

Alexei Navalny and the Secret List of Forbidden Words

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

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Andrei Lyubimov / Moskva News Agency

Блат: crimes (in prison and among criminals); connections (outside prison by everyone else)

Alexei Navalny got in trouble in prison again, this time for saying two words: крыша (roof) and хата (hut or peasant house). So what is the problem with those two words? He was told that they “входят в сборник жаргонных слов и выражений, употребляемых преступными элементами” (They are listed in an anthology of slang words and expressions used by criminal elements).

I thought Navalny might have gotten in trouble for laughing at the phrase преступные элементы, but no; it was more absurd. In prison it is forbidden to use slang words and expressions used by criminal elements. Weird — I mean, they’re in a prison, what kind of language do they think the criminal elements imprisoned there would use?

But it gets even weirder. When Navalny asked to see the list so he would not err again, his request was refused. The anthology was sent to prison in 1983 and “с тех пор остаётся засекреченным” (and ever since then has been classified).

That is, you can be punished for uttering forbidden words and phrases, but the list of forbidden words and phrases is held in secret. (Scratches head.)

The real problem is that these words and expressions migrate back and forth between the criminal world and the non-criminal world. That is, regular words enter criminal slang and acquire new nefarious meanings. And criminal slang enters the general, non-criminal language and becomes a part of it, sometimes keeping its original meaning, sometimes being tamed over time or changing entirely.

Take, for example the benign, even lofty word музыка (music). It is a perfectly acceptable word used by everyone from your teenage neighbor to your priest and even your snobby Тётя Роза (Auntie Rose). But it went over to the Dark Side when no one was looking. It also means “criminal language.” It is just one of the words used to describe how crooks and dirty dealers talk: арго (argot); жаргон (jargon); байковый язык (the language of tall tales); феня, блатная феня, соня (all versions of “thieves’ cant”), рыбий язык (language of fishes); and музыка (music). It is sometimes called блатная музыка —блатная means criminal.

Today this slang is probably most commonly called феня, a word derived from офеня (traveling peddler, itinerant bookseller). To speak it is по фене ботать, as in: Где по фене ботать учился? (Where’d you learn prison slang?)

Navalny got in trouble for uttering “normal” words that also have “criminal” meanings: крыша is a protection racket and хата has a number of meanings, including a criminal hang-out and a prison cell.

Another everyday word that took a dark turn among crooks is the word мусор (garbage) — you hear it every day when your significant other asks “Ты уже вынес мусор?” (Did you take out the trash?) But in феня it means a cop.

Стук out here in the world is the sound of knocking, tapping, pounding or pitter-pattering, and стучать is the verb for it. Мне нравится стук дождя по крыше (I love the sound of rain pattering on the roof). Если никто не открывает, стучите сразу в несколько дверей (If no one answers, just go and knock on several doors). But in prison slang стук is a denunciation and стучать means “to denounce.” Твой напарник сейчас стучит на тебя в участке (Your partner is in the police station snitching on you as we speak).

Хвост is what your dog wags when she’s happy to see you. In феня it is most commonly a guy who is following you: Если вы заметили слежку за собой, ни в коем случае нельзя оборачиваться, а, наоборот, стоит ввести хвост в заблуждение (If you notice that you’re being followed, do not under any circumstances turn around, but to the contrary, you should try to confuse the guy tailing you).

In the non-criminal world, стирка is what you do to keep your clothes clean: С давних времён стирка была очень трудоёмким процессом (In the old days, doing the laundry was a very labor-intensive process). But in the criminal and prison worlds, it can mean a scam or a

rag, and in the plural (стирки) it can mean a deck of cards.

Probably 90% of the words in феня have not been invented by criminals: they are ordinary Russian words that are given a new meaning. So every time Alexei Navalny or another prisoner opens their mouth, they are likely to violate the secret code.

But the process of word assimilation went the other direction, too. Out here in the so-called free world, it's useful to know which words came out of the prisons with the prisoners. This is difficult since crooks used their slang with folks outside their crowd and cops-and-robbers television shows use феня for "authenticity." So you might be using criminal slang — or a later version of it — without knowing it.

I learned this lesson the hard way when I used the word мудак within the hearing of an older, well-educated and well-spoken woman. It's a rough word that means an idiot, a louse, a creep. But she knew it as a word from the gulag that meant a simpleton or a naïve person who'd never been "inside" and gave me a good talking-to about my language acquisition.

But it is hard to know word origins. Take the word понт, once used among criminals to mean showing off to rise up in the ranks. Now it's almost the standard word for bravado, acting like a bigshot. Брать/взять на понт is to convince people that you're great by sheer aplomb: Главное взять на понт (It's all about attitude). Выглядит как дешёвые понты (Looks like cheap showing-off).

Косить in the camps meant pretending to be sick to avoid work. This handy word came out with the released prisoners and now has two meanings. The first is close to the criminal original: to avoid some kind of work or job. Classically, this is the verb for staying out of the army: Получается, что косить от армии станет дешевле (It looks like draft dodging will get cheaper). But it can also mean to pretend to be someone or something, which might be how you dodge the draft: Правда, ему пришлось пять лет косить под сумасшедшего (To be fair, though, he had to pretend to be crazy for five years.)

Here's another example: тусовка was a criminal gang. Today in "regular language" it's any group of people, which, when you're young, is a very big deal: Не моя тусовка, если честно. (It's not my crowd, to be honest). No wonder: Просто скучная тусовка с кучкой болтливых интеллектуалов (It's just a boring crowd with a bunch of intellectuals running on at the mouth).

The moral of this very sad story? Speaking your mind in or out of prison is a dangerous activity when the crooks and cops speak the same language.

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