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2020 Words of the Year

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Слова года 2020: 2020 Words of the Year

Every year my favorite column is слова года (words of the year), a look back at the year that was in word pictures. And my favorite group that compiles them is headed by the linguist and professor of Russian language and literature, Mikhail Epstein. Over the course of the year, more than 3,000 word-nerds from virtually all over the world submit new Russian words and phrases as they appear, as they change, or even as they create them. Then at the end of the year, 400 are chosen for the short list, which then goes to the expert council of writers, linguists, specialists in literature and culture, journalists, and philosophers. The expert council even includes a psychologist and a Bible expert, who perhaps offer counseling and comfort to the council members in tough years like this one. I know I'd need it.

And then, tucked away in their own personal voting booths, uninfluenced by the choices of

their colleagues, they vote in four categories: word of the year; expression of the year; "anti-language" (the language of hatred, aggression, propaganda and falsehood); and finally, my personal favorite: "proto-logism" of the year, that is, the best invented word or phrase.

When you look at every year's winners, you get a snapshot of the mood, preoccupations, and main events of the past decade and a half, from гламур (glamourous in the loosest possible sense) in 2007 through кризис (crisis) in 2008, жара (heat) in 2010, Крымнаш (Crimea is Ours!) in 2014; Новичок (Novichok) in 2018; and протест (protest) in 2019.

And that leads us to the 2020 word of the year: обнуление (zeroing out). This term appeared early in the year, in the context of a three-step process: change the Constitution, which would zero out Vladimir Putin's past presidential terms, which in turn would allow him to start over again. This is, you will agree, an attractive proposition. Можно обнулить количество калорий, которые я сегодня съел? (Can I zero out the number of calories I ate today?) Unfortunately, it is limited in its application.

Almost all of the runner-up words of the year had to do with the pandemic, including коронавирус (coronavirus); ковид (Covid); самоизоляция (self-isolation); удалёнка (work from home); зум, зумиться (Zoom, to have a Zoom conference); пандемия (pandemic); вакцина (vaccine); карантин (quarantine) and a word I tend to overuse: ковидиот (covidiot).

Epstein explained why the group chose a word associated with politics for a year defined by a deadly virus. It wasn't just the presidential terms that were zeroed out, he wrote, "Обнулилась в буквальном смысле, т.е. подошла к концу, жизнь множества людей. Обнулились работы, бизнесы, профессии, отрасли, бюджеты. В значительной степени обнулилась общественная и культурная жизнь." (The lives of a great many people were literally 'zeroed out,' that is, they came to an end. Work, business, professions, entire branches of the economy and budgets were nullified. To a great extent, public and cultural life were reduced to null.)

Political life also took the top spot in the category of expression of the year: Жыве Беларусь! (Long live Belarus!) which is, I think, the first time a non-Russian phrase came in first place. The other top contenders largely had to do with the way we lived under the pandemic: масочный режим (mask regimen); социальное дистанцирование (social distancing); лица старше 65 (people aged 65 and older) who have had tighter restrictions on movement; новая нормальность (the new normal) a calque from English that sounds perfectly normal in Russian; когда всё это закончится (When will this all end?); бесконтактная доставка (contact-free delivery); and the witty, difficult to translate вирусокосный год (viraleap year).

It is a sign of the times that the dark category of propaganda, lies, and hate-speech had the largest number of words and phrases. They were, naturally, connected with political life. In the end, Навальный мог сам себя отравить (Navalny might have poisoned himself), a quote from Vladimir Putin, took first place.

Second place went to the tongue-twister государствообразующий народ ("state-forming nation"). This was part of a Constitutional amendment proposed by Putin in early March: In the article defining Russian as the national language, he suggested adding the clarification

that русский язык — это язык “государствообразующего народа, входящего в многонациональный союз равноправных народов РФ” (the Russian language is the language of the ‘state-forming nation that is part of the multi-national union of equal nations of the Russian Federation’). This is a riff off градообразующее предприятие (literally a city-forming enterprise, i.e., the company in a one-company town) and appears to be an attempt to give the Russian nation special status without giving it special status, like the Patriarch of the Orthodox Church of Constantinople is “the first among equals.” Very subtle. Hard to grasp.

That leads us to the third-place expression: изменения в Конституцию (amendments to the Constitution), the main theme of the first quarter and included here due to a grammatical error. This shows that we foreigners aren’t the only ones who mess up prepositions and their cases (it should be в Конституции). In this category the experts also noted phrases from Belarus political life, such as the Belarusian police definition of their policy toward protesters: гуманно применим оружие (“we’ll use weapons humanely”) and Alexander Lukashenko’s description of their behavior: как крысы разбежались (“they ran away like rats”).

And now let’s jump to the fun category of homemade neologisms. The top winner was обнулидер (Nulleader), leader who has undergone the ritual of zeroing out and who has zero responsibility for the previous period and double-zero responsibility for the next. A very attractive position, I’d say, and one that could sweep the world if we’d let it.

In second place is another torture-the-translator word: расковидеться. Invented according to the pattern of разговеться (to break one’s fast, eg. on Easter) it combines ковид (Covid) and видеться (to get together) to mean breaking one’s covid-induced solitude to start seeing people again. Очень хочу расковидеться! (I really want to end my coviditude!)

In third place is a word that I think should enter the language immediately: Гоминицид (humanocide), that is, the destruction of the human race. Коронавирус — новейший и опаснейший гоминицид (Coronavirus is the newest and most dangerous humanocide).

And finally, there is another invented word that works as well in English as it does in Russian: френдетта (friendetta). This is when you go on a rampage and unfriend half your Facebook friends for their various sins and sensibilities. Very useful word.

And so: итого (to sum it all up)... 2020 was a year of three p’s: pandemic, politics and Putin.

May next year be better for all.

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