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Breaking Wind the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Старый пердун: old fart

We're all adults here. We understand that we all, from time to time, produce a variety of noises and smells. There's nothing to be ashamed of. We might eat too much of certain kinds of food and then you know what happens: Beans, beans, they're good for your heart, the more you eat them, the more you fart.

Yes, folks. Today we going to talk about farting, aka вздутие кишечника (flatulence).

If you were in polite company you'd say — actually, if you were in polite company, you'd

make no reference to this at all. But let's say you've opened all the windows in your classroom in the middle of winter and your principal wants to know why. Стоял дурной запах (There was a bad smell), you say. The principal worries that it's from the bathrooms. Нет, you say. У одного ученика проблема с желудком (One of the students has an upset stomach.) Now she worries he lost his lunch. So you clarify, nicely: Выпускал газы (He passed gas.)

But among friends and family you use other words. The most benign — the ones used in talking about children and little dogs — are пукать/пукнуть or фукать/фукнуть. Девочка пукает, извиняется и хихикает. (The little girl passes gas, apologizes and giggles.) Sometimes you might be traveling with a big baby, like this driver: Напарник мой музыкально фукает и желает сам себе доброго здоровья, как при чихе (My partner farts musically and says "God bless" to himself, like when he sneezes.)

Пердеть is less polite, but something you might hear in some families, like when a little boy wants his mother's freshly baked pirozhki. ⊠ Мамочка, а дай еще с капусткой, я их так люблю... (Mom, let me some more cabbage pies, I love them!) ⊠ Толик, съешь лучше с рыбкой, ты ж с капусты пердишь... (Tolya, better take a fish pie, the cabbage ones make you fart.)

The noun produced by this verb is пердёж (a fart). Он пердит, понимаешь! За этот пердёж нас выгнали из кафе. (He farts, get it? And we got kicked out of the café because of his fart.)

The producer of the fart is пердун (literally a farter). When used to describe someone young, it means a useless, idiotic, or despicable person. Никакая я тебе не мама, пердун проклятый! (I'm not your mommy, you little piece of crap!) Пердун он, ваш Гитлер! (He's a bastard, your Hitler!)

But most of the time it's старый пердун (an old fart), an old codger who probably smells a bit nasty and who is unhappy with everything and everyone, and generally a miserable old goat. He's always male — at least I can't find an example of a woman who is старый пердун. Годам к 40 вас многие девочки будут считать старым пердуном (By the time you're 40 a lot of the girls already think you're an old fart.) Он старый пердун, который всё по советской власти тоскует (He's an old fart still nostalgic for the Soviet regime.)

And then there is бздеть, which generally means to fart silently. Here's some friendly advice for a young interpreter: Главное не бздеть, в кабине и так душно (The main thing is not to fart — it's stuffy enough in the cabin as it is.)

In my childhood, we called a silent fart SBD: Silent But Deadly. In Russian, this is пустить шептуна (something like cutting one with a whisper). But interestingly — in a weird scatological way — little Russian kids have the same idea. One of my young friends explained: Пукнуть тихо, это, как правило, очень вонюче (If you fart silently, it's really stinky, as a rule.)

Hey, 12-year-olds are the experts here.

Finally, there is смердеть: Он смердит. Не чувствуешь, что ли? (He cut one. Can't you smell it?) But in general, смердеть means to emit a very bad smell, often the smell of decaying flesh.

For me, the interesting bit in all this is the figurative meanings of these words. In English, the figurative sense is to fart around, to goof off, to do nothing useful, as in: Quit farting around and start doing your work!

But in Russian, the figurative meanings of the various farting verbs are to be scared or to talk nonsense. Makes sense, I guess: you make a bad noise (talk nonsense, run on at the mouth) or get frightened (almost crap your pants).

So, you might say: Хватит пердеть! Я не верю тебе (Cut the crap! I don't believe you!)

In fact, unless you work in a bean factory, most of the time when someone says Не бзди! It means "don't be scared," not "don't fart." You'll find this in war stories, especially before a battle. Не бзди, я с тобой; не бзди, прорвёмся (Don't be scared, I'm with you. Don't be scared, we'll get through it.)

Бздеть can also mean to yammer on about something in an annoying way: Он постоянно злится и бздит часами (He keeps getting mad and runs on about it for hours).

And that's pretty much it. Go forth and fart in glory.

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