

What Drives All Those Engines and Motors

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Моторка: motorboat; boat with outboard motor

Back from a short vacation and looking through the mailbag: Let's see. ... "Is there a word to describe the colder-than-usual fall weather in Moscow?" Yes, dear reader, there are actually many words to describe the weather. Unfortunately, The Moscow Times is a family newspaper, and I can't share them with you.

Moving right along ... There are a lot of letters about my column on President Vladimir Putin's letter in The New York Times. Most of them make the same point. Take this one from — can't make it out — looks like Peskov? Or is that Surkov? Anyway, it reads Русская версия письма была для внутреннего потребления — вы же понимаете (The Russian version of the letter was for domestic consumption — you understand, of course).

You know Mr. Peskov, or Surkov or whoever you are, for over a decade people have been telling me that the wildly anti-American propaganda spouted on the Russian news 24/7 is "just for domestic consumption" — just a bit of a show for the hoi polloi, who like their leaders to talk tough. Distasteful, of course, but we're all adults. It's all just part of the political game.

But that show for "domestic consumption" reaches 130 million people, and it's been extremely effective. I don't feel very understanding anymore.

Sorry. I had to get that off my chest.

Let's see what other questions are in the mailbag. Here's one: "What's the difference between двигатель (engine) and мотор (motor)?"

They are synonyms, of course, but there is a slight, um, well, difference in usage ... right? I turn to my Russian-speaking friend. "Ну, да. Синонимы. А разница в ... гм ... ну ... " (Well, sure. They are synonyms. And then there's a difference in ... hm ... well ...)

Actually, if either one of us knew anything about mechanics, this would be easy. It turns out that in this case, Russian and English are in perfect harmony. An engine — двигатель — is any machine that turns some form of energy into motion or force. A motor — мотор — is a specific kind of engine that uses internal combustion or electricity, although that distinction is not always respected in casual usage. But the thing that lifts your jet is двигатель (engine), and the thing that moves your car is either двигатель or мотор (motor).

Мотор can also be a slang word for a car. Сейчас мы с тобой возьмём мотор, покатаемся, и пойдём в ресторан (Now let's get a car, drive around and go to a restaurant).

Моторчик (motor) is any little motor or motorized thingamajig. Он нажал на клавишу вентилятора, и моторчик запел свою жалобную песню (He pressed the button to turn on the fan, and the motor sang its sad little song).

But моторка is a little motorboat, the kind of putt-putt you use for good-weather boating: Отец катает нас детей на моторке по Волге с двухлетнего возраста. (My father has been taking us kids out in the motorboat on the Volga since we were two years old).

Мотор can also be slang for a person's heart: Мотор шалит (My heart is acting up). And it's an important word on the movie set: Так ... начали ... мотор! Хлопнула хлопушка. (All right ... camera ... action! The film slate clapped shut.)

So мотор is versatile, but only двигатель can move things figuratively. Реклама — двигатель торговли (Advertising is the engine of trade).

Now if we could all just find a kinder engine of human progress.

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