

The Connotation Conundrum

The Word's Worth

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

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Качать права: to make a stink fighting for your rights

One of the sub-categories of Torture the Translator is the Connotation Conundrum. This is when the word or phrase in one language has a positive connotation while the equivalent word or phrase in the language you are translating in or out of has a negative connotation. When you come across this in a translation, you think: Dad was right. I should have become an accountant.

I was reminded of this the other day during an office discussion of качать права.

Качать means to rock, shake, sway or pump. You can shake and pump and rock just about anything in Russian: качать головой (to shake your head); лодка качает (the boat is rocking) качать ребёнка (to rock a child); качать/накачивать мышцы (to pump up your muscles). The idiom качать права is literally something like “to shake your rights,” and is defined in dictionaries rather decorously as “to demand that your rights be observed.”

But качать права is anything but decorous. It means to make a scene, to throw a fit, to give people a hard time in order to get your due.

In English, sticking up for your rights, standing up for yourself, and demanding justice are all Good Things, by and large. But качать права is Not a Good Thing. It is confrontational and nasty. It's hard to translate it so you convey that someone is doing two things — throwing a fit and demanding what might be their legal or moral right — and that the speaker, in most cases, does not approve. That's a lot of information packed into two little words.

And so you fiddle and fuss over the translation for hours: Они любят качать права, скандалить и уверены, что такой тип поведения ☒ признак высокого уровня внутреннего достоинства (When they think they aren't being treated right, they love to throw their weight around and make a scene, and in fact they're certain that behaving this way is sign of a high level of personal integrity.)

Sometimes you leave out the whole rights issue altogether: Когда охранники отказались ее выпускать, требуя пропуск, я начала качать права. Типа опаздываем на поезд, поезд через 40 минут, если она опоздает из-за их дурацкой бумажки ☒ им будет плохо (When the guards wouldn't let her out without a pass, I began to throw my weight around, saying things like we're late for a train, it leaves in 40 minutes, and if she misses it over some stupid piece of paper, they'll be in trouble.)

See? Misery, thy name is translation.

Another classic example of this is the lovely English word whistleblower, that is, someone who exposes activity or information in an organization or someone's behavior that is illegal, immoral or incorrect. Being a whistleblower is a Good Thing. You expose corruption! You save taxpayers' money! You prevent crimes! You put the guilty behind bars!

In fact, you get your photo on the cover of Time magazine as one of the most important and heroic people of the year.

But if you were in Russia, and the magazine was Время, the word splashed on the cover under your photograph would be Стукач! (Stoolie!)

For various historical, cultural, and perhaps even religious reasons, in Russia and in Russian, tattling on anyone, even if they are breaking the law, is a Bad Thing, and the words for people who do it are pejorative, to a greater or lesser extent. The words заявитель, осведомитель, and информатор are all informers — people who come into a government agency and inform the authorities about something that is illegal. Given the misuse of denunciations in the past, this is not a respectable thing to do.

It is probably also dangerous, but that's another column...

The only word that is more or less neutral is разоблачитель — an exposé (of misdeeds). The other option is to use a descriptive translation: человек, который заявляет о нарушениях в компании или государственных органах (someone who makes public information about violations in a company or governmental organization); or лицо, совершающее служебное разоблачение (someone who exposes business or governmental misconduct). Those are fine, but they don't have that ring of glory that "whistleblower" has — the image of someone running out into the night, blowing a whistle and waking everyone up to danger.

The closest you can get — and this isn't very close at all — is борец за правду or справедливость (literally, a fighter for truth or justice).

To complete a threesome of translation torture I give you the pair of ambitious and амбициозный. Perhaps it's just better to think of these words as false friends. In English, ambitious is defined as "having or showing a strong desire and determination to succeed." This is clearly a Good Thing. In Russian амбициозный is defined as исполненный тщеславия, своенравный (vain and intractable). Not a Good Thing.

The only way around this is to use a completely different word in Russian: целеустремлённый (goal-oriented); трудолюбивый (hard-working); далеко идущий (someone who will go far). Sometimes people use амбициозный but with a footnote: Муж у неё амбициозный в хорошем смысле (Her husband is really competitive, but in a good sense.)

I suppose you could just add но в хорошем смысле (but in a good sense) to the other cases, like стукач, но в хорошем смысле (a stoolie, but in a good sense).

Well, maybe not.

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