

The Unsinkable, Unbending, Long-Lasting Rules of Translation

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Craig Mclachlan / unsplash

Непотопляемый: unsinkable

On the list of Tricky Bits (highly technical term) in translation are words in two languages that have the same meaning (translator does fist pump to empty room) but different connotations (translator swears impressively in two languages). I remembered this the hard way, that is, by using one of these bad matches in a conversation. The explosion of laughter brought me to my senses.

In English, unsinkable is a mostly positive adjective — think of “unsinkable Molly Brown” or books like “Unsinkable: The Secret of Bouncing Back.” But when I called someone непотопляемый, meaning that nothing could keep them down, a friend snorted and said that you mostly find unsinkable objects in the toilet bowl.

In Russian, she continued, it's better to call someone *несгибаемый* (unbending/unbendable). That would be fine in Russian. But you need to be careful when translating it into English, where a person who is unbending or unbendable might be inflexible in a bad sense — rigid and unwilling to adapt to conditions or change.

But when you start poking around for examples of usage, you see that the word you'd choose in English depends on each individual case (translator glances at clock and decides 3 p.m. is an acceptable hour for a stiff drink).

With *несгибаемый* it seems that you can use the adjective to modify a thing or action with no bad associations in Russian. However, when you translate the word into English, unbending is not always the best option. For example, *Меня поразили их несгибаемый дух и уважение к нашим демократическим институтам* (I was struck by their indomitable spirit and respect for our democratic institutions). Or here: *Без упорства и настойчивости невозможно сформировать крепкий несгибаемый характер* (Without perseverance and tenacity you can't develop a strong, unwavering character). *Карма — это действие и реакция, закон гравитации, применяемый к мысли и делу, казалось бы несгибаемый закон причины и следствия* (Karma is action and reaction, the law of gravity as applied to thoughts and deeds, the apparently immutable law of cause and effect).

In Russian *непотопляемый* (unsinkable) is often “непотопляемый” (that is, in quotes) when describing the Titanic or any other ship/endeavor/action that was supposed to be a success and failure-proof but wasn't. “Непотопляемый” пароход Титаник затонул, унеся с собой множество жизней. (The supposedly “unsinkable” Titanic sank, taking many lives with it as it went down).

Sometimes it's a bit tongue-in-cheek. Here note that *одноклассники* (classmates) are referred to as *однокашники*, a joke version of the word that means “porridge-mates,” i.e., people who grew up eating porridge — каша — together): *Почему-то однокашникам он казался непотопляемым — слабым, но везучим* (For some reason his old school mates thought of him as unsinkable — not very strong, but lucky). And here it's almost a backhanded compliment: *В мутных водах российского истеблишмента он казался фигурой непотопляемой — не только как представитель старой политической гвардии, но и как видный деятель отечественного шоу-бизнеса* (In the murky waters of the Russian establishment, he was unsinkable, not only as a representative of the old political elite, but as a big name in Russian show business, too).

There are, however, other good unbending options in Russian. *Непреклонный* (literally unbowing) is a good word to describe anyone who is steadfast and determined. *Непреклонная воля* (steely will) is a Good Thing, but *непреклонный* with regards to характер (character) is often rigid and a Bad Thing. Here is an example of that, when someone is trying to buy train tickets at a discount: *С билетами ничего не получилось. Девушка в окошке была непреклонна. Очень строго, очень официально она потребовала, чтобы Юрий внёс полную стоимость билетов* (It didn't work out with the tickets. The young woman in the window was totally intransigent. She demanded severely and very officiously that Yury pay full price for them). In other cases — and other professions — this kind of personality might be just the right thing: *Знаменитый и непреклонный парижский детектив берёт первый за последние 11 лет отпуск* (The renowned and

relentless Parisian detective is taking his first vacation in 11 years).

If you don't like that image, you can be more specific and call someone **бескомпромиссный** (uncompromising). This, like all the other adjectives, is good when describing a Good Guy (think human rights activist, right-headed politician): Этот путь позволяет нам создать бескомпромиссный фильм (Taking this approach lets us make our film without compromising).

But it might not be so attractive in your ex-spouse or in-law: Он человек жесткий, абсолютно бескомпромиссный, эмоциональный (He's hard man, emotional, with zero-tolerance for compromise).

But why not make life a bit easier? **Стойкий** is a good word — hardy, solid, something that can stand up to high winds. With things, **стойкий** often means something that is long-lasting or resilient. Однажды переболев ротавирусной инфекцией, человек получает стойкий иммунитет (After one rotavirus infection, a person has long-lasting immunity). Несмотря на стойкий интерес к русской истории, сам он историком себя не считал (Despite his enduring interest in Russian history, he didn't consider himself a historian).

With people, it can be someone who can stand up to dirty tricks and cheap shots. Here is the apotheosis of **стойкости**: У Штирлица в исполнении Тихонова стальные нервы, стойкая выдержка и отличный интеллект (Stierlitz as portrayed by Tikhonov has nerves of steel, unwavering self-possession and a sharp mind). Вы стойкий человек, который лишь закаляется от трудностей (You are a resilient person, only hardened by difficulties). Он стойкий противник такого рода санкций (He is a staunch opponent of sanctions of this sort).

With feelings, **стойкий** might mean strong or unshakable. Sometimes it's a bad feeling: Есть стойкое ощущение, что инициативы последних лет, связанные с “ускоренным” развитием Дальнего Востока, рождаются в каком-то изолированном от реального мира московском кабинете, где нет даже карты России (I can't shake the feeling that the recent initiatives to “accelerate” development in the Far East are dreamed up in some Moscow office that is cut off from the real world and where there aren't even any maps of Russia).

But sometimes it's good: Где-то внутри было стойкое ощущение, что вот теперь все именно так, как и должно быть (Somewhere deep inside I had a strong feeling that now everything was exactly as it should be).

Now that's a kind of long-lasting, strong, resilient, unmitigated feeling one wants.

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