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Always Say До Свидания, Never Прощайте

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Последнее слово: last word

I began to write The Word's Worth in April 2002, the third writer (I think) to take up what was envisioned as a language column for expats. Since then I've written more than a thousand columns, touching on just about every aspect of language use and language change, and most of the time having fun — often in an exasperated sort of way — in the process.

But I'm not living in Russia anymore, there are few English-speaking expats in Moscow needing help with local slang, and for obvious reasons much of the joy has gone out of it. I'm still immersed in my own Russia of good people, good jokes, good culture and good food. But I can't write the column I used to write. So this will be my last column for The Moscow Times. And since it's the last one, it seems like a good chance to look back.

It’s been a wild ride.

I started off, however, on a high note. In my first column in 2002 I wanted to define that mysterious Russian word авось, which means faith in success or good fortune, often unfounded.

I began in my favorite place: etymology. The word авось may have been originall а + во + сь, and meant something like вот-вот (referring to something about to happen). I’d translate this as “any minute now.” As in: “Any minute now, Prosya, the rain will come and save our crops” or “You just wait, Vanya, any minute now my company will pay me the wages they owe me and then we can buy some drink.” Over time, it’s come to represent a deeply held belief in a Deus ex machina salvation.

I think of авось as one of those seminal concepts in Russian life, something that goes into making Russians Russian. It’s what Ivan-the-fool counted on to get him out of a jam in Russian fairy tales, and what saved him time and again, despite his foolishness. It's авось that was responsible for probably half the babies in the country – their parents were sure they could make love without protection just this once.... “авось пронесёт” (with any luck misfortune will pass us by).

Well, not always.

Another frequent subject of my columns was what I first called Mr. P’s Language lessons — the folksy, sometimes arcane, often off-color language of Vladimir Putin. After every speech journalists would turn to linguists for explanations of the less common expressions, and there were even two collections of them called Путинки, something like the president’s greatest linguistics hits. For example, there was this comment directed to oligarchs: Все должны раз и навсегда для себя понять — надо исполнить закон всегда, а не только тогда, когда схватили за одно место. (You have to understand once and for all – you have to obey the law all the time, not just when they’ve got you by the short and curlies.) Or this usage of кое-кто, the dog whistle “you know who” — which is always the US when something bad happens: Знаю, что кое-кто очень бы хотел, чтобы Россия погрязла в этих проблемах. (I know that someone would very much like Russia to get bogged down in these problems).

Over the years a lot of the folksy expressions disappeared from Putin's speeches and cliches (штампы) took over — запас прочности (margin of safety); высокая консолидация российского общества (the high level of consolidation of Russian society); денацификация (deNazification); and фашизация (fascism-ization). Speeches became less original and more jargony. In recent years the Russian president often conducts conversations with himself: Плохо это для нас или нет? Да нет (Is this bad for us? Not at all). От чего зависит курс? Курс у нас плавающий, зависит от рыночных условий (What determines the exchange rate? We have a floating exchange rate that depends on market conditions).

But I have also tried to help folks navigate everyday Russian life, for example, providing an explainer for that Russian phenomenon of контрольный звонок (confirmation call). This was hard for an American like me to understand. If we set set up an appointment for Tuesday, 2 p.m. three months from today, I’d show up at exactly that time without a second call or a second thought. But at 1 p.m. a Russian will make an appointment for 5 p.m. that very same day and insist on the контрольный звонок. Because you never know if the weather will

change, the boss will call you into a meeting, the government will be overthrown, or the traffic will be impossible. Перезвоните на всякий случай! (Give me a call just in case!)

And of course I've tried to keep up with the changes in language, trying to figure out words like пальцевать (show off, play the big shot); кинуть (to stiff someone); замочить (to kill, for example in an outhouse); гламурный (any expensive, often tasteless must-have item); пиндос (derogatory slang for an American); and, of course, фейк (fake, i.e. anything that does not toe the government line).

In 2009 I was captivated with a television ad that introduced a new word, or rather an old word reborn. In the ad, the man of the house comes home in a filthy shirt. His wife is convinced that the filthy shirt will never be clean again, until a stranger magically appears with a box of soap powder in her bathroom. Instead of calling the cops on the intruder, she gives it a try. When she pulls the spotless, snow-white shirt out of the washer, she squeals: Ну, вообще! Обалдеть!

Обалдеть is easy to understand; it means "to go crazy," and in this context means something like: Amazing! But вообще – which the wife pronounces as "ваще" – is more problematic. You can toss your dictionary out the window. The standard meaning of "in general" or "on the whole" makes no sense in this context. At some point in the evolution of the Russian language, вообще became a kind of generic interjection of astonishment. The little woman's delight at her hubby's clean shirt might be translated as: Wow! I'll be darned!

And about ten years I made a belated discovery about how Russians and the Russian language express positions. Things sit, stand or lie according to such mysterious logic that no one could really explain it, although everyone, including children who could barely speak, got it right. I got it wrong. But who could guess that тарелки стоят на столе (plates stand on the table)? Or that гриб сидит (a mushroom sits)? And that деньги лежат в банке (money lies in the bank)? Sheesh.

But I did try from time to time to rise above it all and consider eternal values, like what spiritual binders were — the духовные скрепы (spiritual bonds) cited by President Putin in his speech before the Federation Council in December 2012: Мне больно сегодня об этом говорить, но сказать я об этом обязан. Сегодня российское общество испытывает явный дефицит духовных скреп (It's painful for me to speak of this, but speak I must. Today Russian society clearly has a deficit of spiritual bonds.) These bonds, he said, included милосердие, сострадание, сочувствие (charity, compassion, empathy).

At the time, the phrase drew puzzled glances. You might come across скрепы (bonds) in church literature: С первых шагов вера и Церковь стали одной из надежных скреп местной жизни (From its first steps, faith and the Church became one of the strong bonds holding together local life.)

But spiritual bonds were also mentioned frequently by a Russian thinker not usually associated with higher matters —Alexandra Kolontai. This early Soviet proponent of free sex wrote a great deal about душевно-духовные скрепы (soulful spiritual bonds) and their importance for balancing sexual instinct. At least I think that's what they were supposed to do; I got sidetracked by her крылатый Эрос (winged Eros) and Эрос бескрылый (wingless Eros).

Don’t ask.

And of course I endeavored to keep up with linguistic memes, like the one about the unfortunate city of Voronezh. Newspapers printed grim headlines: Ни дня без бомбежки Воронежа (Not a day goes by that Voronezh isn’t bombed). Только вчера властные пацаны заправили самолёты и полетели бомбить Воронеж (Just yesterday the government boys fueled up the planes and took off to bomb Voronezh.)

No, the city isn’t being actually bombed. “Бомбить Воронеж” is code for “hurt yourself to punish someone else.” Specifically: Нельзя в ответ на санкции бомбить Воронеж (We can’t bomb Voronezh in response to sanctions).

If the rather darkly humorous phrase бомбить Воронеж catches on, I wrote then, it will be another Russian version of “to cut off your nose to spite your face.”

Yes, reader, it did catch on. And Voronezh is still being bombed.

This seems like a good time to take a break from the bombing. I don’t think I can stay away from великий могучий (the great and powerful) Russian language for long, but I’m going to think about a new format that is more appropriate to the times and my place in them. If you want to stay in touch, you can learn about my future plans here.

До свидания!

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