The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Making a Fuss in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

November 08, 2019



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Скандал: fuss, fit, ruckus

I tend to get a bit obsessive about language and literature, which is obvious from my bookcases: the three shelves of everything written in Russian and English by or about Vladimir Nabokov; 30 books on old Moscow; every Russian slang dictionary ever published — and even a few unpublished manuscripts. Once I get interested in something, I'm like a dog with a bone.

Lately my language obsession is with what I call "half false friends." When the Russian language borrows a foreign word, over time the speakers modify its original meaning, often to

the point where the Russian word has nothing in common with its foreign cognate. A good example of this is ангина (tonsillitis) which is not at all angina (a heart condition). Classic false friends.

But sometimes the borrowed Russian word retains some of its original meaning and picks up a secondary meaning along the way. An example of this is демократичный. Sometimes it means democratic: Правление Евросоюза должно быть более транспарентным и демократичным (Governance of the European Union should be more transparent and democratic.) But sometimes it means affordable: Тур-агентство предлагает отдых на Балканах за вполне демократичные цены (The tourist agency is offering vacations in the Balkans for very affordable prices.) In Russian, the basic idea of democratic is retained — something for all people, not just the elite — but it is expanded to include prices, places, and even styles of clothing — none of which are said to be "democratic" in English.

Another word like this is скандал (scandal, sometimes). In English a scandal is mostly some bad or immoral behavior that is shocking and upsetting, and occasionally talk about that behavior. In Russian, it's flipped: скандал is mostly the talk, noise, shouting, ruckus over something and only occasionally is it, in part, the bad behavior being shouted about. In fact, sometimes there is just a big stink — скандал — with no underlying cause.

So, in Russian, you most often hear the shouting and ruckus part of a scandal: Я думаю, ладно, не буду из-за ерунды поднимать скандал (I thought, "Well, fine then. I'm not going to make a fuss over something so petty.") Его имя неоднократно было связано со скандалами (His name was associated with controversy more than once.) Когда она узнала, что у мужа роман, она закатила громадный скандал (When she found out her husband was having an affair, she threw a fit.)

And only occasionally do you find the disgraceful behavior meaning of скандал: Это скандал для такой большой страны ☒ иметь такую примитивную структуру экономики (It's a disgrace for such a large country to have such a primitive economy.)

When you get to the verbs, the meanings have split completely. In English, to scandalize is to shock someone with your bad behavior. In Russian, скандалить is to throw a fit, get into a fight, behave badly. Ребёнок скандалил, плакал, требовал у мамы невозможного: вернуть собаку. (The child threw a fit, wept and demanded that his mother do the impossible — bring his dog back.) Иду в телефонную компанию разбираться. Скандалить приходится! (I'm going to the telephone company to sort it out. I'll have to raise Cain!)

There is one other meaning of скандалить, which has the perfective form оскандалить: to put someone down or put someone in an awkward position. Горбачёв поснимал "зубров" и даже в прессе многих оскандалил (Gorbachev fired a lot of the old guard and even shamed many of them in the press.)

It follows, then, that скандалист (male) or скандалистка (female) is a troublemaker. Я человек смирный, не скандалист, не завзятый пикетчик, но сегодня я не могу молчать. (I'm a peaceful guy, not a troublemaker, not an inveterate protester, but today I can't keep silent.) Она — хрестоматийная семейная скандалистка (She is a typical family troublemaker.)

There is another set of words for all this in Russian, which also come from one borrowed word. Here an alcoholic drink morphed into rabble-rouser.

This false friend story begins with буза, aka bouza or boza, a lightly fermented drink made from various grains that originated along the silk route. You can find references to the drink in 19th century Russian literature, and even in stories from places like Dagestan today: Лечебный напиток! Мне мама в детские годы бузу давала понемножку для сердца. (It's a medicinal drink! When I was little my mother gave me a little bit of bouza for my heart.)

But somewhere along the line буза became bad behavior, presumably first by people who drank too much of it. One old woman commented on the riots of football fans in Moscow: Они сатанисты, сказала бабушка, это они устраивают побоища на стадионах, это они учинили бузу на Манежной площади (They're Satanists, the old woman said — the ones who start fist-fights in the stadiums and the ones who ran riot on Manege Square.)

And then it follows that the person who raises a ruckus — буза — is бузотёр. Вадим, живой классик кинодраматургии, великий мастер, и бузотёр, не отдает долгов! (Vadim, a screenwriting genius, a great maestro and rabble-rouser, doesn't repay his debts!)

And what these troublemakers and rabble-rousers do is бузотёрить: Городское племя наехало на отдых, сейчас бузотёрит при свете керосинового фонаря, соображая очередние пакости (The urban tribe descended on the place for their vacation, and now they're making trouble by the light of a kerosene lantern, thinking up nasty tricks.)

Although sometimes the troublemaking is much less dire: Вокруг сидели такие тихие дети, никто не бузотёрил, иные лизали тарелку языком. (All around were kids sitting very quietly, no one was making a fuss, while some licked their plates clean.)

So remember, if someone is оскандаленный he is not scandalized by someone, but insulted or discredited. Буза is either a delightful drink or a riot. And демократично might be said about a cheap bar or a well-ordered parliament.

Who said language acquisition was going to be easy?

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