

United We Stand

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

November 08, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Соединённый: united, connected, combined

The U.S. election cycle is finally over, and I can put away my crib sheets on the Electoral College and retire my standard explanation for the chaotic, confusing and contradictory state policies for registering voters and accepting absentee ballots: Страна называется Соединённые Штаты Америки. Это как Европа, где каждый штат – суверенное государство (The country is called the United States of America. It's like Europe, where every state is a sovereign government.)

On about the 57th time I hauled out that phrase, I suddenly thought: Why is united translated as соединённые and not объединённые (also united), and what's the difference between the two words? Those questions turned out to be a lovely distraction from wondering why anyone in their right mind would vote for someone who said he'd reveal his budget after he gets elected.

After a bit of poking around, I learned that a fair number of Russian translators

and nonspecialists wondered the same thing – well, not about the nutty electorate, but: Why isn't США (USA) really ОША – Объединённые Штаты Америки?

The armchair linguists agreed that while the verbs from these adjectives, соединить and объединить, are basically synonyms, they are used in different situations and have slightly different meanings. But they don't agree on what they are.

As far as I can determine, the verb pair соединять/соединить is used to combine or connect things or people. It can have the sense of establishing a line of transportation or communication. If you call someone's office, the secretary might check to be sure the boss wants to talk to you and then say: Соединяю (I'll connect you now). Or it can mean mixing something together: Творог протереть и соединить с кипящим молоком (Sieve the pot cheese and combine it with scalded milk). Or it can be used for combining several discrete objects or notions together: Мы соединили два участка в один большой (We put together two plots of land to form one big parcel).

Объединять/объединить isn't generally used to describe communication or transportation lines or a mixture in a recipe, but it can be used to describe combining discrete things into one whole. Мы объединили наше имущество (We combined our property). It also has a loftier meaning of joining people or organizations together under one leader, ideology or goal. Sometimes people are joined together by their shared love of something: Объединила его с бабушкой их любовь к чаю (A love for tea brought him and the old lady together).

And then the verb or adjective can be used to describe a joint group that is either long-standing or temporary, like объединённое командование (joint command).

The distinction is subtle and may have more to do with conventions of language use rather than shades of meaning. But when I looked at countries or organizations that have "united" in their name, the word is translated as объединённый when the constituent parts existed before their unification, like Объединённые Арабские Эмираты (United Arab Emirates) or Организация Объединённых Наций (United Nations Organization).

Maybe since the states in North America didn't really exist as separate legal entities before unification, they are Соединённые? Interestingly, Russian translators can't make up their minds about the United Kingdom, which is either Соединённое or Объединённое Королевство.

Or maybe the explanation is much simpler: Some translator working on a deadline 200 years ago wrote Соединённые Штаты Америки and it stuck?

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/11/08/united-we-stand-19245-a19245>