a certain epithet used with regard to a certain political figure. The first word in the epithet under question is сказочный, an adjective that modifies the second word, a noun meaning "not very intelligent" that we cannot reproduce here since we are a family newspaper, law-abiding visa-holders, very proper citizens, or some combination thereof.

But that didn't stop me from going down the rabbit hole of сказочный.

The adjective is from the noun сказка (a tale or fairy tale), and so the first meaning of сказочный is fantastical, storybook, magical, that is, like something out of a fairy tale.

Сказочные героини в твоем возрасте уже шли под венец (In fairy tales, girls your age had already walked down the aisle.) Пора прощаться со сказочным городом (It's time to say good-bye to this fairy-tale city.)

But the second meaning is figurative. How would you describe a fairy tale? Unreal, unbelievable, incredible, amazing, outrageous. That's what the second meaning of сказочный is. Сказочное богатство (incredible wealth); сказочное терпение (unbelievable patience); and even сказочная наглость (outrageous gall) are just ways of expressing something out of this world. У них совершенно сказочная собака, которая делает свое дело в унитазе и даже потом сама спускает воду! (They have a completely amazing dog who does her business on the toilet and even flushes afterwards!) There isn't a hint of fairy tales or Disney castles in there at all.

And here, my friends, is one of the trickiest parts of language acquisition. When we are reading or listening to a language that is not our native tongue, we sometimes "hear" the original meaning in idioms, figurative expressions, figures of speech, and words with really obvious roots. We push that original meaning to the forefront. But in many cases native speakers don't hear it. For them there is nothing storybook about сказочное богатство — it's just a pile of money.

But don't feel bad — non-native speakers have the same trouble with English. I remember once referring to someone as a "homewrecker" and a Russian friend thought I'd used the most amazingly vivid expression that had to be translated exactly that way to get the sense of total physical destruction of the house the family lived in. Не-не-не! (No-no-no!) I said. Нельзя называть её «бульдозером» (You can't call her a bulldozer...)

So how can you learn which figurative meanings carry the echo of the original sense and which don't? Well, you could do what I do: find a literate, cooperative Russian, drag him home, lock him up, and torture him with questions until he runs out of answers or escapes.

Just kidding.

But really, the only way to figure this out is to ask native speakers. I am always pestering people with questions. Как вам эта фраза — звучит странно или нормально? (What do you think about this phrase — does it sound strange or normal?) Слышишь корень или нет? (Do you hear the root or not?) Слово обычное или чем-то выделяется? (Is the word ordinary or does it stand out?) You can imagine what fun I am at parties.

Now if you don't want to fiddle with сказочный, there are plenty of other adjectives that convey the same thing.

Some have a whiff of the otherworldly about them, like волшебный (magical), сверхъестественный (supernatural), and perhaps чудесный (magnificent). But other adjectives like легендарный (legendary) мифический (mythical), and фантастический (fantastic) have largely lost their touch of magic. Легендарная программа сначала советского, а потом российского телевидения "Клуб путешественников" занесена в Книгу рекордов Гиннесса как самый продолжительный телевизионный проект ("Travelers' Club," the legendary program that was first on Soviet television and then Russian, is in the book of Guinness world records as the longest running television show.) У

него фантастические доходы (His income is jaw-dropping).

Мифический (mythical) requires careful reading, since it can mean “from an ancient myth,” “non-existent,” or “myth-making.” The first meaning is easy to catch: if there’s a Greek name involved, chances are we’re talking about the pantheon of the gods. But with the other two meanings, pay attention to intonation and facial expressions. Его мифические доходы might be “his unbelievable huge income that will be the stuff of myths” or it might be “his imaginary income.” So tricky, this language stuff.

I personally like the word феерический (fabulous, fantastic) from the French word féerique, meaning related to fairy tales and fairies. Sometimes it suggests magical without stardust, Tinkerbell, and magic wands: Открытие фестиваля, как и положено в Канне, было феерическим (The opening of the festival was just enchanting, as befits Cannes.) Other times, when modifying a noun with a negative meaning, it might mean utter, complete, total: Я не мог слушать его феерическую чушь (I couldn’t listen to his utter BS.) Её выступление было феерическим провалом (Her performance was an epic fail.)

If you worry that you’ll put your foot in it with the magical thinking words, you can just stick with some of the amazing-wonderful-extraordinary adjectives, like бесподобный (incomparable); великолепный (marvelous); восхитительный (splendid); замечательный (wonderful); исключительный (exclusive); and my personal fave: потрясающий (stupendous). I just like how it sounds: Книга ⊠ потрясающая! Всем советую прочесть! (The book is just astounding! I recommend it to everyone!)

Or how about this? Концерт — умереть и не встать! (The concert was to die for, literally “die and not get up”)

Simple, expressive and no funny business with magic wands and elves.

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