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Thinking Outside the Box the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Смекалка: smarts, ingenuity, resourcefulness

About a thousand years ago in Moscow, way back when the man in charge was a General Secretary, I bought a kilo of unshelled walnuts (грецкие орехи) at the market. But when I got home, I realized that I didn't have a nutcracker (щелкунчик). Nor did I have a hammer (молоток). I tried hitting them with pots and wooden cutting boards, but that just smashed the nut and shell into an inedible powder.

Suddenly I had an idea. I opened the kitchen door and put the walnut on the floor next to the hinge jamb and slowly closed the door. Magic! The door cracked the nut against the jamb, and I could pull the broken shell off.

I was so proud of myself — until I found out that everyone in Moscow had figured this out some time in the previous century.

But at the time I thought: Какая я смекалистая! (Am I ingenious or what?!)

The adjective смекалистый (resourceful, inventive, quick-witted), noun смекалка (smarts) and verb смекать (to catch on, figure something out) are essential Russian words with big back stories.

The set of words originally comes from a root shared with several other Slavic languages that means to weigh, think over, search, and measure, and it seems related to the verb метить (to mark, brand, target). All of those add up to today's meaning of searching, thinking over, and finally hitting on an answer.

Today the verb pair смекать/смекнуть isn't used that much. The Google N-gram shows usage peaking in the 1840s and zigzagging its way down to almost a flatline by the last decade.

The basic meaning is to catch on to something, figure something out. A century ago you might have read: Я смекнула, что украл (I figured out that he'd stolen it). But not everyone catches on, as Turgenev once described: Он всё смекает, смекает, а под конец, смотришь, ⊠ ни аза не смекнул! (He keeps working it out, and working it out, and in the end you look — and he hasn't worked out a single thing!)

That said, it is such an expressive verb, you might want to risk sounding anachronistic. For example, you might use it to describe someone with a head on her shoulders even if she isn't sophisticated: Она хоть женщина грубая, провинциальная, но в денежных вопросах смекает (She might be crude woman from the boonies, but she sure has a head for money). Or you could use it when you're waiting for a lightbulb to go on: Смекаешь, в чём дело-то? (Have you figured it out yet?)

Like the verbs, the noun смекалка and adjective смекалистый describe people who don't have a lot of book learning but are excellent problem-solvers. Here's what I think of as the classic смекалистый statement: Я хоть прост, да смекалист (I might be simple, but I sure got smarts). Or this: Не очень образованная, правда, из бедной сельской семьи, читает с трудом, но смекалистая (She isn't very well-educated, I have to say. She's from a poor village family and can barely read, but she's a sharpie).

Смекалка is like the secret sauce in any endeavor: Инициатива плюс смекалка дают свой положительный результат (Initiative plus ingenuity produce a good result) — or give you any result at all: Была бы смекалка ⊠ додумались бы и сами (If they had a some gumption, they'd have thought of it themselves).

There can be a tinge of shrewdness in смекалка — probably not anything illegal or immoral, but possibly something in the gray area. For example, I might be a bit careful around this guy: Смекалистый, но темноватый мужик (He's got smarts, but the guy's kind of a dark horse).

And I'd definitely watch out for this guy: Лентяй смекалист на отговорки (a lazy man is good at excuses).

There are people who are born with all-purpose resourcefulness — природная смекалка (natural ingenuity) — but in other people смекалка comes with specializations: Вот и пригодилась твоя деревенская смекалка (Well, there you are — your village smarts came in handy). It helps in wartime: “Сырые дрова не горят, а резиной хорошо растапливать котёл”, ⊠ пояснил мне Серёгин. Это была солдатская смекалка в действии (“Damp wood won’t burn, but you can get the fire going with a tire,” Seryogin told me. That was soldier savvy in action.)

And performers have their own variety, as it were: Актёрская смекалка оказывается чрезвычайно к месту (His actor’s resourcefulness is just the ticket).

Смекалка is also believed by many to be a quality native to — and even exclusive to — Russians. Or maybe there is just a special русская смекалка (Russian ingenuity)?

In any case, it’s a Thing: Это настоящий русский человек, смекалистый и одарённый (This is a real Russian, resourceful and gifted).

Sometimes this quality is not so flattering: Как известно, у русского человека вместо знания ⊠ смекалка (As everyone knows, instead of knowledge a Russian has street smarts).

Or straight out not flattering: Российская смекалка проявляется в игнорировании правил (Russian ingenuity is expressed in scorn for rules).

Or really, really not flattering: Наш народ смекалистый: воруют, что плохо лежит, бегают по инстанциям и выколачивают всевозможные пособия (Our people are enterprising: they steal whatever isn’t nailed down and hit all the offices to squeeze every kind of subsidy out of them).

Sometimes смекалка is connected with another mysterious quality of some Russians, as in this entertaining definition: Смекалка ⊠ великое замещение “нельзя” на “можно попробовать”, и растёт она из особого отношения русского мужчины к слову “нет” (Ingenuity is the magnificent replacement of “you can’t” with “let’s give it a try,” growing out of a Russian man’s particular attitude to the word “no.”)

One guy even thinks смекалка is completely foreign to someone with a “western” mindset, whatever that is: Поиск оптимального пути обхода препятствия, качество, известное как русская смекалка — особый тип мышления, отличный от западного (The search for the optimal path around an obstacle — a quality that is known as Russian ingenuity — is a special kind of thinking that differs from Western thought).

Frankly, I don’t quite buy it. I mean, I was raised with западное мышление but I came up with the door-jamb nutcracker. I’d counter his theory with a theory of my own: Necessity is the mother of invention.

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