

As Cool as Putin and a Boiled Egg

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Крутой!: Cool! Hot! Amazing! Great! Tough!

If you ever have occasion to talk with a native Russian speaker under the legal drinking age, you're going to hear the adjective крутой a lot, along with the adverb круто and comparative form круче. In fact, I've come to think of крутой as the quintessential Russian word for the 21st century. But what the heck does крутой mean?

The primary meaning in literary and standard language is steep or twisted. For example: В тех местах, где спуск становился круче, он останавливался и подавал ей руку (In places where the slope grew steeper, he would stop and give her a hand). With regard to roads, крутой means sharply crooked: Осторожно! Впереди крутой поворот направо (Watch out! Up ahead the road makes a sharp turn to the right).

Then there are several one-offs — particular meanings of крутой for very particular cases. With regard to waves, крутой means huge, as in this lyrical description of a storm: Прыгая по крутым волнам, ураган достиг берега (The hurricane leapt along high waves to reach

the shore). With regard to foreheads and chins, it means protuberant: У него крутой лоб (His forehead juts out). With regard to water, it means boiling hot, as in this recipe: В крутой кипяток спускать куски сырого мяса (Drop pieces of raw meat into water brought to a rolling boil). Logically — inasmuch as language is logical — крутое яйцо is a hard-boiled egg.

Figuratively, крутой can refer to actions that are major and affect the essence of something. So you can talk about крутые перемены (major changes) or крутой перелом в жизни (a huge turning point in life).

With regard to actions, крутой can mean severe, like крутые меры (drastic measures). With regard to people, in literary Russian крутой or крутой нрав (character) means severe, decisive and stubborn. Today this is a bit dated, but you can still hear it. For example, the headline of a newspaper article read: Родом из Березников: истоки крутого нрава Ельцина (Born in Berezniki: The source of Yeltsin's resolute character).

But that's literary language. It's slang where круто has made its real mark. After slogging through blogs and talking to teens, I've concluded that круто and крутой refer to people, actions and things that are extraordinary and powerful in some way. The power might lie in beauty, success, wealth, some kind of extreme or ruthlessness, and there is no moral judgment. It's not good or bad — just круто. For example, when Dr. House is told that his patient has just suffered his fourth organ shut-down, is turning orange and bleeding from his ears, and says, "Cool!" I've mentally translated this as Круто!

When stores, nightclubs, restaurants, houses and cars are deemed крутые, this means they are expensive, exclusive, terrific, beautiful, popular and either visited or purchased by rich and famous people. Клуб был такой крутой! (The club was really hot!) Magazines, work, music, films, books, clothes etc. that are крутые, are really successful, well-paid, great or desirable. Он считает, что у неё крутая работа, а я типа секретаря (He thinks that she's got some fabulous job, but I'm like a secretary).

When people are крутые, they are everything from hot to brutal, depending on context and the speaker. Крутой парень might be a hard-ass or cool guy. Крутая девушка is a looker, a tease or a rich chick. Крутая женщина is a successful and powerful woman. Крутая баба sometimes is a tough broad, sometimes a rich and no-nonsense woman. Крутой бизнесмен might be major player (that is, super-rich), but he also be a guy who plays hardball (that is, sends his competitors to sleep with the fishes).

Confused? Here's a good way to look at it: In today's slang, Putin is крутой, Medvedev is not.

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