

English Speakers Tremble Less Than Russians

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Страх и трепет: fear and trembling

I have a love-hate relationship with the word трепет (trembling, quivering).

I love that the word catches and magnifies the smallest tremble or quiver in nature, like трепет листьев (the trembling of leaves), трепет занавески (the rustling of the curtains), or the old-fashioned трепет ресниц (flutter of eyelashes). When it is used to describe a person's reaction to something, I love that it brings to the surface the most subtle emotions. It's as if the language is so attuned to the world that it notices the passing of the slightest breeze and almost imperceptible human reactions. Or it's as if Russians experience the most subtle emotions so intensely that they express them physically. Great stuff.

But I hate the word's ambiguity. People can tremble out of fear, awe, reverence, joy or

tenderness. Sometimes it's clear what kind of trembling is going on because it's spelled out: Я испытывал радостный трепет (I trembled with joy.) But often I can't figure out why someone is quivering, quaking, trembling or shuddering. Russians always seem to know. Is it because they understand the linguistic context better than I do, or they have broader historical knowledge, or they know more about the writer? I don't know, but it drives me nuts.

In any case, because English speakers tremble and quiver a lot less than Russian speakers, трепет is often translated by the emotion that causes it. Я видела, как мой тринадцатилетний сын спокойно и безо всякого трепета обращается с этой машиной (I saw how my 13-year-old son dealt with the car calmly, without a hint of trepidation.) Этот художник не вызывает во мне трепета (I'm not at all awed by that artist's work.) Мы поклоняемся с трепетом и благодарностью Кресту Господню (We bow down with reverence and gratitude before the holy cross.) Прекрасно помню, с каким трепетом я посмотрела этот мультфильм в первый раз (I remember how thrilled I was the first time I saw that animated film.) Эти солдаты вызывали трепет у противника (Those soldiers made the enemy quake in horror.) Старушка с трепетом относилась к этой маленькой, некрасивой собачке (The old woman was so tender with that ugly little dog.)

But what about this: Не испытывая никакого особого трепета, я пришёл в университет на Моховой. I came to the university on Mokhovaya Ulitsa without any particular ... what? Fear? Excitement? Awe? Intimidation? Delight? Apprehension? Beats me. If I couldn't get clarification from the rest of the text or an omniscient Russian speaker, I'd probably fudge it: I was pretty calm when I got into the university on Mokhovaya.

The verb to describe trembling is трепетать. Я трепетала при мысли о встрече с ним (I trembled at the thought of seeing him.) This shouldn't be confused with the verb трепать (and its perfective forms потрепать, истрепать), which has a variety of standard and slangy meanings. It can mean "cause something to tremble": Ветер трепал листья (the wind fluttered the leaves). Or "bring disarray": Он потрепал её волосы (He tousled her hair). Or "wear out": Он за три месяца истрепал новые ботинки (He wore out his new boots in three months.) Жизнь его потрепала (Life wore him down.)

Трепать нервы is to get on someone's nerves. Трепать языком is to blab. Потрепать человека is to beat someone up — what I want to do whenever I see трепет in a text.

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