

The Heavy Task of Translating TV Shows

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June 27, 2013

The  **Moscow Times**

Во все тяжкие: Breaking Bad

One of my favorite little games to entertain myself on quiet evenings in Moscow is to read the TV guide and try to guess the name of the American television show from the Russian translation. Sometimes it isn't much of a game. Доктор Кто and Хорошая жена are obviously Doctor Who and The Good Wife. Getting those right doesn't add to my score.

Звёздный путь (Star Trek), Игра тронов (Game of Thrones), Безумцы (Mad Men), and Секс в большом городе (Sex and the City) were no-brainers.

But another equivalent translation threw me off. Морская полиция: спецотдел is NCIS, which is the acronym for Naval Criminal Investigative Service. Sometimes my total ignorance of American television — and American law enforcement agencies — is a real handicap.

But when there isn't a near equivalent, it gets more complicated, and I begin to pity the poor translators. Titles are tricky business. They are often developed by a committee of media specialists and then pre-tested to appeal to a particular demographic of a very particular American viewing audience. The translators have to come up with something that will sing — or at least speak — to a Russian audience, and they are probably paid about 87 kopeks per word and given 14 minutes to do it.

The punning names must give them heartburn, and they usually give up and go for a descriptive translation. A series about a mediator called Fairly Legal — get it? — is simply Посредник Кейт (Kate the Mediator). Royal Pains, a show about a concierge physician on Rublyovka — er, in the Hamptons — is called Пациент всегда прав (The Patient is Always Right). A show called Person of Interest turned into В поле зрения (In the Field of Vision), changing the focus — no pun intended — from the person to the surveillance technology.

I never would have guessed in a million years that Жизнь как шоу (Life Like a Show) was Smash and have no idea why the translator passed up the many Russian words and phrases for a stage hit. Успех (Success), Блокбастер (blockbuster, often used in Russian to describe any successful film, musical, play or book), or even Хит Сезона (The Hit of the Season) would have worked. They might have even gone with На бис! (Encore!) TV guide: 5; Me: 0.

And then there was Во все тяжкие (Breaking Bad). Not only did I lose this round, I lost two points for not knowing what the Russian phrase meant and five points for not understanding the American phrase. "Breaking bad" is apparently slang from the U.S. South that means someone has been leading a moral, sober life and suddenly takes a turn to the dark side.

Во все тяжкие has a more interesting history. One version is that the big bells in a church tower are called тяжкие (heavy), and when a bell ringer uses all the bells, including the whoppers, он бьёт во все тяжкие (he hits all the heavy ones). Пуститься во все тяжкие means to do something with all your might, or to cast caution to the winds, or to go off the rails into a life of dissipation. Here, there is an added association in Russian with тяжкие преступления (heinous crimes), which I gather the lead character commits left and right. Congratulations to the translator, and another loss for me.

Now I'm going off to get a life. Stay tuned.

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