

Hardcore and Awesome!

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Очковать: to be scared, to turn tail

Lately, I've been indulging in my favorite procrastination pastime — reading Russian blogs. When the posters are young and snarky — and the posters are almost always young and snarky — this is a humbling experience. Four decades of Russian-language competence go out the window. Once again, I'm a first-year Russian student, reading a sentence four times, recognizing half the words, guessing at others by their roots and totally baffled by the rest. Either the poster is terrified, or he can't see, or maybe he won something. The last comment was really funny. Or it was awful. Or it was awfully funny.

Why can you people speak Russian?

After hours of googling, pouring over online and print dictionaries and interrogating young people of my acquaintance, I've managed to translate some frequently recurring words from молодёжный сленг (youth slang) into литературный язык (standard Russian).

My first new word was жесть. If you look it up in a standard dictionary, you'll see that it means sheet metal or tinplate. Only it's hard to imagine that in a discussion about some dreadful event someone would respond with an emphatic "Sheet metal!" Жесть apparently comes from жестоко (harsh, cruel), and in slang it can refer to something horrible: Вот такую живую жесть обнаружили в канализации: колония огромных червей (A real horror show was discovered in the sewer system: a colony of huge worms). Жить и растить детей в таком состоянии войны и ада — это полная жесть (Living and raising kids in this state of war and hell — it's just rotten). Ты слышал, что он ей говорил? Жесть! (Did you hear what he said to her? Harsh!)

Жесть can also refer to something dangerous — for example, in sports: Альпинисты ночевали в мешках на стенах. Настоящая жесть! (The mountain climbers slept in bags hanging from the walls. Now that's what I call extreme sports!) In another medium, it can refer to something violent and obscene: Слова в песне — жесть! (Those song lyrics are hardcore!)

It can also be used to describe something violent and funny. Here "funny" is in the eye of the beholder: В клипе трое девушек избивают мальчика — прикольно! Жесть! (In the video three girls beat up a boy. It's a riot — hardcore!)

When confronted with жесть, the normal human reaction is очковать (to be frightened). Очковать seems to have started its slangy life in the camps, where it meant to be scared witless. As so often happens, очковать became a bit tamer as it entered the language of the general population, and is now used to describe someone behaving like a coward or feeling apprehensive about something. As two guys get ready for a B&E, one might say: Что-то очкую. Точно охранника нет? (This is starting to spook me. You sure there's no guard?)

Another popular bit of slang is the evocative лабзда, which means busy-work or any kind of senseless activity. When Mom tells Vanya Junior to clean his room, he might mutter: Лабзда такая. (What a waste of time).

And then there's зихер (or зехер), which appears to be less widely used. It refers either to a person or an action that is underhanded, mean or vile. When a kid trips the guy speeding by on his roller blades, his friend with a conscience might say: Это конкретно зихер (That was, like, real low, man.)

But his snarky friend just laughs and says: Жесть!

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