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Warning: Do Not Say This in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Julien L / unsplash

Асап: (ASAP, aka as soon as possible)

Languages change. We know this. Of course, we do. We are reminded of it every time we pick up a Jane Austen novel and marvel at the quaint phrases. And certainly when we see a Shakespeare play and chuckle over every "forsooth." And definitely when we pick up Chaucer and put it down again because we can't understand a thing.

And yet... and yet when language is changing around us, we are uncomfortable, annoyed or outraged. I personally cannot stand emails that begin "I'm reaching out to you today..." For me, "to reach out to someone" is to make a concerted effort to communicate with someone in order to help them or involve them in an endeavor. It is not a synonym for "I'm writing you today..." Delete immediately.

And yet...and yet... it's just the language changing.

Russian speakers are also bothered by their changing language. Lately I've been entertaining myself — or maybe consoling myself, since misery loves company — with lists like 15 раздражающих фраз, которые ни в коем случае нельзя говорить коллегам (15 annoying phrases that you must never say to your coworkers); Самые раздражающие слова и выражения (The most annoying words and expressions). Of course, many of the words and expressions are foreign words (mostly English), like асап (ASAP) or the truly dreadful я на колле (I'm on a call). But there are homegrown annoyances, grammatical "mistakes" that are becoming commonplace, and a few calques from English thrown in, too.

The grammatical "mistakes" that have Russian speakers stamping their feet in protest are the ancient/folk forms of их (their) — ихний and его (his) — евоный. There is also a form of the feminine possessive её — ейный, but that has apparently not re-entered common usage to the same extent. These are the sorts of words you might hear from very old people in a very distant village. Ейный муж пришёл домой (Her husband came home). Дядя евоный там похоронен (His uncle is buried there). Мужики, тише, генерал ихный говорит (Men, be quiet – their general is speaking). But people find these forms inappropriate in the boardroom — either because it sounds like an uneducated person or because it sounds like an insensitive person making fun of uneducated people or trying to be cute. Cute is never a good look.

The other perennial grammar mistake that Russian speakers loathe is using крайний (farthest, maximum) for последний (last). Крайний is derived from the noun край (edge) and means at the edge of something, like крайний дом на улице (farthest house on the street) or крайний срок (deadline, i.e., the farthest limit of time). But since крайний дом на улице does mean "the last house on the street," it's easy to see how Russians confuse it with последний, which is the final (last) one of a line of something or in a time period.

If you don't want to be lectured mercilessly, memorize the phrase for joining a line: Кто последний? (Who's last?).

The homegrown phrase that drives most Russian speakers batty is that mainstay of emails: Доброе время суток (literally "good time of day"). The idea is that since you don't know when the recipient of your email, who is located seven or 12 time zones away, might open it, you can't say Добрый день (good day) or доброе утро (good morning). So what could you write to cover all possible situations? (Scratches head.) Oh, hey, I know! How about this word: Здравствуйте! (Hello!) or a different kind of opening, like Уважаемый Иван Иванович! (Dear Ivan Ivanovich, literally "esteemed"). Sheesh. No wonder it bugs people.

The other phrase at the top of the hate-o-meter among Russian speakers is я вас услышал (I heard you), which someone translates as что-то между "спасибо" и "идите нахрен!" (something between "thank you" and "go to hell"). Other people cite it as the standard boss comment that means "Я понял твою проблему, но решать её не собираюсь" (I understood your problem but don't intend to do anything about it).

What annoys me about the phrase is that it has been identified as a calque of the American English phrase "got it" – without any evidence that I can find. This has inspired pages of silly nonsense about robotic Americans and sensitive Russians. If it is a calque from English (as yet unproven), I'd put my money on its exact equivalent — "I heard you" — which is what you

say when your Significant Other reminds you to pay the internet bill for the 14th time. It's exactly that cross between "thank you" and "go to hell."

Should you ever want to mutter я тебя услышал at work or at home but don't want to be dismissive, you are advised to gush: я весь внимание (I'm all ears); как я тебя понимаю! (I know just how you feel!) or понимаю тебя как никто (I understand you like no one else).

And then pay the bill.

Another Russian speaker pet peeve: вкусное всё (delicious everything). It's fine to have delicious food: Как вкусно кормят в Париже! (The food in Paris is so delicious!) It's even fine, if a bit precious, to have a delicious corner, say, as the name of your food blog or café: Добро пожаловать на мой кулинарный канал "Вкусный Уголок" (Welcome to my cooking channel, Tasty Corner). But Russians can't stand одежда самых вкусных оттенков (clothes in the most delicious colors) and очень вкусная реклама (a scrumptious advertisement). I don't blame them.

In the category of new technology, Russian speakers are annoyed by the phrase голосом поговорить (to speak with my voice) because, well, what else would you speak with? Apparently, people are so used to texting — писать смски — (which they do at the speed of light) that when they call someone on their cell phone, they begin their conversation with an apology: "Извини, что голосом" (sorry that I'm calling to talk).

If the person you are calling prefers not to speak, they might explain why with another annoying phrase: Я не очень умею в разговоры (I not very good in conversations). In standard Russian you use the infinitive after the verb уметь: уметь разговаривать (to be able to chat). So be prepared to be annoyed: я не умею в гуглопоиск (I'm not good at google searches).

But sometimes this is just an illustrated confession: я не умею в грамотность (I'm not real good at grammar). Не то слово! (You aren't kidding!)

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