The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Buy a Brilliant and Applaud an Artist

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

June 02, 2023



Sabrianna / unsplash

Артист: an actor, a performer

A couple of years ago I was flummoxed by a Russian word I'd never heard before and couldn't understand: тред. People were writing things like "тред набрал 30 тысяч лайков за несколько часов" (The "tred" picked up 30,000 likes in a few hours) or "зашёл в этот тред только сказать одно" (I came into this "tred" just to say one thing). I honestly could not figure out what you could join that would also get likes.

Finally one day it occurred to me to read it out loud, and тред became instantly recognizable as a "thread" — a series of messages in social media, mostly Twitter.

Duh.

Over the centuries Russian and other languages have borrowed a lot of words from Greek, Latin and each other. In recent years, Russians have grabbed fistfuls of words from English as

borders opened and new concepts and objects flooded the country. The result of all this borrowing back and forth is not, as you might think, a coming together of the minds and a shared understanding of the world, but quite the opposite. The borrowed words take on new meanings or, as in the case of тред, the word might take on only one meaning of the many meanings of "thread." In a decade or so, the Russian тред might mutate a bit, pick up a new shade of meaning and join the ranks of ложные друзья (false friends).

Ложные друзья are not friends at all. They are the words you don't look up when you're translating because you know them. I mean, honestly, why would you look up аллея, so clearly an alley? True, it's weird that someone is strolling along a city alley, when most people run through those dirty, smelly spaces between buildings. Eventually the text doesn't make sense and you look up the word to discover that it came to Russian from French and means дорога, усаженная по обеим сторонам рядами деревьев (a path with rows of trees planted on both sides). And that phrase you were translating? Езда на велосипедах по аллеям воспрещается? You thought it meant "Cycling through the alleys is forbidden" because it was dangerous to the cyclist, but it meant "Cycling along the garden paths is forbidden" because the cyclist would pose a danger to the people strolling.

Another common word for a street in Russian can cause the same kind of confusion. Проспект Мира, we all know, was named after the "международное движение за мир и Всемирный фестиваль молодёжи и студентов" (the international peace movement and the world festival of youth and students" held in Moscow in 1957. That's grand, but why is an avenue a проспект?

Both Russian and English got their prospects from the Latin prospectus (view). English would eventually turn that "view" into something less tangible – a view of future success, a view of how a disease might develop, a person who, in the long view, is likely to be successful or might be a candidate for a position. In Russian it was more down to earth — проспект became a broad roadway that would provide an excellent view. However, the notion of something with a future did seep into Russian, for example, with рекламный проспект (advertising pamphlet), which — to make your head spin a bit — in English can be a prospectus. Я только что нашёл рекламный проспект и план развития курорта (I just found a sales brochure and plan to develop the resort).

And to make your head spin a bit more, Russian uses another Latin borrowing to describe someone with good prospects: перспективный (promising, up-and-coming). Russian etymological dictionaries state this come from the Latin verb perspicere (to inspect, see clearly) and in particular perspectiva ars (the art of seeing ahead). So now I suppose you could say: Это очень перспективный проспект (This prospekt has great prospects).

And so it goes. Артист is not an artist but a performer, an actor. Бриллиант is not someone who is brilliant, but a stone that shines brilliantly: a diamond. Банда should never be used to describe a rock band; it's a criminal gang. And шеф is not the person in the funny hat in a restaurant kitchen, but it is someone in charge. It's a boss.

Инсульт is not an insult but a medical problem: Он попал в больницу с инсультом (He was hospitalized after a stroke). And be careful not to confuse симпатия and sympathy. Симпатия is not what you express when someone suffers a loss or disaster. It's what you feel

when you really like someone. Взаимная симпатия двух талантливых молодых людей окончились свадьбой is not about two people who felt sorry for each other. It means: “the mutual attraction of two talented young people ended in a wedding.”

And then there is аккуратный, which is not accurate. Аккуратный человек is someone who is well-organized, neat and tidy, someone who is careful and does not make mistakes. Даже самый аккуратный водитель не может стопроцентно уберечь свое авто (Even the most careful driver can’t protect his car 100 percent of the time). Places can be аккуратный: Дом чистый и аккуратный, двор тихий и уютный (The house is clean and tidy; the courtyard is quiet and cozy). And almost any action can require a careful approach: Выход из диеты аккуратный, не набрасывайтесь на сладкое и мучное (You must end your diet carefully — don’t stuff yourself sweets and pastries). Действовать нужно очень аккуратно (You really must act with care).

Sometimes the notion of doing something carefully means doing it thoroughly: Они аккуратно ходят на все лекции (They attend all the lectures without fail.) And that almost leads to the English sense of accurate – doing something exactly, or right on time. It’s expressed by the slangy в аккурат: В аккурат через час пришёл (He came in exactly one hour). And after a robbery someone might notice: Труба в аккурат рядом с окном была, а окно открыто (The pipe was right up next to the window, and the window was open).

The moral of this story? Надо всё читать очень аккуратно.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/06/02/buy-a-brilliant-and-applaud-an-artist-a81368