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The Key Words of 2019

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Embed:

Протестное настроение: mood to protest

Every year since 2007, a group of professional and amateur linguists under the benevolent guidance of linguist Mikhail Epstein spend 12 months noting and cataloging all the key words and expressions that appear over the course of the year. Sometimes these are newly created words, like Брекзит (Brexit) in 2016. Sometimes they are standard Russian words that have taken on new meaning or associations, like беженцы (refugees) in 2015. In addition to the task of cataloging, these language watchers and lovers play around a bit, inventing their own neologisms, like last year's Вохрократия (Paramilocracy, i.e. a government based on paramilitary security services). The end result of their efforts are words and expressions in

four categories that reflect the year that was: Слова года (Words of the Year).

It is quite amazing, especially in hindsight, how apt their choices have been. Their first word of the year in 2007, at the height of easy money and flashy lifestyles in the big cities, was гламурный, an adjective borrowed from the English glamorous but applied to everything from celebrations of religious holidays to ceramic tiles. In the end, гламурный morphed to mean what young(ish) Polinochka and Natusik imagined to be owned, worn, driven, consumed or attended by a Hollywood movie star. If they thought Beyonce would have it as her kitchen backsplash, it was гламурный.

After that came кризис (crisis); перезагрузка (reboot); жара (heatwave); РосПил (syphon off); Болотная (Bolotnaya Square); Госдура (the State Fooliament); Крымнаш (CrimeaIsOurs); беженцы (refugees); Брекзит (Brexit); реновация (renovation); and Новичок (Novichok). See? I don't even have to put the years in.

2019, it turns out, was all about social unrest. Among the dozens and dozens of possible words of the year, the group voted to make the Word of the year the very simple, no-frills, completely ordinary word протест (protest). In second place was допускай (let us in [to the elections]), and in third place was пытки (torture). Well. Not much to add to this dark trio, except that this was the first time a word in the imperative made the list, which is a fine example of grammar having meaning in and of itself.

All of the three top expressions of the year were also connected with protests and social unrest in one form or another. The top expression of the year was Московское дело (the Moscow case), the case brought against some of the 1,388 people detained during the street demonstrations on July 27. In second place was the phrase клоачный язык (crap language) used by the linguist Gasan Guseinov to describe current Russian language usage. The word, which is like potty-mouth only stronger, enraged a lot of people. They shouted Как вы смеете?! (How dare you?) — a phrase that was also on the year's list of top expressions as uttered by activist Greta Thunberg. Guseinov's insistence that he meant the hate-filled, insulting, intolerant language used by some Russian citizens did little to calm emotions.

The third most important expression of the year was Я/МЫ (I/We Are) with a name added. This expression appeared when the Kommersant, RBC and Vedomosti newspapers all put on the front pages Я/МЫ Иван Голунов (I/We are Ivan Golunov), an investigative journalist with Meduza detained under obviously trumped-up charges.

After that, the authorities continued to provide plenty of opportunities for this public of form of solidarity, and t-shirt manufacturers probably kept a Я/МЫ print file open, ready for the next name.

Антиязык (anti-language) is the group's category for words or expressions of the year that are the language of propaganda, lies, or aggression as well as clichés and disgusting, vulgar expressions. Judging by what I heard on the street in the weirdly tense weeks before the holidays, this list must have been really, really long. In first place is иностранный агент (foreign agent), aka иноагент ("spy" to be blunt), which is what just about everyone I know in Russia is. I am one, too, I suppose. I can't quite figure out the criteria.

Second place is the phrase пещерные русофобы (literally "cave Rusophobes") coined by

President Putin in a speech about the attempt of these creatures to squash Russian language learning and usage all over the world. This might be translated as Rusophobic Neanderthals and is, blessedly, the one thing I can not be accused of.

Third place goes to глубинный народ (deep nation), coined by political theorist Vladislav Surkov, who wrote that "Глубинного государства в России нет... зато есть глубинный народ" (There is no deep government in Russia... but there is a deep nation.)

No, I have absolutely no idea what that means, so please don't even think of asking me.

The neologisms dreamed up by the group members are, as usual, apt and witty. The top winner was Бо-бо-гвардия (Boo-boo-guards) to describe the national guardsmen who testified being hurt badly by empty plastic cups tossed at them and 85-year-olds pushing them, despite their 15 layers of padded clothing and helmets that gave them the name космонавты (cosmonauts).

In second place was the slightly more obscure ГАСАНтра-Барбара, a play on Gasan Guseinov (see above) and the soap opera Santa Barbara, used to describe the hysterical scandal that raged over his statement about Russian language usage.

And in the third place is a new verb that I intend to use all the time: фейсдельничать, defined as бездельничать, сидя в фейсбуке (to goof off on Facebook). Perfect.

And finally, I want to point out that at the end of my column on the Words of the Year 2018, I wrote: "So fasten your seatbelts, folks. Next year in Russia is going to be a bumpy ride, language-wise and otherwise, too."

Nailed it.

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