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Please Don't Hurt My Feelings

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Оскорбление: insult, injury, affront

One of my favorite radio shows is — and this is not going to be a big surprise — Говорим по-русски! (Let's Speak Russian!) on Ekho Moskvy, where various Russian language specialists discuss trends, changes, interesting facts, complicated grammar and the daily violence done to великий могучий русский язык (the great and powerful Russian language). Last week the guest was a professor who is член Гильдии лингвистов-экспертов (a member of the Guild of Expert Linguists), one of the people who analyze conflicts of language in media, trademarks, and other areas — in short, a god who walks the earth.

The topic was about the notion of hurting people's feelings in Russian, particularly in Russian legislation, like the law against оскорбление чувств верующих ("insulting the feelings of religious believers"). While I'd always found the phrase surprisingly difficult to translate, I

hadn't considered all the issues associated with it or all the nuances of insulting, hurting feelings, humiliating, and injuring честь и достоинство (honor and dignity) of your neighbors and fellow citizens in Russian.

So, how are you mean and insulting in Russian? There are several linguistic options.

Расстраивать/расстроить (to upset someone) can happen unintentionally or by circumstances. Its reflexive form is often used to convey being annoyed, upset, put out: Я расстроилась! После тяжёлого дня хотела принять душ, а горячей воды нет! (I'm so annoyed! After a hard day I wanted to take a shower, but there's no hot water.) But you can also be upset by someone's hurtful actions or words. Шеф меня так расстроил! Он сказал, что я очень плохо работала в последнее время. (My boss really cut me to the quick. He said my work had been bad recently.)

Another verb pair is обижать/обидеть (to say or do something that hurts someone's feelings or injures them physically). This is a very versatile verb pair. It can be used to mean showing disrespect, like when two people are dickering over a sales price. ⊠ Я же сказал! Плачу четыреста за картину. ⊠ Обижаешь, дорогой! ("I told you — I'll pay you 400 for your painting." "You insult me, my friend!") Or when you are not given your due: Меня недоверие обижает (Their lack of faith in me is insulting). Or when a child hits his little sibling: Не обижай маленького! (Don't be mean to your little brother!)

And then обижать is used to describe saying something nasty or unflattering about someone: Не очень мне хочется обижать людей, которые занимаются ремонтом автомобилей, но они все — жулики (I don't really want to insult car repairmen, but they are all crooks!)

In fights people use harsh words that can sting: Он очень сильно меня обидел! (He really insulted me!) Он обидел меня до глубины души (He deeply offended me.)

It can also be used to mean some form of physical or sexual abuse, often to children: Этот тип припёрся из своей деревни, чтобы детишек тут обижать (That creep snuck over from his village to abuse the little kids.)

Sometimes people aren't doing the insulting: Богом обиженный is what you say about someone without talent, looks or intelligence. In English we might say: He was standing behind the door when God was handing out brains.

In another usage, not being insulted is very, very good. When you say природа (nature) didn't insult someone, it means that nature didn't skimp, but was very generous to someone. Природа не обидела его талантами (Nature endowed him with many talents, literally "didn't begrudge him talent").

Sometimes this expression is used with different agents of generosity: Вообще, государство не обижало директора казённых заводов (Generally speaking, the state was pretty generous to the directors of their factories).

Just about the worst way to treat someone is унижать/унизить (to humiliate, diminish, debase, belittle). Although, sometimes it's not as bad as it might seem: Нас не унижала коммунальность (We didn't find communal living humiliating). Or it seems worse than

perhaps it is: Стоять в очереди он не мог: это его унижало (He refused to stand in line; he found it humiliating.)

But most of the time унижать is the process of destroying someone by making them feel so little that they hardly exist: Уж унижать человека ⊠ так унижать: сперва уничтожить его оболочку, потом и до души добраться (If you going to debase someone, then do it right: first belittle their outer appearance and then go after their heart and soul.)

Оскорблять/оскорбить is also quite strong — it means to insult, offend, cast aspersions. It's not just putting someone down, it's saying something demeaning. It usually provokes a reaction, though not always this dramatic: Если рыцаря оскорбляли, к ногам обидчика летела перчатка (If a knight was insulted, he threw down the gauntlet at the feet of his offender.) Today no gauntlets are thrown down, but people get mighty upset when they are insulted. Оскорбили мою профессию, мою, можно сказать, святыню! (They insulted my profession, something I hold sacred, you might say!)

Often it seems that the best way to convey one's indignation is to use several near-synonyms, like here: Будто в душу плюнули. Оскорбили, унизили... (It was like they spit on my soul. They insulted me, humiliated me.) Я никого не хочу ни обидеть, ни оскорбить (I don't want to offend or insult anyone).

If you ever happen to insult someone unintentionally, try making it up to them by using this phrase: Прошу прощения если я чем-то вас обидел (I'm sorry if I somehow offended you.)

Hint: you can also say that even if it was intentional. You regret it, right?

This brings us back to the phrase оскорбление чувств верующих. I've found it translated in many ways: insult the feelings of believers, assault on religious feelings, insult the sentiments of religious believers, and even religious contempt or a breach of the sanctity of religion. I don't really like any of them. I think the problem is that in English "religious feelings" is an odd phrase, and while you could insult someone's religion or hurt someone's feelings, mixing those two concepts gets confusing. The only phrase that sounds half-decent to my ear is "to be disrespectful of people's religious feelings and beliefs."

Now the tricky bit with all of this and the law is that being insulted is subjective. Someone might call you every name in the book, might disparage your nationality, your religion, your looks, and your intelligence. And it's like water off a duck's back: Меня это не обидит и не покоробит никогда (That will never offend or bother me). And then someone might give you a dark look and you feel totally devastated.

That's the legal problem. The linguistic expert on the radio show that started all this said that you either have to define in the law exactly what constitutes оскорбление or chuck it out altogether since one person's insult is another person's background noise.

In fact, he said, in most cases, when someone swears at you, or calls you a nasty name, or says something mean, it's not оскорбление (insult) or унижение (humiliation). It's речевое хулиганство (verbal hooliganism).

And that is now officially my favorite phrase of the summer.

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