

Bad Russian Can Be Dangerous for Children

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Гусыня: goose (female)

One thing that makes learning Russian harder today than it was 20 years ago is the preponderance of bad Russian that we foreigners are exposed to.

By “bad” Russian I mean spelling, sentence construction, word use and stress that are nonstandard and considered by the Russian language pooh-bahs to be ungrammatical — that is, about half the Russian you read on blogs and in newspapers.

People might complain about the prescriptivist bent in Russia, but the fact is that speaking and writing “correct Russian” is a high value here, and, as they say: В чужой монастырь со своим уставом не ходят (when in Rome do as the Romans do). That is, whether we like it or not, we foreigners are going to be judged by our grammatical or ungrammatical Russian.

But figuring out what is “grammatical” Russian has gotten tough. Editorial control seems to have gone out the window. I recently bought a pair of slippers made in Podolsk and labeled тапачки (that is, тапочки).

And a friend sent me a collection of signs and announcements that make native Russian speakers cringe or hoot with laughter and leave us non-native speakers scratching our heads.

For example, take this notice on the entrance of an apartment building: В семь вечера в среду в третьем подъезде состоится собрание. Повестка дня: выборы домового. (There will be a meeting at 7 p.m. on Wednesday in the third entrance. Agenda: election of the house spirit.)

Wait a minute. That can't be right. Perhaps the writer meant *домовой комитет* (the resident's committee). Or maybe Russia has become so democratic that a *домовой* (house spirit) can run for office?

Sometimes the problem is professional slang, which translates badly on paper. In a hospital, someone spotted this disconcerting notification: В виду холода в рентгеновском кабинете делаем только срочные переломы (Considering the cold temperature in the X-ray room, we are only doing rush breaks). This is similar to the way English-speaking doctors refer to the “liver in Room 406.” But I don't think they mean that the doctors will quickly break some bones in the frigid X-ray room.

The sign should have read something like this: По причине холода делаются снимки только тех переломов, которые нуждаются в срочном лечении (Due to the cold, X-rays are only being done of broken bones that require immediate attention).

The language of advertisements can also get mighty confusing. Here it sounds like a company produces knitted clothes for the children of werewolves: Вяжем детские кофточки из шерсти родителей (We knit children's tops from the parental wool).

This company makes human-sized bags: Делаем полиэтиленовые мешки по размеру заказчика (We make plastic bags the size of the client).

And this vendor is unlikely to find a buyer for his product: Продаю коляску для новорождённого синего цвета (I'm selling a carriage for a blue-colored newborn). Watch that word order!

Judging by some ads, life in the countryside is more interesting than I imagined. Продаются три поросёнка, все разного пола. (Three piglets for sale — all of different genders.) Продаются четыре гусыни и гусак. Все несутся. (Four geese and one gander for sale. All are good egg-layers.) Продается немецкая овчарка. Недорого. Ест любое мясо. Особенно любит маленьких детей. (German shepherd for sale. Not expensive. Eats any kind of meat. Especially loves little children.)

I think I'll stick with the egg-laying gander.

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