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Secretly, Silently and Sneakily Yours

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Adrienn / pexels

Втайне: secretly, in secret

A translator friend of mine recently announced with some fanfare that he had found the most misspelled word in the Russian language. He had documented 11 misspellings, which is impressive — although I'm sure my personal record for misspelling здравствуйте over the years has topped that.

In any case, the word that gives everyone such a hard time is (drumroll): исподтишка. The main problems are one word or three: из под тишка and/or из-под тишка? The three choices of vowels: исподтяшка/тешка/тишка. And some confusion over the consonants: ис/изподтяжка/тишка.

And what does this creatively spelled word mean? It is an adverb that most commonly means "secretly" and less commonly "suddenly," "unexpectedly." So where did secret and sudden come from when the word is clearly related to тихо-тише (quiet, more quiet)? It should

mean some form of silently, right?

Time for an Etymology Break.

Исподтишка is broken down into из под (from under) and тишок, which has disappeared from the language as a stand-alone word. The original meaning of тишок was тишина, спокойство — nicely rendered in English as “peace and quiet.”

Тихо and тихий convey lots of notions in Russian including slow, quiet, peaceful, careful, and obedient. The earlier version of исподтишка was исподтиха, which in the 18th century meant “slowly, in no rush.” But over three centuries or so, something came up out from under (из под) to disturb that slow and peaceful meandering — something secret or something sudden.

If all that seems like a stretch, it is. Word evolution is a not a straight line.

And even today it’s not always easy to distinguish which meaning is meant. The secret part is obvious: Я исподтишка наблюдала за мальчиком. А он вёл себя странно (I secretly observed the young boy. He was behaving strangely.) Она исподтишка поглядывала на него (She secretly kept her eye on him). But the sudden part is successful because it’s also secret. Here are examples a dictionary gives for the “sudden” meaning: Чтобы нанести удар исподтишка по советским войскам, дивизия с грозным именем “Викинг” обречена на гибель (In order to hit the Soviet troops when they didn’t expect it, the division with the threatening name “Viking” was doomed to die). It’s very sneaky: Это, по-твоему, и есть геройство — напасть исподтишка? (So that's what your notion of heroism is — sneaking up and attacking?)

The word that started all this, тишок, now only exists in the language in the adverb тишком, which means secretly or so quietly as to be unnoticed: В школе я сидел за одной партой со скромной девочкой, которая любила меня тишком, без огласки (In school I sat next to a shy girl who loved me secretly, without ever expressing it).

Here’s another good example: То есть, быть незаконопослушными им очень хочется, только тишком, безнаказанно. (That is, they really want to be scofflaws, only they want to break the law secretly and get away with it scot-free).

There are a number of other secretly-silently adverbs that all have roots in тихо (quietly) like втихаря (on the sly, quietly). This is a concept that all book-loving young people know all about: В казарме давали отбой в десять, но Тюменцев приспособился читать втихаря у себя под одеялом, освещая книгу карманным фонариком (At 10 pm they called lights out in the barracks, but Tyumentsev managed to secretly read under the covers, shining a pocket flashlight on a book).

If you want to be secret in an old-fashioned way, use the lovely word втихомолку (silently, secretly), easily deconstructed to the root words тих (quiet) and мол (speech, tongue). Не шумит бригада. У кого есть — покуривают втихомолку (The troops aren’t making a sound. If they have cigarettes, they smoke silently). Она ревниво ловила на нём взгляды молодых студенток, и мучилась втихомолку (She was jealous when she caught the way young women students looked at him, and she suffered in secret).

Another silently/secretly adverb is втихую. Here's an example that is — sadly for us — from a different era (1999): За эти годы он наслушался и начитался всякого, ничему не удивляясь. Это раньше втихую поругивали власть. А нынче — свобода (Over the years he had listened to and read all kinds of things, none of which surprised him. In the past people had to criticize the government in secret. But now there's freedom).

There are, of course, adverbs that concentrate on the secret part, such as втайне (literally "in secret"): главное событие происходило втайне и в темноте (The main event took place in secret and and in darkness). Or the slightly more informal тайком, perhaps describing the above main event: Молодой паре приходиться скрываться, тайком встречаясь. The young couple is forced to hide, seeing each other in secret (The young couple had to hide and meet secretly).

The problem is, as we all know: Всё тайное станет явным (Everything hidden will become known).

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