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The Looming But Not Inevitable (Translation) Disaster

The Word's Worth

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Imminent: грядущий, предстоящий, приближающийся, неизбежный и т.д.

The only part about the recent "imminent-not imminent-no word for imminent" discussion in the news that I liked was seeing people who generally don't pay that much attention to word definitions and translation suddenly get very interested indeed. It would have been better, of course, if they knew something about the languages they were writing and tweeting about, but hey — at least people were thinking about the importance of every word and nuance in diplomatic and state negotiations.

To be fair, imminent is a difficult word in English. First, you might confuse it with immanent (inherent) and eminent (highly respected). Second, it can mean that something *might* happen or that something *will definitely* happen. Third, the possible or certain event might occur *fairly soon* (whenever that is) or *almost immediately*. Fourth, it might help to know if the

speaker is using American or British English, since AE tends to mean “certainly, immediately” and BE tends to mean “might, soon-ish.”

And finally, fifth: In my observation, some people use “imminent” the way many people use “unbelievable!” When someone squeals, “That’s unbelievable!” it doesn’t mean that the person doesn’t believe it. It just means that whatever they’re talking about is extremely good, bad, weird, lucky, etc. So, for some people, “imminent attack” might mean: “This might happen! Pay attention!”

Now you can imagine the difficulty for translation into Russian. You have to figure out the answers to #1-5 above before choosing the right word. Russian has a dozen or so ways to express the idea that some event will happen soon, but none that have exactly all the ambiguities of “imminent” as used today. In the translation biz, when you must choose one meaning out of many, it’s called concretization. We dislike it. All those nuances and ambiguities — gone.

But Russian has plenty of nuances and ambiguities, too. There are many words and expressions that mean “about to happen.” The choice of verb indicates, to some extent, if the event about to happen is good, bad, or neutral. Some verbs and expressions can be used for all three. In Russian, like in English, “on the horizon” can be used for bad things: На горизонте ⊠ совсем уж нищенская пенсия и полнейшая безысходность (On the horizon is a truly miserly pension and total despair). But it can refer to positive changes, too: Появились на горизонте Белый и Блок (Bely and Blok appeared on the horizon).

And then there is an entire list of words for events that are upcoming, mostly participles, which are formed from verbs and usually get translated with an -ing ending in English. Предстоящий, from предстоять (upcoming, to lie ahead), can refer to something good, bad or neutral. Кого вы будете поддерживать на предстоящих выборах? (Who are you going to be supporting in the upcoming elections?) Журналисты пытались получить хоть какую-то информацию о предстоящей военной операции (Journalists tried to get at least some information about the impending military operation).

Often предстоять is translated as “must do”: Теперь им предстоит обобщить все полученные им от государств сведения (Now they must summarize all the information they got from the governments). Sometimes you can hear a sigh in it: Нам это всё ещё предстоит (All that still lies ahead of us).

Грядущий, from грясти, can also be a neutral way to describe something in the future. It’s commonly used in the phrase грядущие дни (coming days) or день грядущий (tomorrow, the next day). You probably know the expressions Что день грядущий нам готовит? (Who knows what tomorrow holds?) or Не переживай о том, что день грядущий несёт (Take each day as it comes, literally, don’t worry about what tomorrow may bring). The phrase на сон грядущий (just before bed, before going to sleep) is a standard part of everyday Russian, even though it comes from prayer books: Когда мы подросли, с нами стали читать молитвы на сон грядущий (When we got older, they began to say bedtime prayers with us).

But sometimes грядущий is used to describe events that are threatening, like грядущая битва (the coming battle) or грядущая катастрофа (the approaching catastrophe).

Приближающийся (from приближаться, to approach) is another all-purpose “forthcoming” word: Приближающиеся выборы заставляют активизироваться политические силы (The upcoming elections are making political forces get down to work). Правительство продолжало держать фиксированный курс до последнего, несмотря на все признаки приближающегося финансового краха (The government continued to keep to its fixed course right up until the end, despite all the signs of imminent financial collapse).

To describe bad events that are coming up, you might use нависать and нависающий (to loom, to hang over): Если бы не нависающая угроза нового ареста, он был бы сейчас счастливым парнем (If not for the threat of a new arrest hanging over him, he’d be a happy lad now).

To be more specific about an impending disaster, spell it out in Russian with a phrase like надвигающаяся опасность войны (the imminent danger of war). Sometimes there is still hope it can be avoided: Эта надвигающаяся катастрофа должна быть предотвращена (The impending disaster must be stopped from happening).

But some disasters cannot be stopped: they are неминуемый (inevitable). В случае победы коммунистов нас ждёт неминуемый экономический крах (If the communists win the election, economic disaster is certain.)

But even in dire situations, Russians quote the wisdom of Benjamin Franklin: В жизни нет ничего неизбежного, кроме смерти и налогов (In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes).

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