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Hazard a Guess on the Meaning of Азарт

The Word's Worth

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Непереводимое слово: an untranslatable word

A few weeks ago I jumped into a conversation on social media about a Russian word that is untranslatable. I like to joke that there aren't any untranslatable words. After all, you can't turn in a translation with blank spaces in some paragraphs and say, "Oh, that? There were some words that were untranslatable, so I just left them out."

That said, of course there are words for things or concepts that don't have equivalents or near equivalents in another language. Those are truly "untranslatable," and sometimes instead of struggling to come up with a translation or explanation, the word just gets borrowed: тройка becomes troika, or a computer monitor becomes монитор.

More commonly you find a word that has many meanings and associations in one language

without a match of one word that has the same combination of meanings and associations in another language. There isn't a perfect match in English for тоска, which is a combination of yearning, regret, sadness, tedium and weariness, so you have to choose one or two of those English meanings to convey something of the vastness of the Russian concept. In other cases, you don't really translate as much as describe. That very convenient Russian word сутки gets explained as a 24-hour period. Or земляк is a person from the same area you came from.

Another problem is when a word in Russian has a negative connotation but the word for it in English is positive, or the other way around. There was once an unpleasant diplomatic incident when an American referred to Chechen terrorists as rebels. It was translated as повстанцы, which is "correct." Only in Russian повстанцы are usually good, and the Russian authorities thought the Americans were praising terrorists.

These are the hit-your-head-against-the desk words. Translators are never happy with their choices. You almost always have to leave something out, or you ruin a tight line of prose with a long explanation.

But if you think about it — really think about it — it's an extraordinarily strange phenomenon. The word is translated in a way: the foreign translator, reader or listener understands it and has "translated" тоска into something in their head that captures all its meanings and associations. But there isn't a word for it in English.

It's a wonder we aren't all drunks or crazy.

Anyway, the prompt for all this contemplation was the noun азарт and the related adjective азартный and adverb азартно. These words combine the notion of excitement, enthusiasm and adventurousness with love of challenge, risk-taking, taking a gamble and the thrill of the chase or game. It's the word you use when someone starts dickering with a salesperson and gets so caught up in it that he can't stop until he makes the perfect deal. Or it's the word you use to describe a suitor whose object of desire is not interested or pretends not to be: whether he really wants to capture this person's heart doesn't matter — the point is to win. Or it's what drives the hiker to climb over that one last mountain. It is, I dare say, the word you'd use to describe Sherlock Holmes when he declares: "The game is afoot!"

We understand what this is in English and can even express parts of it – why can't we capture it all?

I wondered if part of the problem is that both the English hazard and the Russian азарт come from the same source language — French — but then evolved in different ways. Both came from the Old French hasart or hasard, a game at dice, which may have come from the Spanish word azar (an unfortunate card or throw at dice), which in turn may have come from an Arabic word for die. The uncertainty of derivation is because it was all taking place circa 1300, and the Google search engine doesn't go that far back.

The original French word evolved from chances in gambling to chances in life. Now *hasard* means chance, fortune, luck, or an accident. In English, the notion of chance evolved in the direction of danger, accidents, and misfortune. Now we most commonly use the noun to mean something dangerous – fire hazards – and we use it as verb almost only in the phrase "to hazard a guess" (take a chance on a guess).

But in Russian, the notion of chance evolved in the other direction — the passion, excitement, eagerness and thrill that are part of any risky venture, be it at the gambling table, in business or in love.

Maybe that's one of the sources of translation problem: same root meaning but opposite connotations – one of danger, the other of excitement.

So how is азарт used in Russian and how can we translate it into English?

The only easy bit is this: азартные игры are games of chance: Никакой я не противник азартных игр (I personally have nothing against gambling). But gambling does have drawbacks: Любовь к азартным играм очень многих привела к печальному концу (Love of gambling has brought many a player to a sad end).

Азарт is often used to describe people in certain occupations or avocations. Hunters have азарт, except when they don't: Разочарованные охотники выпили венгерские вина, откушали познанской ветчины и без обычного азарта постреляли волков (The disappointed hunters drank some Hungarian wines, ate some Poznan ham, and without their usual zeal shot wolves). But азарт helps when you have a challenge ahead: Козы ложились на рельсы, пассажиры, соскочив с подножки, азартно стаскивали их за рога (The goats lay down on the tracks, and so passengers jumped off the running board and threw themselves into pulling them off the rails by their horns).

And of course, азарт is essential for athletes: С его азартом вскоре он стал чемпионом (With his will to win, he quickly became a winner). And inventors and researchers: Азарт исследователя загорался в нём (The zeal of a researcher burned within him). And in nasty developers, too, sometimes: Что-то манящее было во всем этом: азарт разрушения (There was something appealing about it — the thrill of destruction).

When you are в азарте, you are filled with rage, excitement or fervor: В азарте я позабыл, что решил поручить это дело начальнику (In the heat of the moment I forgot that I'd wanted to hand the case over to my boss). Sometimes в азарте is used to describe someone's state right after an upsetting event has taken place, like this street robbery: Ноги у меня были совершенно ватные. Муж шёл в азарте: ◙ Они разбежались! Я его избил! (My legs felt like rubber. My husband got caught up in the exhilaration of the moment. "They ran off! I beat one up!"

Азартный is often used as a general description of a person: someone who likes a challenge, gets swept up in enthusiasm or zeal, who likes to take chances, and who can't stop until he or she succeeds and gets whatever they're after. Он творил истово, азартно, забывая есть и пить, спать и гулять (He wrote assiduously, feverishly, forgetting to eat and drink, sleep or take walks). Он был не только бильярдист, но и в карты обожал играть ◙ вообще азартный человек (He wasn't just a pool player. He loved to play cards, too. He loved any challenge). А я-то себя знаю: мне чем сложней поставленная задача, тем азартнее сердце бьётся (I know myself. The more difficult the task before me, the faster my heart beats with the thrill of the challenge).

Азартный человек is someone who is competitive: Отец был азартный спорщик. Со своим тестем он был в глубокой вражде по каким-то политическим вопросам (My

father loved a good argument. There was bad blood between him and his father-in-law over some political issues.)

And this is someone who is passionate, easily carried away even in fields that we, on the outside, might not find terribly exciting: Благодаря азартному и рискованному труду многочисленных сборщиков кактусов, семейство кактусовых оказалось одним из самых изученных групп растений (Thanks to the passionate and risky work of many collectors of cactuses, the cactus family is one of the most studied groups of plants).

Who knew?

And finally, азартные люди have never met a challenge they've walked away from: Партия в этой опере, конечно, трудна, что тоже вызывает профессиональный азарт (The role in the opera is, of course, difficult, but that means it's a thrilling professional challenge).

Well, you get the idea. Are these perfect translations? No. Are they even good translations? Well... not really. Some are okay; others are missing a dimension of азарт. But I'm not done with them. Я вошла в азарт... (The game is afoot!).

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