

Taken by Storm

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Гроза: thunderstorm; a ferocious, violent person or event

Холодный атмосферный фронт ожидается с северо-западных регионов (A cold front from the northwestern regions is expected). Great! На Москву надвигается гроза (A thunderstorm is headed for Moscow). Can't wait! В московской области объявлено грозовое предупреждение (A storm warning has been issued for the Moscow region). Disappointed!

So far the dire warnings of hurricane-force winds, cold air and torrential downfalls have come to nothing. As I wait for stormy weather, I've been thinking about гроза (thunderstorm) and related words, which are a bit more linguistically versatile than their English-language counterparts.

According to etymologists, the original meaning of гроза was something terrible or upsetting, which a thunderstorm often is. Figuratively, гроза can mean a person or event that is threatening, menacing or destructive. Его еще считают грозой современных

литераторов: он всегда позволял себе говорить, что думал (Among contemporary writers, he is still considered a terror: He has always said exactly what he thought). Гроза can also be used as a metaphor for turbulent behavior: Он грозой носился по поселениям, рассылая бесчисленное множество приказов и положений (He stormed around the settlements, issuing countless decrees and regulations).

Гроза has produced the verb pair грозить/погрозить, which means to threaten physically or metaphorically. Он грозил мне пальцем (he wagged his finger at me); or: Он грозил мне кулаком (he shook his fist at me); or, if things take a nasty turn: Он грозил мне пистолетом (he threatened me with a gun). But you can also say: В случае признания виновным, ему грозит не менее четырёх лет тюремного заключения (If found guilty, he is facing at least four years in jail).

Then there's угроза, which can be translated as threat, danger, peril or menace, depending on the context. For example: В настоящее время под угрозой исчезновения находятся 1130 видов млекопитающих (Right now, there are 1,130 endangered species of mammals). Sometimes you want to fiddle with the grammar a bit: Угроза терроризма, фундаментализма висит над всем регионом (Terrorism and fundamentalism threaten the entire region).

There are two adjectives derived from гроза: грозовой (stormy) and грозный (terrible, menacing, threatening, formidable). The second adjective is deliciously expressive. Он бросил на меня грозный взгляд (He scowled at me). Он говорил грозным голосом (He spoke menacingly).

In our list of menaces and threats, we mustn't forget Иван Грозный (Ivan the Terrible). The lexicographer Vladimir Dal wrote a splendid definition of грозный when applied to a leader: мужественный, величественный, повелительный и держащий врагов в страхе, а народ в повиновении (courageous, majestic, authoritative, keeping his enemies in fear and his people in submission). As you see, this is not "terrible" in the sense of "really bad" (Ivan the Really Nasty), but rather in the older meaning of "terrible": "impressing dread, terror or solemn awe and reverence."

Another possible translation would be "awe-inspiring," if we mean "awe" in the sense of "a mixed emotion of reverence, respect, dread and wonder inspired by authority, genius, great beauty, sublimity or might." Alas, languages change over time, and today we tend to use "awe-inspiring" to describe something positive and beautiful. And we definitely can't call him Ivan the Awesome.

But a good thunderstorm right now — that would be awesome.

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