

the awful English language

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by [nomadsland](#)

Summary

Language was mistake.

Honeybees communicate by dancing. Works for them, lets them figure out where good flowers are. Ants do it with smells, little chemical trails on the ground to get back to food source. There's a monkey that screams different for leopards than eagles – different sound for different predator.

People, though. People have too many words, too many languages, and Ilya is very, very tired.

Notes

Idek man, I just have a lot of feelings about the relationship between emotion and language, and I gave them all to Ilya.

Thank you to ghostalservice for the quick beta! Any Russian mistakes are my own. I couldn't be arsed to figure out clickable superscripts but the translations are all at the bottom.

See the end of the work for [more notes](#)

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Hockey season is long, with many hotel rooms and Animal Planet documentaries. (Cannot party every night - would die.) Sometimes Shane is there in the same hotel bed where Ilya watches Animal Planet, and that is often good, but sometimes not. One night Ilya tries to take him from behind in the shower but cannot finish because he'd watched film about capybaras the night before and it is too similar. He should watch MTV or ESPN. But capybaras are very cute. And the pigeons with their magnet brains.

Language, though. Language.

Chirping is first time he notices. Rookie season, using English more than he ever did before. He takes summer before to practice, expand vocabulary. (Website called Urban Dictionary is helpful. So is porn.) Still, even with the effort research takes, chirping is easier in English. Things he might hesitate to say in Russian slide out of his mouth in English. *Fuck your mother* feels different in his chest to Ёб твою мать¹, because the road from *mother* to мать² to мама³ is long enough that by the time he arrives, it doesn't mean Ирина⁴. The English route from brain to mouth bypasses heart entirely, and it makes Ilya free. Both giving and taking these words feels lighter, more fun. Hit into boards and called педик⁵? Gloves off, teeth on ice, Alexei's voice (their father's voice) echoing in head for entire period. But hit into boards and called a faggot, a pussy, a cocksucker? Cross check at next opportunity and find a chirp that makes the dumb motherfucker drop gloves first. It's like superpower, at least at first: English doesn't hurt like Russian can.

#

Once he figures out about chirping, other things have sense. It's not so much that English is hard as Russian is easy. When Alexei calls, or their father, that is easy too. Both the speaking and the saying, like an actor with a script:

Yes, father. No, father. I'm sorry, I will try harder.

Fuck you, you greedy piece of shit, what more could you take from me?

In Russian, he knows how to say, but also what to say, because Ilya has been saying the same shit his whole life.

And now he doesn't have to.

English is so *new*. Has stupid idioms (he will never admit to how many times he repeated himself first two months with Raiders when coach said, “You can say that again!”), and prepositions he will never make right. Fuck prepositions. Fuck prepositions right in the ear.

English is new, and Ilya is new, too, with all the things he’s allowed to say in English.

It’s a lie. Liar told you that

and he breaks the internet.

When I need to feel fresh, I reach for my Axe

earns him one hundred thousand American dollars per word. Crazy. This is craziness!

I love you, I love you, I love you

to every man on team as they leave the ice, and he means it, as much as he means anything in English.

Starting budget for condo is 2 million, but I am flexible

and his realtor (ugh, this is bad word to read and say) smiles like a shark.

Fuck, Hollander, you look so pretty with your lips around my cock.

Hollander:

Hollander —

Shane.

And, yes. There is that, too.

#

Most people, their mamas raised them right, and they do not point out Ilya’s English problems. Raiders dressing room? Very polite. Ilya gives captain speeches now, and not often do the boys correct him. Even then, is mostly to make clear. *Clarify*. Strange word, used for ideas and butter. (He learns the second meaning, the butter one, at dinner at an Indian restaurant in Boston, when he asks *what is ghee* and waitress brings him a little on a spoon. *Clarified butter*, she says, and her Rs are not the same as his, but are better than most in his ear. Softer.)

Most people, their mamas raised them right, but then there is Shane Hollander, poster boy for His Mama Raised Him Right, except he is always, always pointing out Ilya’s English problems, and it is very, very annoying for many, many years, especially because he never stands out and says it. Always hides behind questions. *Was that a typo? Did you mean something else?*

It is very, very annoying until one night when Ilya is sad drunk in hotel room in – it is warm, so maybe Texas? Let us say Texas. Ilya is sad drunk in Texas and watching Shane Hollander give interviews on ESPN, because Ilya had already checked Animal Planet and the capybaras are busy tonight. And Hollander is sitting all hunched in front of interview microphones and looking like he looked the one time Ilya tried to fuck him without lube – honest mistake, got taken away – and Ilya realizes after many minutes that Shane is answering every question the same.

