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# Spitting, Eating Your Teeth and Other Weird Gestures

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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*Плевать: to spit, to not care*

I have a friend who loves the word наплевать (to spit), only she stretches out each syllable: на-пле-вать and ends with sharp downward jab of her chin. This doesn't mean "I spit on it" — or it does, sort of. It is a verbal description of a gesture (spitting) that means "I could not care less."

In English, spitting on someone or something has a different meaning — more contempt than indifference. So when you translate a sentence like this: Мне плевать на вас и ваши проблемы (literally "I spit on you and your problems") you might say: I don't give a hoot about you or your problems.

In Russian, there are two ways to use gestures. One is to physically use them; the other is to

describe gestures in words. You need to know what both kinds mean so that you don't, well, put your foot in your mouth.

Let's start with a few physical gestures. If a person twirls their index finger at their temple, it means that the person under discussion — or even the person they are talking to — is crazy, off his rocker, not thinking straight. There is similar gesture: someone holds their thumb at their temple with their palm up and facing forward and then flaps the hand up and down. This also means that someone is a bit crazy, but it might be used ironically or about someone who is ditzy, a lightweight, or not very smart.

If you are fed up with something, or just fed up to the brim with too much food, hold your hand under your chin, palm down. This means the relatively benign Я сыт по горло (I'm filled to the brim, I ate too much); or the annoyed мне надоело (I've had it up to here); or the ultimatum: с меня хватит (that's it – I've hit my limit). Context, as usual, is everything.

Other easily readable gestures include scratching the back of your head, which means "I don't get it" or squinting your eyes to mean "I'm concentrating."

One that puzzled me at first is slapping the back of your neck where it joins the spine, a spot that is often a bit of a hump. In Russian this spot is called горб, and it plays a larger role in the imagination and language than its English equivalent. For example, to work really hard is гнуть or ломать горб (literally to bend or break your neck hump). In English this might be to break your back, bust a gut or work up a sweat. We do, however, share similar names for the hump that often appears in older women: вдовый горб in English is dowager's hump.

So what does it mean to hit this spot on your back? It's the physical representation of сидеть на горбу (literally "to sit on my neck"), usually when someone is in your care and it's a burden, or when you have a problem that is weighing on you. In English we might say we have the weight of the world on our shoulders, but at least in my part of the English-speaking – or gesturing – world, there was no physical gesture to describe it.

On the other hand — as it were — there are verbal expressions in Russian that describe physical gestures. Here's an expression that might have been a real gesture once: с глазу на глаз (literally "from one eye to another"). This means to speak privately, one on one: Мне нужно поговорить с глазу на глаз (I need to talk privately).

False friend alert! С глазу на глаз means talking privately, just two people. It does not mean "to see eye to eye." That's to be in agreement (согласны). It's no secret that we haven't always seen eye to eye (Не секрет, что мы не всегда находили общий язык).

Смотреть сквозь пальцы (literally "to look through your fingers") is to intentionally ignore something. In English, we use an expression that has the same idea, but a different physical gesture: По его словам, мировая общественность не может смотреть сквозь пальцы на происходящее в Ливии (He said the world public cannot turn a blind eye to what is happening in Libya).

Here's a weird one: зубы съесть (literally "to eat your teeth"). That means to have experience, to be an expert, to know your stuff. In English we have the expression "to cut your teeth on something," but that means to get your start. I guess in Russian they've already cut

their teeth and now are swallowing them?

In any case: Даже если скажете, что уже зубы съели на различных мероприятиях, уверен, вам всегда хочется знать, как сделать их ещё лучше (Even if you say you're an old hand at event organization, I'm sure you want to know how to make them even better).

There is a weird version of this: собаку съесть (literally "to eat a dog") and no, I have no idea where this expression came from. But it means the same thing: Надо собаку съесть, чтобы во всем этом разобраться (You need to have done this a million times to know all the ins and outs). Вот вы у него и учитесь. Он в суде работает побольше вашего отца и на этих делах собаку съел (You ought to study with him. He's been working in the court longer than your father and he really knows his stuff).

All of this can be tough on translators. You have to figure out if a guy really spit or if it's all metaphorical. Here it seems the person actually made a gesture: Он махнул рукой и сказал: - Не стоит (He waved his hand dismissively and said, "It's not worth it.") But here he probably didn't:  В итоге отец просто махнул рукой на сына, дав ему возможность самостоятельно обустроить свою судьбу (In the end the father simply gave up on his son and let him make his life on his own).

And then there is one other problem for translators — when Russian and English/American gestures don't match up in terms of meaning. In Russian, you spread your arms (развезти руками) to indicate "I am perplexed, I don't know what to do." In English, we usually focus on another part of that gesture:  Врач развел руками и сказал, что больше не знает что назначить (The doctor shrugged and said he didn't know what else to prescribe.) Or you can ignore the gesture and convey the meaning: "the doctor was at a loss."

Or you can beat your head against the desk trying to decide. Metaphorically, of course.

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