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A Phenomenon Missing From the Dictionary

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Commuter: житель пригорода, ежедневно ездящий на работу в город ◙

Common wisdom has it that when a new object or concept appears in a language milieu, the speakers of that language get cracking and come up with a name for it.

Sometimes in Russia, people take the easy route — they just Russify the foreign name. So that electric box on your kitchen counter is called тостер (toaster).

Sometimes they come up with a homegrown name — or several. Garlic presses are called чеснокодавилка, чеснокодавка (both derived from the word for garlic — чеснок — and the verb давить — to press), пресс для чеснока (literally "press for garlic"), or even чесноковыжималка (literally "garlic juicer"). At some point in the future, the vast Russian nation will, in some mysterious unspoken way, come to an agreement, and one of those

names will stick.

But sometimes there is a time lag between the appearance of a phenomenon and a word for it.

Take commuting, commuters and commutes. Every morning and evening, the roads leading in and out of every major Russian city are packed bumper to bumper with commuters who live outside the city limits and commute every day to and from work. The phenomenon definitely exists. And yet speakers of Russian apparently don't feel the need to come up with a way to describe it in a word or two.

In Russian, a commuter is человек, который каждый день ездит из пригорода в город на работу (someone who travels to work from a suburb to the city every day). The question "How long is your commute?" might be Сколько времени вы тратите на дорогу на работу? (How much time do you spend getting to work?). Or the more informal: Сколько времени добираться из дома до работы? (How long does it take to get from home to work?)

That said, there are ways to describe various means of commuting in Russian. A commuter train is электричка. A commuter bus is рейсовый автобус. A commuter parking lot is перехватывающий паркинг (literally "intercept parking").

But what do you call the person using these services? Приезжий (new arrival) doesn't work — that's someone who moves to the city. Челнок means a shuttle trader, not an oil company exec with a suburban mansion. Right now you call this person: житель пригорода, работающий в городе (a suburbanite working in the city).

Another area in which the Russian language hasn't caught up with reality is personal relations. What do you call your significant other — that is, the person with whom you share a serious, committed, long-term relationship without marriage? Russians scratch their heads. Любовник/любовница (lover)? Sounds like a fling. Партнёр (partner)? That's a business associate. Компаньон/ка (companion)? Sounds like either a 19th-century spinster hired to keep the lady of the house company or the guy you work with. Сожитель/ница (co-inhabitant)? Sounds like you're in a police lineup. Бойфренд/гёрлфренд (boyfriend/girlfriend)? Okay if you're 14; ridiculous when you're 50. Друг/подруга (friend)? Needs to be said with mock solemnity and doesn't necessarily mean live-in relations.

The Russians I know who have long-term, live-in partners simply call themselves муж и жена (husband and wife), and only clarify if it's necessary: но мы не расписались (but we haven't registered). Or they just refer to each other as мой and моя (my) — and let someone else worry about the noun. ⊠⊠⊠

How will this all play out? Check back in 50 years.

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