When you say “unfortunate incident,” do you mean Comeau’s injury, or are you referring to the egregious lack of a hooking penalty in the third period on Pittsburgh’s left defenseman?

Just to clarify, you’re asking about my dating life during a post-game interview? No, Jack, I’m not going to be commenting on that.

Sorry, Janet, I’m afraid I don’t follow. Ok, Boston’s four-game winning streak? Well, Janet, the Voyageurs and the Raiders have a long history of rivalry, and I’m looking forward to the challenge when we host them next week.

It should not feel as good as it does, the learning that Shane does this with everyone. Is not just about Ilya and his stupid English. There is something in Shane that makes him ask, every time, to make sure he is understanding.

Ilya is not understanding this man. Best in the world at hockey (sometimes), fluent in English and French (sometimes), but with confidence of teen. Adolescent. Teen-ager. No, that word is bad, too. Pudgy teen. No friends. Lots of pimples. Ilya wants to wrap him in blankets like baby in winter, tuck him someplace warm and out of the wind.

Ilya texts him, and watches on TV (with delay) as Shane’s eyes cut to his phone.

There was no hooking, Drapeau tripped over his own skates

But when you say host...

Looking forward to the challenge of you hosting my dick in your ass

Onscreen (with delay), Shane coughs and turns pink. Ilya knows from seven years of fucking that the blush goes all the way down to his abs.

It is not exactly what Ilya wants to say, but it is, for now, enough.

#

Shane belongs to English – it is their shared language, it is Shane’s mother tongue. They met in English and fucked in English and fell in – well. Everything they are is in English. And Ilya knows this in the way he knows English, in his top layer of skin, but not in the sinews. Not in his bones. It is where he keeps Shane, too. The words pressed between their bodies like flowers between pages of a book. But Ilya fears there must be *reason* that when he is deep inside Shane, he can only find the Russian.

Я не хочу уходить⁶.

He does not think about this for many years. Is, how do you say – quirk. A stupid word for a stupid habit. But it is there, just behind his back teeth, the molars, and sometimes he cannot stop it. And so it goes.

Until Shane murmurs,

How about you tell me everything that's on your mind, but in Russian?

From the first word, it is a mistake.

Because from the first word, Ilya knows – he *knows*, right down to the center of him – that now Shane is not just on his skin, but *здесь*⁷, in all the parts of Ilya that are *Илия*⁸.

Ilya tells him everything he is feeling in the language that he feels it in, and even if Shane doesn't understand, he is here with him. He is part of it. Ilya tells him,

*Я так сильно тебя люблю и не знаю, что с этим делать*⁹,

because it's true. It's true in the marrow of his bones and pump of his heart and each snick of his blades on the ice, and oozing out of the pores in his skin, and somewhere between one breath and the next, he has given his whole heart, raw and beating, to Shane, *who doesn't even know*.

#

The cottage.

It's funny, really, that Shane should have a *дача*¹⁰ – is maybe the most Russian thing about him. Maybe that is why Ilya agrees to come in the first place. Maybe it is why, when Shane says *Let's just be honest with each other* that Ilya agrees to that, too. There are so many words inside of him, always. Maybe it will not be the worst thing to let some of them out.

There are so many words inside of him, that it is inevitable (hah, a New Yorker word) when, after a day of many, many words, after many days of many, many words and so much fucking feeling that Ilya nearly feels sick with it – after these days, when Shane wakes him in the night with even more words, it's *я тебя люблю*¹¹ that comes spilling over his lips.

Twice.

Ilya had been to Amsterdam many years ago. A tournament, maybe a year before draft? He'd spent a free afternoon watching the canal boats in the locks. Only when the water had risen enough could the boat continue on its way. This is what it feels like in his brain during the seconds that he is breathing his words into Shane's neck. Only after he has told him thrice – once on phone in Moscow and twice into the warm, humid air where Shane smells most like himself – only after three times does the lock open and the English emerge. Is like magic, maybe.

“I love you.”

Holy shit, Shane says, and then, *I love you too*, and when he says it Ilya wonders if maybe it's not two language problem at all, but that words are not enough to carry all this weight.

#

Shane says it back the next morning: *ya tebya lyublyu*, his perfect fucking lips, his pink wet tongue fighting the every step of the way. His accent is terrible.

It's the most beautiful thing Ilya's ever heard.

End Notes

1. Fuck your mother
2. Closer to "old lady" or "mater" -- antiquated term for mother used mostly in profanity
3. Mama
4. Irina
5. Faggot
6. I don't want to leave
7. Here
8. Ilya
9. I love you so much, and I don't know what to do about it
10. Dacha
11. I love you

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