

'Ew, That's Disgusting!' and More Untranslatable Russian

I love lists of “untranslatable” words.

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Брезгливый: fastidious (sometimes)

I love lists of “untranslatable” words. Just once I’d like to hand in a translation with blank spaces in every paragraph and, when questioned by the client, simply shrug and say, “Hey, those words were untranslatable.”

No word is utterly impossible to translate, but there are plenty of words that lose much of their richness in translation. Big, fat, scrumptious Russian words full of meanings and associations sometimes don’t have English equivalents, and their translations are like half-empty sacks.

The current bane of my translating existence is брезгливый. Dictionaries will tell you that it means fastidious and refers to a person who can't stand anything dirty or smelly. Seems easy, right? Бабушкино поганое бельё стирать в своём тазике он не разрешал был брезглив (He didn't let us wash Grandma's foul underwear in his basin — he was finicky about cleanliness. Брезгливая Ирина не могла выносить запах сортиров. (Fastidious Irina couldn't stand the stench of the toilets.)

Very often it's used in the adverbial form (брезгливо) to describe someone's reaction to something dirty. And with that the real problems with translation begin, since in Russian there seems to be a certain way of looking or behaving that telegraphs: I find this absolutely revolting. In English people don't look at something fastidiously. In fact, I don't even know what a fastidious gaze is. A moue of distaste? A slight shudder? A supercilious arched eyebrow?

So I asked a selection of Russian friends: Посмотрите на меня брезгливо (Look at me fastidiously.) Screwed up faces and hilarity ensued. The expressions varied, but basically came down to someone saying, "Ew!"

But there's still a problem. The Russian брезгливо tells us about the person: someone who is highly sensitive, rather squeamish, perhaps a bit superior, who can't bear anything that is physically or psychologically disgusting. This kind of person always carries moist wipes and crosses the street to avoid a homeless person. There's even a verb брезгать, which is what a брезгливый person does to something yucky. Unfortunately, In English in most cases we're stuck with just describing someone's reaction — disgusted — not the person. Алла брезгливо посмотрела на грязный стол (Alla looked at the dirty table with disgust.)

Lots of things can discomfit this kind of person: Он не заметил, что во время редкой интимной близости жена брезгливо морщится и едва сдерживает отвращение (He didn't notice that during their rare moments of intimacy, his wife screwed up her face in revulsion and barely concealed her disgust.)

You can perform various gestures брезгливо (in a finicky way). In English, we don't have a lot of options: Он брезгливо поджал губы (He pressed his lips together in disgust). Она брезгливо пожал плечами (She gave a shudder of revulsion.)

And then there the neat-freak's standard facial expressions, like брезгливая усмешка, which is a fastidious curl of the lips, and брезгливая гримаса, which is the classic "ew" face all puckered up with revulsion.

Finally, there are combination facial expressions, which I can barely imagine, let alone imitate: брезгливо-недоуменное выражение лица (a fussy-puzzled expression); гневно-брезгливая манера (irritated-fastidious manner); брезгливо-скужающее выражение (a fastidious-bored expression); брезгливо-приветственно кивнуть (to give someone a condescending welcoming nod).

My favorite is насмешливое, брезгливое доброжелательство (a slightly disdainful, squeamish kindness), when your host invites you to sit down, waving his hands to chase away the scent of your perfume, and wipes his hand after shaking yours. That's

брезгливость.

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