

A Whole Lot of Nothing

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Пустышка: pacifier, something empty

One of the problems of being a translator is that your work load is pretty much feast or famine. Half the time you get a job offer every time you pick up the phone, and the other half you're playing computer solitaire and wondering if everyone has abandoned cross-cultural communication. In Russian, this parade of feast and famine is described with the phrase: то густо, то пусто (literally, "now thick, now empty").

I used this phrase a gazillion times before realizing that I had no idea how густо (thick, dense) came to mean "abundant." It turns out that I had it backward. Abundance (wealth, property) was probably the original meaning of густо when it broke off from Lithuanian a millennium or so ago. The mystery is how the adverb густо and adjective густой came to have their most common contemporary meanings of thick or dense.

However the meaning morphed, today you can use густой to describe anything made up of closely placed shaft-like things, like густой лес (a dense forest) or густые волосы (thick

hair). It's also used to describe anything thick and goopy, like густой сироп (thick syrup), or anything thickly impenetrable or intense, like густой туман (a thick fog), густой артиллерийский огонь (heavy artillery fire) or густой цвет (deeply saturated color). It can even refer to a deep, resonant, usually low sound, like густой бас (a deep bass voice).

The пусто part of the expression is even more productive. Sometimes пустой is just plain old empty: Она собралась в Москву не с пустыми руками (She didn't plan on going to Moscow empty-handed). In Russian, various parts of your body can be empty: У меня пусто на душе (I felt empty inside). Сегодня у меня голова совсем пустая (I'm a total dingbat today.)

Emptiness can be figurative: Будем надеяться, что это не пустые слова (Let's hope that those aren't empty words). Or it can convey that something is devoid of meaning: Это не пустые слова — они наполнены самыми добрыми пожеланиями (These weren't trite words, but rather were filled with good wishes). If said about a work of art, пустой means something without serious content. Я прочёл книгу — она пустая (I read the book — it's a waste of ink).

With regard to people, пустой means spiritually or intellectually bankrupt.

“Как новая подруга вашего сына?” (“How's your son's new girlfriend?”)

“Да ну. Пустая девушка.” (Bleah. She's an airhead.)

Пустьак is a little nothing or trifle. Когда они поняли, что не надо ссориться по пустякам, дело у них пошло на лад (As soon as they realized that there was no point to arguing over nothing, their relationship went smoothly).

Пустышка is a whole lot of nothing. It can be found in every home having a small child. Наша Сонечка заснёт только с пустышкой (Our little Sonya can only fall asleep with her pacifier). It can be used to describe anything that is empty inside: Купила килограмм орехов и половина из них — пустышки! (I bought a kilo of nuts and half of them are empty). Or it can describe an empty-headed person: Она гламурная пустышка (She's an empty-headed glamour girl). Or it can be a disappointment of sorts: Как всегда, я вытянул пустышку (As usual, I bought a losing lottery ticket).

It's hard to stay married to translation through thick and thin.

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