

Drunk as a Skunk in Russia? Never!

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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olga9177 / pixabay

Как огурчик: fresh as a cucumber, er, daisy

So there you are at a dinner party, sitting around the table after the meal, sipping wine and telling funny stories. You want to tell the story about how you didn't know you were supposed to dilute спирт (grain alcohol) at your first Moscow party, so you drank about five shots straight before nearly keeling over. You search the recesses of your brain where expressions are stored and mentally translate into Russian, coming out with the fantastical: Я была пьяная как скунс!

Silence. Which is odd because “drunk as a skunk” always gets a laugh.

Oh, right. Maybe it's not funny in a country where there are no skunks and in a language where “drunk” and “skunk” don't rhyme.

Пить надо меньше (Lay off the booze).

In Russian, commonly used comparisons are called устойчивые сравнения (fixed similes). And you should know them because otherwise you'll sound like an idiot — like me.

Take the example of drunks. In Russian an old-ish way of describing a drunk is пьяный как стелька or пьяный в стельку: drunk as a shoe liner. How's that for an image? Not what I'd reach for in my mental storehouse. After a mostly fruitless search for the source of this image, I came to the conclusion that Russians aren't too sure where the expression came from themselves. One supposition is that the original comparison was пьяный как сапожник (drunk as a cobbler) — allegedly because cobblers were “crude people” and “drank a lot” — which led to the expression сапожник пьян в стельку (the cobbler was flat-out drunk, smashed like a shoe liner).

But I'm not convinced that cobblers drank more than any other manual laborers. On the other hand, I suppose a flat, moist, stinky shoe liner might suggest someone who was dead drunk, plastered, or hammered.

In any case, however the expressions originated and evolved, they are useful to know: Приходит домой муж, пьяный в стельку. Стоит возле двери, покачивается. (Her husband comes home completely blotto. He stands in the doorway, swaying.)

In literature you might find пьяный как дым, ночь, никогда, всегда, грязь, мертвый, (as drunk as smoke, as night, as never before, as always, as mud, as death). Around the table you might hear пьяный в доску (smashed [flat-out drunk like a plank]) or пьяный как зюзя/свинья (drunk as a pig) — and another dozen or two images that depend on the imagination of the speaker.

You might even hear a comparison where the intoxication is lovely: Запах ветра пьяный ☒ как молодой хлеб (The breeze smelled drunk, like unripe grain).

But you will never hear пьяный как скунс (drunk as a skunk) or как лорд (drunk as a lord).

Since we are on the subject of intoxication, the reverse state of sobriety is also expressed by different comparisons in Russian and English. In Moscow you are not sober as a judge or church mouse. You are трезвый как огурчик or just как огурчик (literally as sober as a cucumber) or трезвый как стёклышко/стекло (literally as sober as glass). Both can be used in contexts without sobriety, such as: Он выспался и встал как огурчик (He got a good night's sleep and got up as fresh as a daisy). But they can also be used to describe being stone-cold sober: Скорость машины в пределах допустимой, водитель трезв, как стёклышко (The car is going under the speed limit and the driver is as sober as a judge).

Another possible point of confusion concerns houses. When I see a friend who is almost nine months pregnant, I might shout delightedly: Wow! You're as big as a house! Or I might tell a coworker: Don't worry — your position is as safe as houses.

But in Russian that would sound insulting and weird. Russian houses don't carry the associations of large size or safety and security. Instead, they convey the sense of comfort, a feeling of warmth and ease, self-confidence. Чувствовать себя как дома (to feel at home)

can mean to feel confident and competent in a new or foreign setting: Моей дочке десятый год пошёл, а она в лесу как дома (My little girl isn't even 10 years old and yet she knows her way around the forest). Or it can mean feeling at ease or unconstrained: Достаточно посидеть с моей соседкой две-три минуты, чтобы почувствовал себя как дома, как будь-то вы давно знакомы (It's enough to spend two or three minutes with my neighbor to feel completely comfortable, like you've known her forever).

Быть/чувствовать как у себя дома (to be or feel like you're in your own home) is also used when some place or circumstances are utterly familiar and comfortable. You might encourage your guests to feel this way: Будь как у себя дома! Не стесняйся! (Make yourself right at home! Don't be shy!). Of course, this might be annoying: Наглый пёс расположился на моей скамейке, как у себя дома (That cheeky dog made himself at home on my bench).

Как родной дом (like in my own home) is slightly different. The comparison is used to describe a place that is like your second home: Хорошо, когда человек воспринимает свой храм как дом родной (It's splendid when a church is like someone's second home). Here is a good example and explanation: Сказать, что рассказы Бабея были мне близки или очень понятны, ✘ это ничего не сказать. (To say that I felt an affinity with Babel's short stories or that I understood them completely would be an understatement). Они мне были ✘ как дом родной. (They were like coming home.) Ведь в родном доме не надо думать, что значит тот или иной предмет, кому и для чего он нужен, ✘ он как часть вашего существа (After all, in your home you don't have to think what some object means, who needs it and why — it's like part of your being).

Quite different is как в сумасшедшем доме or как в дурдоме (like in a madhouse). This describes any place with lots of noise and little order. У актёров, как в сумасшедшем доме: кто плачет, кто смеётся, кто зубрит роль (It's a madhouse with the actors: one's weeping, one's laughing and a third is memorizing his lines). Sometimes it's so bad it's not like a madhouse, it just is one: У нас в магазине сегодня полный дурдом (It's a complete madhouse in the store today).

Sometimes дурдом is an impolite way to speak about a psychiatric hospital: Просто иногда кажется, как будто сумасшедшие захватили дурдом (Sometimes it seems like the lunatics are in charge of the asylum).

Actually, I think that almost every day when I read the newspaper.

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