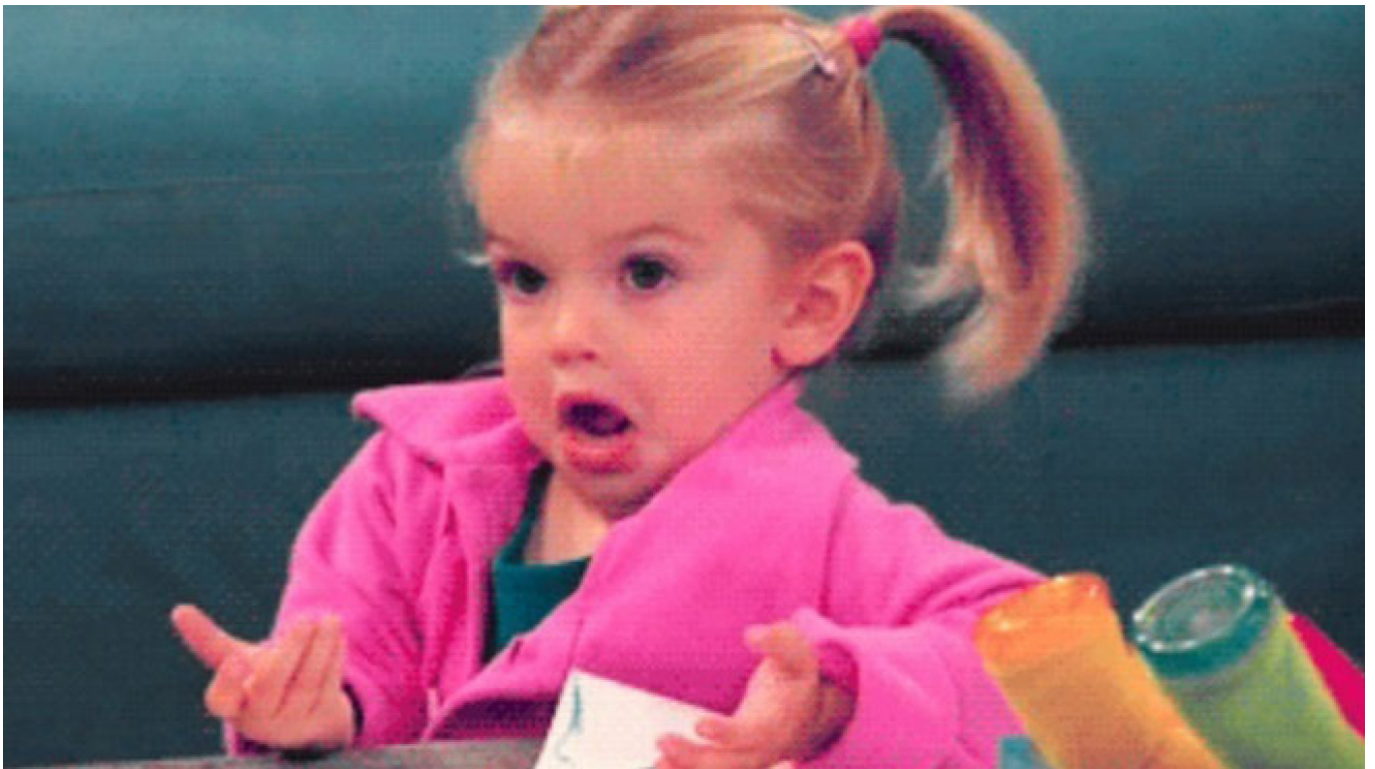


Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered by Russian, in Russian

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Замешательство: confusion

Language acquisition is a weird process. Sometimes I understand a phrase and even use it and then suddenly realize that I don't have any idea what the actual words in the phrase mean. A perfect example of this is *меня оторопь взяла*, which means "I was dumb-founded" or "I

was blown away." But what on earth does that curious word оторопь mean? And how does it take you (взять)?

Оторопь, it turns out, is from the verb оторопеть, which means to be struck dumb, to be stopped in your tracks and/or momentarily rendered speechless with surprise. Увидев её на пороге, я на секунду оторопел. (I saw her in the doorway and for a moment I was stunned.)

Оторопь can grab you in various ways — that is, with various verbs. It can be summoned (вызывать): Многие сцены реально вызывают оторопь — чувак просыпается в трущобах, не помня, как там оказался и что с ним случилось прошлой ночью (Many scenes really shock you — a guy wakes up in a slum with no idea of how he got there or what happened to him that night.) Or it can take you: Да и меня, признаться, тоже оторопь взяла (I have to admit that I was also taken aback.) Or it can fall upon you (напасть): Оторопь и стеснение напали на меня (Shock and embarrassment washed over me.) Or it can even creep up on you (найти): На него нашла оторопь (He was stopped in his tracks.)

Sometimes оторопь is more of a befuddlement than shock: Он реагировал с недоумением и даже с лёгкой оторопью (He reacted with confusion and even bemusement.) But most of the time оторопь seems to take people's breath away: Слова Грефа о России-дауншифтере вызвали оторопь на Гайдаровском форуме (At the Gaidar Forum, Gref's words about Russia as a downshifter knocked people for a loop.)

Another word for this state of shocked confusion is замешательство, a word that I always find, well, shocking and confusing. I shouldn't be confused: it comes from the verb замешать, which means to begin to mix something up, to stir something up, or to entangle something. This form of confusion can be brought on or summoned, like оторопь: Вначале это вызвало некоторое замешательство в обществе (At first it elicited bewilderment in society.) Or you can be (находиться) in a state of befuddlement: Учёные находятся в некотором замешательстве относительно пола мумифицированной личности (The scientists were rather confused about the gender of the mummy.)

I'm befuddled by замешательство (confusion) and вмешательство (interference). I have to listen carefully to figure out if someone is a mixed-up boob or an interfering busybody.

Much easier to use the word растерянность, which describes being at a loss: Бизнес в растерянности. Олигархи просят президента вновь сесть за стол переговоров (Business leaders have thrown up their hands. Oligarchs ask the president to sit back down at the negotiating table.)

Or the word недоумение, which so obviously means being unable to make complete sense of something: Некоторое недоумение вызывает двусмысленное отношение власти к предвыборной пропаганде в Интернете (The ambiguous attitude of the authorities to online campaign propaganda is somewhat puzzling.)

But you know what else is puzzling? How оторопеть and оторопь (to be stopped in your tracks) come from the same root as торопиться (to hurry).

Полная растерянность! (I'm at a complete loss.)

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