

Lost and Found in Translation

There are both international and national culture-specific aspects to Russian phraseology. Russian idioms of non-Russian origin come from world heritage sources (Greek mythology, the Bible); "home-grown" Russian idioms have their roots in Russian customs, geography, and history. In this edition of Учитель, we explore both types.

1. Can you find equivalents of the following idioms in English?

делать из мухи слона, обвести вокруг пальца, жить как кошка с собакой, ни рыба ни мясо, держать язык за зубами, кожа да кости, с тяжелым сердцем, с легким сердцем, (чья-то) правая рука, кровь бросилась в голову (кому-то).

2. Can you find English equivalents to these mythological and biblical idioms?

Яблоко раздора. Дамоклов меч. Ахиллесова пята. Запретный плод, в поте лица, святая святых, хлеб насущный, блудный сын, земля обетованная, метать бисер перед свиньями.

3. Which phenomena of Russian history are reflected in the following phrases?

во всю Ивановскую; верста коломенская; Мамаево побоище; окно в Европу; шапка Мономаха.

4. What do the names of these folklore characters or expressions mean?

Лиса Патрикеевна; Кощей бессмертный; сказка про белого бычка; змея подколотная; в тридевятом царстве.

5. Find the culture-specific words in the following phrases:

мало каши ел, не солоно хлебавши, заваривать кашу, расхлёбывать кашу, тёртый калач, ездить в Тулу со своим самоваром, выносить сор из избы, задать баню, пристать как банный лист

6. Find the archaic words and forms in the following phrases:

семи пядей во лбу, ростом в косую сажень, на свой аршин мерить, от горшка два вершка, бить баклуши, точить лясы, не видно ни зги, ничтоже сумняшеся, притча во языцех.

ANSWERS

1. To make a mountain out of a molehill; to twist somebody around one's little finger; to fight like cats and dogs; neither fish, flesh, nor fowl; to hold one's tongue; skin and bones; with a heavy heart; light-heartedly; right-hand man; blood rushed to somebody's face.

2. The apple of discord. Sword of Damocles. Achilles' heel. Forbidden fruit; by the sweat of one's brow; Holy of Holies; daily bread; prodigal son; the Promised Land; to cast pearls before swine.

3. with all one's might, extremely loudly (so that royal decrees, customarily announced in the Kremlin's Ivan Square, could be heard by all); verst-posts leading to the village of Kolomenskoye, where the tsar's residence was, were taller and farther apart than normal: the phrase is used to describe a very tall person; the Battle of Mamai, a khan and military commander during the Mongol-Tatar invasion – used to connote devastating fighting; window onto Europe, about St. Petersburg, founded by Peter the Great; Monomakh's hat – a symbol of power.

4. as sly as a fox (usually about a woman); Koshchey the Deathless, an evil character in Russian fairy-tales, used about a tall, thin, evil and greedy old man; an endless story; snake in the grass; in a faraway kingdom.

5. каша, хлебать, калач, самовар, изба, баня, банный лист.

6. пядь, косая сажень, аршин, вершок – old measurements; баклуши, лясы – two words from carpentry, the first expression means to be idle, the second to wag one's tongue; зга, an old word meaning "road," thus it means something that is impossible to see, pitch dark; the last two expressions are taken from Old Church Slavonic, the first means "without a shadow of a doubt," the second "the talk of the town."