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The Cat Cried and Ran By

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Мурзик: Murzik (popular cat name)

We interrupt our usually scheduled serious topics for a public service column about the care of and conversation with a Russian-speaking cat. What should you name your кот (tom) or кошка (dam, molly or queen)? How should you address him or her? And how can you entertain your питомец (pet) with feline language lore?

First you need to summon your cat, which in Russian is кс-кс-кс. Kitty-kitty-kitty will not work. I have been told by authoritative cat owners that the Russian way of calling is superior as it is designed to get their attention with the sharp "к" sound and seduce them with the soft "с." Like all folklore, this might be arrant nonsense or the wisdom of the ages.

Then you need to know how to describe the cat's response to your call — or the cat's way of calling you: мяу (meow). The verb for this is, unsurprisingly, мяукать: Сидел чёрный котёнок-сирота и мяукал над блюдечком с молоком (A homeless black kitten sat in front

of a saucer of milk and meowed).

If they are very unhappy and aggressive about their unhappiness, they might make other sounds: шипеть (to hiss) and фыркать (to spit, snort). This may be confusing to outsiders but apparently is easily understood by the cats themselves: Сделав ещё несколько шагов, кошки вдруг остановились и стали о чём-то между собой фыркать и мяукать (The cats took another few steps then suddenly stopped and began to hiss and meow about something among themselves). To avoid the bad sounds, sometimes all you need is some common sense, like not grabbing a cat that doesn't know you: Он рванулся к кошке, и кошка его оцарапала, шипя (He lunged at the cat, and the cat hissed and scratched him).

What you want to hear from a cat is мурлыканье (purring): Дома тихо, спокойно, кот рядом валяется, мурлычет (The house is quiet and peaceful; a cat is lying next to me, purring). People can purr, too, although it might be a ploy: ☒ Вы меня интригуете, ☒ сказал он мурлыкающим голосом ("You intrigue me," he purred). But when machines purr, that's good: Электрический счётчик над дверью мурлыкал (The electric meter purred above the door).

Another word for purring is урчать: Елена сидела в кресле, молодая кошка урчала у неё на коленях (Yelena sat in an armchair with a young cat purring on her lap). And when a cat sits on your lap and purrs, it often makes biscuits — it kneads your legs or chest. In Russian this is мять (to knead), массировать (to massage) or топтать лапками (to stomp its paws). You might ask: Почему кошка мнёт лапами живот человека? (Why does a cat knead a person's belly?) It all goes back to their childhood: Ещё котятами, в процессе кормления они мяли живот мамы, чтобы улучшить приток молока (When they were kittens they'd knead their mother's belly while they nursed to improve the flow of milk). So now they do it to feel good: Урча и топчась, кошки стимулируют выработку эндорфинов в собственном организме (When cats purr and knead, they stimulate their own production of endorphins).

Now that you have a purring, kneading or perhaps occasionally hissing cat to come to you when called, you need to name it. An important nationwide survey conducted many years ago when opinion polls were still trustworthy found that the most popular cat name was Муся (Musya). It is supposedly popular because it's a diminutive of Мария which means beloved, but surely it is because the sibilants, the cooing "у" and triumphant "я" pops into your head when you see a kitten.

If your cat is a happy creature, you might name him Мурзик (or her Мурка) for their constant purring. Noble cats might be Барсик (Barsik, a kind of leopard); Лео (a lion, of course); Симба (Simba, you know if you have kids); Персик (Persik "peach" if he is ginger); or Маркиз (Marquis, because he's noble). If he's just a sweet guy he can be Кузя (Kuzya) or maybe Яшка (Yashka). If your kids watch(ed) too many American cartoons, he might be Гарфилд (Garfield) or Том (Tom).

The most common names for a sweet кошка are Ася (Asya); Мурка (Murka, purring); Буся (Busya the little bead); Муся, Мася, Масяня (Musya, Masya, Masyanya — names to be murmured). If she is a more elegant or pedigreed creature, she might be Маркиза (Marquess) or Графиня (Countess). If she is white she can be Белка (Whitey).

For all that cats are beloved pets in Russia, they do not fare well in Russian expressions. If you

are a woman, you don't want to be referred to a драная кошка (raggedy cat), which is a thin — not a desirable quality in Russia until a few decades ago — and unattractive woman. В кого ты превратилась за эти годы беспрестанных мытарств! Кошка драная (What have all those years of unceasing drudgery turned you into? Something the cat dragged in).

Someone who dashes around inefficiently is угорелая кошка (a burned cat) in Russian but often another domestic animal in English: Они носились по городу как угорелые кошки за хлебом и крупой на 10 копеек дешевле (They raced around the city like chickens with their heads cut off trying to pay 10 kopeks less for bread and grains). Кот в мешке (cat in a bag) is also another barnyard creature in English: Более точным названием для них было бы «кот в мешке», поскольку продаются пакеты, содержимое которых неизвестно (A more exact name for them would be "pig in a poke," since they are selling bags with unknown contents).

When a cat scratches your soul, it means you are anxious and upset: Сама она старалась не подавать вида, хотя, конечно же, кошки скребли на душе оттого, что в такой важный для неё день он снова был занят чем-то более важным (She tried not to show it, but of course she was torn up inside because on such an important day for her, he was once again busy doing something more important).

And when a tom cat cries — well, since a cat doesn't cry, it means nothing or next to nothing: Денег у города кот наплакал (The city doesn't have two pennies to rub together).

В темноте все кошки серые (at night all cats are gray) is a way of saying that there is little difference among people or things, or that if there is a difference, you can't see it at night. As someone explains — and complains: Пословицу «Ночью все кошки серые» обычно употребляют, когда хотят сказать, что в кризисных ситуациях трудно разобраться, кто прав, кто виноват (The saying "all cats are gray at night" is usually used when people want to say that in crises it's hard to determine who is right and who is guilty).

My favorite cat expression is the deceptively simple кошка пробежала (a cat ran by), which describes that curious situation when nothing really happened, but something has come between two people. Да они и не ссорились ⊠ так, кошка пробежала (No, they didn't have a fight. It's just one of those things — they are out of sorts with each other). Sometimes the cats that run between people are black or gray: Раньше они всегда были союзниками, а теперь какая-то чёрная кошка пробежала между ними (They used to be on the same side, but now there's some kind of bad blood between them).

Although folk wisdom casts cats in a rather bad light, a recent survey of dubious quality insists: По статистике, кошки самые приятные домашние животные для мужчин до 30 лет (According to statistics, cats are the most pleasing pets for men under the age of 30).

Maybe when they hit 30 they get a dog?

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