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False Friends, Part 12

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Фортуна: good fortune

Everyone knows about ложные друзья переводчиков (translator's false friends). Актуальный is not actual, but relevant, super fashionable, urgent. Ангина is not angina (a dangerous heart condition), but the far more run-of-the-mill tonsillitis. Презерватив is not a food preservative, but a condom — a possible mood-destroying misunderstanding.

And фарт is not a fart. It's a bit of good luck.

I know, right? So hard to rewire the brain on this one.

The origins of фарт in Russian are not clear. The only thing that is certain is that it is from some word borrowed from somewhere. Very helpful. One theory — considered less likely — is that it came to Russian from the German Fahrt, which is used by hunters to mean the trail of an animal. Another theory is that it is a corruption of the word фортуна (fortune) and appeared as camp slang. In criminal slang it can mean something stolen, and ходить на фарт means to nick something.

But to my mind the two meanings are almost the same, since finding something worth stealing and successfully nabbing it is a bit of good fortune, isn't it? In 1903 someone wrote: Где ж ей быть? На фарт ходила. "Фарт", ⊠ от слова "фортуна", ⊠ на арестантском языке означает вообще "счастье". (Where could she be? She went to steal something. The Russian word "fart" comes from "fortuna" – and in the language of convicts, it basically means "happiness.")

In support of the unlikely animal trail theory, you hear it when hunters are talking, especially fishermen: У каждого рыбака свой фарт. Конец апреля и начало мая ⊠ самое везучее время для байкальских рыбаков (Every fisherman has his own lucky charm. The end of April and early May are the most favorable times for folks fishing on Lake Baikal.) There is even a thing — фарт рыбацкий (fisherman's luck) — which is apparently distinct from just plain old good luck. Очень уж мне хотелось фарта рыбацкого изведать на "моем" озере (I'd sure like a taste of fisherman's luck on "my" lake.)

And you hear it a lot when sports fans, athletes, and sports journalists are talking. Sometimes you get the sense that фарт is up there lounging in the clouds, a rather disinterested observer glancing down on humans in between sipping ambrosia and tossing down a victory or two or none, depending on mood and the celestial scorecard: Это всё карма. Вселенная любит поддерживать баланс: за щедро отсыпанные россиянам победы на Олимпиаде она забрала весь фарт у футболистов. (It's all karma. The Universe likes to maintain balance: for generously showering Russians with victories in the Olympics, she took all the good luck away from football players.)

Фарт can play a role in love, or at least in courtship: У Сергея были ключи от квартиры уехавшего за границу приятеля, что в таких делах называется "фарт" (Sergei had the keys to the apartment of a friend who had gone abroad, which in cases like this was considered a stroke of luck.)

You can try to catch it: Кто хочет поймать свой фарт? (Who wants to catch a lucky break?)

And you should always take it when it appears: Мужики, когда ещё такой фарт подвернётся? (Guys, when are we going to have a lucky break like this again?)

Someone who is lucky is фартовый: Всю свою недолгую жизнь он был фартовым (He was lucky all of his short life.) In other cases, фартовый can refer to the person who brings good luck: Иван Петрович — фартовый тренер (Ivan Petrovich is a lucky trainer.)

And, to complete our good-luck word formation, there is also a verb, фартить: С любовью мне на Кипре долго что-то не фартило (For a long time I was unlucky in love on Cyprus.)

English speakers might find it difficult to use these words with your significant other:

Слушай, почему мне не фартит? Где мой фарт? Я вообще не фартовый! It may sound like you are saying: Why can't I fart? Where is my fart? I'm just not a farter. But really you are saying: Listen, why am I so unlucky? Where's my good luck? I'm just not a lucky person.)

If so, just use less fraught words and phrases: Мне не везёт! (I'm not lucky!) Какое везение (What a piece of luck!) Какая удача! (Just in luck!) Вот везуха! Купила последний билет на поезд (What a lucky break! I bought the last train ticket!)

Or when life goes low, you go high. Refer to фортуна (Fortune), a very capricious creature sharing the ambrosia with Фарт up there among the gods: Фортуна не изменила своему фавориту (Good fortune did not betray her favorite.) Ему фортуна сладко улыбнулась! (Fortune sweetly smiled on him.) А то ведь фортуна может и ускользнуть! (But good fortune can slip away, too!)

And as far as false friends go, just be happy you didn't live in Moscow when one of the best clothes detergents you could buy was called Барф.

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