

A Russian Fig is Not a Fig

The Word's Worth

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

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Фиг: nothing, hell, rude gesture, etc.

Oh, the mighty fig.

By that I mean: Oh, the convoluted, confused, sexually obsessed, bizarre word фиг.

First of all, фиг is not the fruit called fig. That's инжир. Second, it's either фиг (masc.) or фи́га (fem.) which is weird. Third, it may have come from the French but probably originally came from the Italian, but way back before that it came from the Latin or Greek. Maybe. Or maybe not. No one is sure. It's like the word always existed.

Fourth, фи́га is the word for the hand gesture of a thumb between the index and middle fingers, which, depending on the nation, time period and speaker, represents the female

genitalia, male genitalia or the act of copulation. The gesture is also called кукиш in Russian.

Fifth, that gesture, which seems to have come from the Mediterranean lands — although maybe it came from India; no one knows — has traveled around the world, losing and picking up new meanings as it goes, ranging from “nothing” to “screw you” to the kiddie game “I got your nose.”

Sixth, you can make the gesture with your hand in your pocket — called держать фигу в кармане (to flip someone the bird behind their back) — which is a way of telling someone where to get off without, say, being fired for honesty.

Фиг is one sneaky little word.

But most interesting of all, фиг can be used as a kind of substitute for a Very Bad Word in a dozen different expressions, which are really just combinations of prepositions and фиг. I’m quite sure that you could fall in love, get married, fight, divorce, get back together again, get rich, lose all your money, and realize it doesn’t matter — all with фиг and prepositions.

Let’s start with the gesture. Today in Russia, when you show someone фигу most often means “nothing” or “you’re not getting anything” or “I don’t have anything.” When your neighbor who drinks too much, borrows money from you to drink too much, and never pays you back the money he borrowed to drink too much shows up at your door and asks to borrow more, you can simply make the gesture and wave it in his face. This means: Nope! For emphasis you can shout фиг or фиг тебе: — Деньги дашь? — Фиг. (“Are you going to give me some money?” “No way.”)

To say that you don’t have any money, you could say: У меня ни фи́га нет! (I’m completely broke!)

Фиг or фигушки can also mean: Hard no. На себя лучше посмотри. Думаешь герой? Фигушки! (Look at yourself! You think you’re a hero? In your dreams, man!)

And then let’s pause at фигня, which means nonsense, something terrible or insignificant. If you go to the theater and can barely keep your eyes open during the first act, you might say: Да ну, фигня какая-то. Может, пойдём отсюда? (For cripe’s sake, what a load of crap. What do you say we get out of here?) And if you stay to the end but really wish you hadn’t, you can say: Фигня это на постном масле (Complete rubbish!)

The expression фигня на постном масле literally means “nonsense on Lenten oil,” that is, nonsense so bad that it wasn’t even on butter. It doesn’t really make sense, but you get the idea: something bad that is doubly bad on Lenten oil. Today the joke is: Раньше фигня у нас была на постном масле, а сейчас на пальмовом. Вывод: раньше даже фигня была лучше! (In the past, our nonsense was on Lenten oil, and now it’s on palm oil. Conclusion: in the past, even our nonsense was better!)

If you want to express “the hell with it/someone,” use фиг с ним: Ну и фиг с ними. Пусть сплетничают. (The hell with them. Let them gossip all they want.) This is useful when your significant other is in Day Four of Fixing the Washing Machine and you really, really, really want to call in someone with actual expertise: Ну, не получилось и фиг с ней. (So you

couldn't fix it — screw it.)

And then there is на фиг, which is a slightly nicer way of saying something that usually uses the Very Bad Word: Пошёл ты на фиг, урод! (Go screw yourself, you creep!) It can also mean something like “what the hell for”: Мне он на фиг не нужен (I need that like a hole in the head!)

But because this word is so sneaky, note the difference between на фиг and на фига, which means зачем (what for): А на фига я её покупал? (Why the heck did I buy it?)

До фига means a lot of something. У нас до фига народу хотят отдыхать в Турции (Tons of people want to vacation in Turkey). У брата до фига денег (My brother has loads of cash).

Ни фига себе or нифига is a general exclamation of amazement, good or bad. When you get to the clinic for the booster shot and can't get in the door for all the people, you say: Ни фига себе очередь! (Cripes, will you look at that line!) When someone tells you they stood in line for five hours to get a booster shot, you can reply: Нифига! (Holy crap!)

По фиг or по фигу means that you don't care at all about something. Да им всё по фигу, кроме своей выгоды (They don't give a crap about anything but the bottom line). Тебе по фиг мои проблемы (You don't give a crap about my problems).

I think there are more фиг expressions, but you know, at this point: Мне уже по фигу.

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