

Let's Talk Turkey

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Max Pixel

Индюк: tom turkey

I know it's hard to imagine, but there was a time, children, not so far in the past when you could not buy a turkey in Russia for love or money. Turkeys were not raised on big farms or in villagers' backyards. You could buy курица (chicken); утка (duck); гусь (goose); фазань (pheasant); Корниш (Cornish hens); тетерев (grouse); глухарь (wood grouse); рябчик (hazel grouse); куропатка (partridge) and перепёлка (quail), but no turkeys. For decades Thanksgiving in my Moscow apartment was a chicken dinner.

This local lack of experience with turkeys, I have decided, explains why Russian notions of turkey characteristics are so off the mark. Although U.S. Northwoods hunters have told me that wild turkeys are clever, fast, and nearly impossible to bag, anyone who has ever met domesticated turkeys understands why we call stupid people or stage and screen flops

“turkeys.” How dumb are turkeys? The owner of a turkey farm once told me that they have to keep them inside if it looks like rain because if they are outside, they throw their heads back, open their beaks and drown. Poor creatures! The breeders should be punished!

But in Russian, индюк (tom turkey) is a proud, self-important, rather vain flashy dresser. There is, I suppose, something silly or a bit contemptible about this turkey, but he isn't stupid. And neither are men who are called индюки.

By the way, these characteristics aren't associated with индюшка (turkey hen) or human women because hens are small, blandly colored, with no fancy tail feathers, and they don't strut around going gobble-gobble-gobble.

All of this makes translation a bit tricky, since calling someone a turkey in English is not at all the same as calling someone индюк in Russian. Sometimes turkey fits, but in other cases you might need to substitute a peacock.

For example, here, in translating what Nikita Khrushchev once said to poet Andrei Voznesensky in the Kremlin, a turkey wouldn't make sense: Называется, пришли в Кремль. Как вам не совестно? Как индюки одеты... в красные рубашки (So this is what you call coming to the Kremlin? You ought to be ashamed of yourselves! You're dressed like peacocks... in red shirts!) Or here: Какой самовлюблённый индюк! (What a narcissistic peacock!)

Toms are said to “puff up” in Russian, all the better to strut around: Они будут теперь ходить с важными рожами, как надутые индюки, и делать вид, что руководят процессом (Now they're going to strut around looking all important, like a bunch of puffed-up peacocks, pretending that they are in charge).

Bears, however, are generally less of a translation problem. In both languages a bear has associations of being large, strong, perhaps crude. In English a big bear of a man is like a Russian big bear of a man: Что-то в нём медвежье: тяжёл, полноват, в массивных очках (There was something bear-like about him: he was heavy-set, a bit fat, wearing massive glasses). But the Russian bear — and hence a bear-like man — is also a bit clumsy. Russians know what we Americans are less likely to know: they call them косолапые — what we call pigeon-toed! — because they've seen bears walk, and they do turn their enormous paws in as they lumber along. Or blather along: Докладчик был похож на медведя; неуклюжий и кудлатый, он тыкал указкой в картинку на экране (The speaker was like a bear: clumsy and shaggy, jabbing his pointer at the image on the screen).

Today there is a new meaning of медведь — a member of the United Russia party, which has a bear as its symbol. This might explain some otherwise bizarre statements: С медведями мы жаждали встретиться (We were dying to meet with some “bears,” that is, UR party members).

There are a few Russian bear-y expressions that are good to know. Медведь наступил на ухо (literally, a bear stepped on someone's ear) means that someone has no ear for music. Well, duh, if a bear stomped on your ear, right? Она шутила, что её брату наступил медведь на ухо и это прогрессирует с годами (She joked that her brother had no ear for music and it had only gotten worse with age).

And then there is медвежий угол (literally, a bear's corner), which is a distant, out-of-the-way place, the back of beyond, the middle of nowhere. Быть может, полезные ископаемые будут найдены в медвежьих углах Сибири, однако работы там пока не ведутся (It's possible that natural resources will be found in the back woods of Siberia, but work hasn't been done there yet).

There is also медвежья услуга, which is help that is more of a hindrance. Такое чувство, что ваши хвалители и поклонники оказывают вам медвежью услугу, ☒ начальство раздражается (I get the impression that your fans are doing you a disservice with their praise — on the top floor they're getting annoyed).

And then there is the expression делить шкуру неубитого медведя (literally, to divide up the pelt of a bear before you kill it), which in English is conveyed in a homier and less woodsy way. This sometimes comes up in salary negotiations: ☒ Послушай, мне хотелось бы твёрдо знать, сколько я получу за свою работу. ☒ Не знаю. Не будем делить шкуру неубитого медведя ("Listen, I want to know exactly how much I'll get for my work." "I don't know. Let's not count our chickens before they're hatched.") The proper response: Спасибо до свидания (thank you good-bye).

And then because Бог любит троицу (literally, God loves a Trinity, but in conversational speech: good things come in threes), let's include our friend the billy goat: козёл. When used to describe a person, it can be someone who looks or sounds like a goat. For example, this is not the kind of review about your performance you want to read in the local paper: Он поёт козлиным тенором (The tenor sounds like a goat). But in general, козёл is one of those all-purpose insults whose meaning probably depends on the speaker: imbecile, jerk, moron, bastard, creep... Take your pick. Назначен новый директор, и он козёл (They appointed a new director, and he's a moron).

How bad are козлы? Well, if you want to mess up someone's business, make sure one is made the boss. Or arrange a bit of village sabotage: пустить козла в огород (literally, let the goat loose in the garden), which is a way of letting someone in to do damage: Предлагалось ликвидировать Государственный комитет по лесному хозяйству и передать его функции Министерству лесной промышленности, то есть пустить козла в огород (They suggested eliminating the State Committee for Forestry and putting it under the Ministry of Forest Industry, that is, put the fox in charge of guarding the henhouse).

If someone is hopeless, you can use another barnyard expression: как от козла молока (literally, like milking a billy goat): От него толку, как от козла молока (He's good for nothing).

You don't want to be any of these kinds of goats, and you especially don't want to be козёл отпущения (a scapegoat). This phrase is from the Bible, but now a part of everyday speech, alas: Осенью, если экономическая ситуация будет неблагоприятной, может понадобиться козёл отпущения (In the fall, if the economic situation is unfavorable, they might need a scapegoat).

I'd much rather be a vain tom turkey any day.

Except on Thanksgiving, that is.

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