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Being Rejected and Defective Can Be Tough

By Michele A. Berdy

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Брак: defective product, reject

Welcome back from vacation! A few of you put on some weight, it seems. Nothing like 10 days of nonstop eating and drinking to ruin the waistline. But a few of you look well-rested. Oh right, you were at the dacha with no electricity for two weeks. I also see some bandaged hands. Fireworks are a bit tricky after a liter of vodka, huh?

Well, let's get down to work, shall we? We'll start the year with a one-question pop quiz — and no moaning! This is a fun one: What do marriage and defective products have in common?

Oddly enough, they share the same Russian word: брак. But before you race to a divorce lawyer claiming that your sacred bond is a factory reject, you ought to know that the words

are etymologically unrelated. Marriage брак is related to the verb взять (to take, as in "do you take this man ... "), while defective product брак was borrowed from German.

The German-import брак also produced браковать (to reject a defective product); бракованный (defective); and браковка (the process of rejecting a defective product). Браковка is also the general process of sorting and quality control done by the браковщик (quality control inspector), although what could the браковщик find while doing браковка other than брак?

We all have plenty of occasions to use these words. An Internet site has this lead sentence: Вы купили компьютер, а он оказался с браком (You bought a computer, and it turned out to have a defect). Another site responds to a query about a skin rash: Может быть вам достался крем для рук из бракованной партии? (Maybe your hand cream came from a defective batch?)

All these брак-related words can have colloquial meanings. For example, in the early Soviet period браковка and бракованный described someone whose poor health kept them from military service. Быть бракованным, то есть не призванным в армию по состоянию здоровья, считалось позором (Being "defective" — that is, not drafted because of poor health — was considered shameful.)

But браковать isn't just a matter of picking out bent widgets or weeding out weak conscripts. It can mean vetoing someone or something. In the Soviet era, this was often for political reasons: Она три раза переделывала статью для газеты, и её три раза браковали (She redid the article for the newspaper three times, and it was rejected three times). Today — what a surprise — it can also be for political reasons: Доказанных фальшивок в подписных листах Касьянова немного, в основном подписи браковали из-за технических ошибок (There were few proven fake signatures in Kasyanov's lists, and so most of the signatures were rejected because of technical errors). But rejection might be for reasons of taste or standards: Начальник забраковал наш бизнес-план (The boss nixed our business plan).

If your boss nixed your end-of-the-year business plan just before the board of directors considered your promotion, your raise might be rejected by ballot: забаллотировать (to vote down). Забаллотировали порядочного человека, испортили ему всё будущее (They voted down a decent man and ruined his entire career). Or rejection can come in a different form: прокатить на вороных (to blackball someone), in which вороной, today most commonly a black horse, referred to the color of the balls: Во время очередного переизбрания членов президиума академии его прокатили на вороных (When members of the academy presidium were up for re-election, he was blackballed).

If you are an actor or a public figure, rejection can come in the form of hissing or booing you off the stage or public arena. A sad composer wrote: В Вене и Париже мою увертюру ошикали (In Vienna and Paris, my overture was booed.)

Whether by booing, ballot, ball or boss — rejection is tough. But then брак of all kinds is tough.

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