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Of Snobs, Show-Offs, and Arrogant Jerks

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Сноб: snob

I have been thinking about snobs lately. I don't really know why; I don't know many snobs and I'm not friends with snobby people. But I like the sound of the word — it starts with a sneer and ends with a satisfying pop — and I like that the word is the same in Russian — сноб. And, heavens be praised, it means pretty much the same thing in Russian and English. Win-win-win.

The word in English has an erroneous folk etymology that has been happily appropriated and proclaimed in many Russian texts. In this false but very attractive version, the word comes from an abbreviation of the Latin *sine nobilitate* (without nobility), which was supposedly abbreviated as "s.nob." in school records. For some reason no one was troubled by the fact that there wasn't a single school record with "s.nob." as proof.

The truth is less colorful but more interesting. Snob was a dialect word for cobbler (as testified in documents dating to the late 18th century) that then morphed into a word for a person of lower class or rank. But by the mid-19th century, the word had morphed again from a lower-class person to someone who imitates and fawns over his social superiors. And then by the beginning of the 20th century the once lowly snob had risen to the upper classes, where he became overly concerned with his exclusiveness and loath to associate with anything or anyone he perceived as inferior, socially or intellectually. So the word goes from poor to poor-with-aspirations to rich-with-contempt for the poor. Social mobility for a word. How cool is that?

In Russia before 1917, сноб was someone who tried to maintain the tastes and manners of the nobility; since 1917 сноб is someone who considers himself to have refined taste, socially and intellectually, and looks down on whomever he considers his inferiors.

Сноб is also the name of a magazine, chosen — they say — for a line in William Makepeace Thackeray's "The Book of Snobs," rendered in Russian this way: "Никто не может быть уверен в том, что он не сноб, поскольку такая высокомерная уверенность – сама по себе уже снобизм" ("None of us should be [confident] that we are not Snobs. That very confidence savours of arrogance, and to be arrogant is to be a Snob"). Whether that is meant as praise of their readers or a reproach, I'm not sure. But it is a catchy name for a magazine.

Russians use the terms сноб (snob); снобизм (snobbism) and снобистский (snobbish, snobby) pretty much the way we do in English. Не станешь же объяснять кофейным снобам, что вкус и в первую очередь запах растворимого кофе с молоком ⊠ это главное воспоминание о детстве (It's not worth explaining to coffee snobs that the taste and especially aroma of instant coffee with milk is our most vivid memory of childhood). Urbanites are snobby about country folk: Москвичи не лишены снобизма по отношению к своим же из провинции (It's not unknown for Muscovites to be snobby about their fellow citizens from the provinces). And even about each other: Петербуржцев обвиняют в некоем снобистском отношении к купеческой Москве (Residents of St. Petersburg are accused of a certain snobbish attitude toward merchant Moscow).

Part of being a snob is putting on airs, showing off, and acting as annoyingly superior as possible. There are lots of words for this in Russian — and some of them are even fit to print! Here are five of my favorite words for being a snobby show-off.

First up is красоваться, from красиво (beautiful). This can be used rather neutrally to describe something that looks beautiful: Вдали на горе красовался дворец императора (The emperor's palace was beautiful on the mountain in the distance). Or it can be used to describe someone showing off: Таня надела новые брюки, блузку и красовалась перед зеркалом (Tanya put on a new pair of pants and a blouse and preened in front of the mirror).

Number 2 in the put-on-a-show line-up is щеголять. The verb comes from the word щёголь (a hot dresser, a fop), which in turn is from the word щегол (a goldfinch). Strutting birds are a common analogy in English, too, although almost always used for men, who might be called popinjays or peacocks.

Over the ages, styles and notions of beauty change, but everyone wants to put on the Ritz: По субботам мы приглашали девушек в кафе "Север", щеголяли узкими брюками,

пестрыми рубашками (On Saturdays we invited girls to Café North and strutted around in tight pants with brightly colored shirts). Hot stuff!

Щеголять can also be used when someone is flaunting a talent or showing off in some way. Sometimes this is quite a show: Они выглядят сугубо революционно, щеголяют цитатами из Маркса и Ленина, выдают себя за строителей нового мира (They look seriously revolutionary, tossing off quotations from Marx and Lenin, passing themselves off as architects of a new world). Or they can have a modest talent that they are proud of: Мой муж любит щеголять поговорками (My husband likes to show off his knowledge of proverbs).

Third up is важничать, which is easily recognizable as making oneself seem very important — важный. Sometimes this is simply by being high-handed and condescending to one's underlings at work: Новый начальник важничает перед подчиненными (The new boss lords it over his subordinates). This habit is not confined to the world of humans: Петухи и гуси важничают (Roosters and geese act like they own the place).

But people sometimes act like they are much more important than they are. Sometimes this is a phase kids go through: Сын много стал о себе думать, важничал перед другими мальчиками (My son started to have a very high opinion of himself and began to throw his weight around with the other boys). Or sometimes it's a phase that adults have never grown out of: Они очень важничали и постоянно напоминали всем, что губернатор ⊠ их дядя (They were very puffed up and constantly reminded everyone that the governor was their uncle).

Number 4 in our countdown of peacock behavior is рисоваться. This word has several meanings. Рисоваться can refer to an object that is "drawn" against the backdrop of the sky: Фигура ярко рисовалась на фоне светлого неба (A figure was clearly silhouetted against the background of the bright sky). Or it can refer to some image "drawn" in the imagination: Ослепительная жизнь рисуется в его воображении, когда он смотрит на неё (When he looks at her, he imagines a brilliant life).

But it can also mean to grandstand, perform, put on a show: Он увидел железнодорожный мост, тот самый, с которого он когда-то прыгал в воду, рисуясь перед Соней Вишневской (He caught sight of the railroad bridge over the water – the exact one that he once dived off to show off for Sonya Vishnevskaya).

And then there is a slang meaning: to appear. Сосед, как обычно, нарисовался к обеду. (Like usual, our neighbor showed up right before lunch).

And finally, Number 5 in our putting-on-airs hall of fame is the verb выпендриваться, which means to show off, fool around, talk BS, and generally act like a teenager trying to attract someone's attention. When your teen does this, you might remind him: Тут девок-то нет. Перед кем выпендриваться? (Who are you laying it on thick for? There aren't any girls around). When your significant other does this, you might give a different reminder: Меньше надо выпендриваться! И пить надо меньше! (Less BS and less booze!)

Выпендрёж is what выпендриваться produces: BS, a load of crap, crapola, big talk, hot air or a load of nonsense. This can be someone's manner: Постарайся без выпендрёжа (Try not

to show off too much). Or it can be a fancy car: Я постоянно думаю о выпендрёжной машине, которую он водит (I keep thinking about that flashy car he drives). Or it can be — or not be — an outfit: Стильно и без выпендрёжа (Classy, not gaudy!)

You know, I think I'd like that as my epitaph.

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