

Give Me Some Elbow Room

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Кусать локти: to kick oneself over something

Over the years, I've been looking at Russian body parts. No, let me start again.

Over the years, I've been trying to master Russian expressions connected with parts of the body. While I'm not convinced that these expressions are a reflection of Russian mentality, it sure is fun to see what associations and figurative meanings anatomy has evoked.

Right now, I've worked up the hand and forearm to локоть (elbow). In both Russian and English, the word for those pointy joints can also refer to the elbow of a piece of clothing, an L-shaped pipe or, less commonly, a sharp bend in a road or river. And both languages use the elbow to describe pushing through a crowd — literally or figuratively — to get what you want.

In Russian the standard expression is работать локтями (literally, "to work the elbows"). Я изо всех сил заработал локтями и начал приближаться к подиуму (I used all my strength to elbow my way forward and began to get close to the podium). Во власть

пробиваются, работая локтями (People elbow their way into positions of power).

When Russians aren't elbowing people out of the way, they are contemplating the possibility of biting their elbows. They use a diminutive of локоть — локоток — in the expression: Близок локоток, да не укусишь (literally, "Your elbow is close, but you can't bite it"). In English, we describe this as "so near and yet so far." Sometimes they actually gnaw on them: кусать локти (literally, "to bite one's elbows") is what you do when you deeply regret something. In English, we express this with another anatomically impossible feat. Я не сделал ей предложение, и с тех пор кусаю себе локти (I didn't ask her to marry me, and I'm still kicking myself).

Russians don't have an exact equivalent of elbow grease, that stuff you use to get hard work done. But they do have a similar image: работать, засучив рукава (to roll up their sleeves and get down to work).

There is also the expression по локоть в крови (literally, "up to one's elbows in blood") to describe people directly involved in murder or mayhem. In English, we focus on another joint: Если у человека одна рука по локоть в деньгах, то другая наверняка по локоть в крови (If a person has one leg knee-deep in money, then the other leg is invariably knee-deep in blood).

The battlefield gave us the mysterious-sounding чувство локтя (literally, "sense of elbow"), which is a sense of the proper distance between soldiers in formation — the span of a forearm. This might refer to a very old meaning of локоть, which was a measure from the elbow to the middle finger. The expression can be used to describe team spirit or a strong sense of being supported by friends or colleagues. К числу желаемых сотрудников относятся те люди, которые имеют развитое чувство локтя (The most attractive candidates for the job are people who have a well-developed team spirit). Еще до своего избрания президентом Путин называл Медведева в числе людей, с которыми у него есть чувство локтя (Even before he was elected president, Putin called Medvedev one of the people he knew he could count on).

So I guess they'll walk локоть в локоть (side by side) — at least until one of them elbows the other out of the way.

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