The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Of Ear Noodles and Maniacal Printers

The trials of translation, Chapter 4,578.

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

March 17, 2023



Mikhail Abdalkin / YouTube

Силовик: silovik

I translate a lot of texts about contemporary political life in Russia, which means that I spend a lot of time sighing melodramatically as I come across a newly coined — or relatively newly coined — expression. For example, бешенный принтер (literally "insane printer") or системная и несистемная оппозиция (literally systemic and non-systemic opposition).

In addition to the first problem of figuring out what they mean, there is a second problem of tailoring your translation to your audience. If your readers know Russia and Russian/Soviet history well, you might use a transliteration or a fairly literal translation. If not, you might want to go for a more explanatory translation.

I suppose the good news is that there are options.

Another problem is that some of these words have evolved over time. So you have to check the date of whatever you're translating and take that into consideration.

Take the word силовик — please! (Just kidding). The word originally referred to people who worked in the governmental agencies that had the right to use force — сила. There are a number of them: law enforcement, military, intelligence gathering and probably many more we don't know about. Силовики is tidy shorthand to describe them all.

Now it is often used more broadly to describe influential people (think: oligarchs), politicians who were once in the military/police/intelligence ministries; and anyone who advocates the use of force and, perhaps more to the point, advocates big chunks of the budget going to support all the above ministries, agencies and their suppliers. They also advocate for self-protection: В Думе готовы оперативно рассмотреть проект о защите силовиков от угроз в Интернете (The Duma is prepared to quickly consider a bill to protect siloviki from online threats).

In a translation it's not practical to render that sentence with a descriptive translation: The Duma is prepared to quickly consider a bill to protect from online threats current and former representatives of the military, intelligence, and law enforcement agencies; businesspeople connected with these agencies, and other hardliners. And so I've thrown my hands up in the air and use siloviki with an explanation the first time I use it in a text.

That printer gone wild is another story. The term бешенный принтер was coined to describe the sixth convocation of the State Duma that began in December 2011, a few months before Vladimir Putin regained the presidency. That group of deputies had the reputation of passing law after law with virtually no discussion. Hence the parliament was called бешенный принтер (maniacal printer).

In English we have a different expression that's in the same spirit and works quite well as a translation. Называли Думу бешенным принтером, который принимает законы по руководящей указке (They called it a rubberstamp parliament that passed laws on the leadership's order).

I have not yet found a completely satisfactory translation for системная и несистемная оппозиция (literally the systemic and non-systemic opposition). Системная оппозиция refers to political parties and groups like the Communist Party that are not in power and hold some different viewpoints but don't threaten the rulers. Несистемная оппозиция is made up of, well, people in jail — that is, real oppositionists who are a real threat to the ruling party and leaders.

The first problem with the words "systemic and non-systemic" is that they are almost always used in a medical context — used to describe, say, diseases that affect the entire body (systemic) and those that are localized in their effect (non-systemic). "Loyal opposition" is close but means a party not in power that chooses to loyally support some aspects of the ruling system. In the Russian context this isn't a choice, it's a status bestowed by the rulers.

The closest I've come is "sanctioned and unsanctioned opposition groups," or parties/groups that are acceptable or permissible and those that are not. Not as tidy as the Russian, but understandable.

How about the челноки (shuttles) of the 1990s? This is the slang word for traders, usually women, who would "shuttle" to, say, Turkey to buy goods and then back to Russia to sell them. They got translated as shuttle traders: 30 лет назад челноки наполнили рынки России дешевыми товарами из Турции и Китая (Thirty years ago shuttle traders filled Russia's markets with cheap goods from Turkey and China). "Shuttle" captures the back-and-forth aspect of this business, but you might also call them cross-border traders.

And now, here's a new problem: what do you do with a visual representation of an expression? I'm thinking, of course, of the regional-level Communist Party parliamentarian who published a photograph of himself with spaghetti wrapped around his ears as he listened to Vladimir Putin's address to the Federal Assembly. This is a depiction of the expression вешать лапшу на уши (literally to hang a noodle on someone's ears), a phrase of mysterious origins that means to cheat or deceive someone. In English this might be conveyed with an expression almost as weird: "to pull the wool over someone's eyes."

We know where the English language expression comes from. It's an Americanism from the early 1800s when judges wore woolen wigs; pulling the wool down over their eyes so they can't see clearly is to deceive or trick them.

There are many versions of the origin of the Russian expression, mostly involving improbable word transformations, such as the verb облапошить (to deceive) suddenly morphing into лапша (noodle) and hanging off ears.

The most likely source is that caldron of Russian word creation: penal colonies. In prisoner slang лапша had many meanings, including something stupid and a felony. Двигать лапшу на уши (to push a noodle on someone's ears) means to give false testimony; кормить лапшой (to feed someone a noodle) means to tell a tall tale. Лапшить is to cheat or deceive. Вешать/повесить (to hang) can be used in the sense of pinning something bad on someone — a crime, a bad act. Мы можем всё повесить на него (We can pin it all on him). So it doesn't take much for these similar expressions to come together in the phrase we have today.

In most cases you can simply use a variant of the English expression: Он пытается вешать тебе лапшу на уши (He's trying to pull one over on you).

But that doesn't work when describing the deputy and his photo. You don't have much choice in how you translate it: В соцсетях депутат разместил фото запечатлевшее, как он слушает послание Владимира Путина: с лапшой на ушах. (The deputy posted on social media a photo of how he listened to Vladimir Putin's address with noodles on his ears — the literal depiction of a Russian expression that means he was being fed a line of bull.)

For the sake of translators — no more photos, please.

Original url:
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