

Hometown Favorites

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Москвич: Muscovite

The other day I was talking to an acquaintance who had moved to Moscow from Voronezh. I wanted to find out where he was born. My question started out fine: Вы коренной — (Are you a native —).

But then I realized I didn't know the proper word for a resident of Voronezh. So I used my tried and true method to conceal my ignorance. I paused and fiddled with my shoe, giving him the opportunity to fill in the word for me. It worked. Коренной воронежец? Да. (A native of Voronezh? Yes.) А ваша жена? (And your wife?) Тоже из Воронежа (She's also from Voronezh).

I gave up my pretense of linguistic competence. Она тогда ... воронежка? (She's a Voronezhka?) I tried. He laughed. Нет такого слова. Вообще нет слова для женщины-жительницы Воронежа (That's not a word. In fact, there isn't a word for a woman resident of Voronezh).

And then we had one of those great Russian little word exchanges. I asked, А как же так? (How could that be?) He replied, Вот так (There you have it).

Since fiddling with my shoe isn't always possible, I decided to find the rules for formation of nouns from city names in Russian. This type of noun has the rather obscure designation этнохроним or этникон (the equally obscure ethnicon).

My research came up with a mixed bag. There are rules, but they have lots of exceptions. Here convention and tradition rule. And to follow what rules there are, it helps to have at least a nodding acquaintance with history. For example, some of the oldest cities use the oldest suffix to denote residency, the letter "ч." So a resident of Москва (Moscow) is москвич (Muscovite), and a native of Псков (Pskov) is traditionally пскович (Pskovian).

Except, of course, that a resident of the super-ancient city of Киев (Kiev) is киевлянин (Kievan), while a native of Томск (Tomsk), founded about 700 years later, is томич, which is a ... Tomskian? Tomskan? Tomsker? Tomskite? Ethnicons are tricky.

Many cities that end in -ск or -тск (except for Томск, of course) use the suffixes -ан, -чан, or -ян, like Минск — минчанин, Хабаровск — хабаровчанин, Смоленск — смолянин, Иркутск — иркутянин and Курск — курянин. You will note that various letters of the city name disappear or stay, apparently as they wish.

Some cities that end in -ово, -ино or -ено use the suffix letter "ц," like Ivanovo: Иваново — ивановец. But others, like Kemerovo, don't: Кемерово — кемеровчанин.

Some cities use the jazzy -як ending to denote their citizens, like Perm: Пермь — пермяк; or Tula: Тула — туляк. A Siberian is traditionally сибиряк, although my 18-year-old neighbor calls him сибирянин.

But a native of Novosibirsk (Новосибирск) is not новосибирянин, as per rule No. 2, or новосибиряк, as per rule No. 4, but новосибирец.

Lucky is a native of Tver (Тверь), who can call himself тверяк, тверичанин, тверитянин, or even тверич, depending on mood and inclination.

Unlucky is a resident of Торжок, who calls himself новотор because the town was originally called Новый Торг. Similarly, a native of Arkhangelsk (Архангельск) is called архангелогородец, because the city was once Архангельский городок.

There are other strange and wonderful ethnicons. A native son of Ufa (Уфа) is уфимец; residents of Odessa (Одесса) are одесситы.

But why are there female residents all over the place — сибирячка, уфимка, ивановка, москвичка and even новоторка — but no words to describe them in Воронеж?

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