

Wrapping It Up: Russian Style

One of the tricky places in Russian is the cognate zone: that place where English and Russian words dream up ways to confuse you.

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Пакет: package

One of the tricky places in Russian is the cognate zone: that place where English and Russian words that sound alike and have the same root hang out and dream up ways to confuse you. These so-called cognates are sometimes also false friends and fair-weather friends.

I've been thinking about this because of a пакет (package) that has been in the news every day for several weeks in Russia. This is пакет Яровой (Yarovaya's package): пакет антитеррористических законов (a package of anti-terrorist laws).

In English we can say that — a package of laws — although English speakers are more likely to talk about aid packages, packages of anti-terrorist measures, or package deals and package tours. In this context пакет-package are fair-weather friends: sometimes they match up and sometimes they don't.

Russians don't talk about package tours — those are путёвки — but they can gather lots of things into their пакеты, like documents: К заявке прилагался необходимый пакет документов (The required package of documents was submitted with the application.) Or votes: В парламенте у партии был блокирующий пакет голосов (The party had enough votes to block legislation.) Or guarantees: Они создали неотразимый пакет гарантий для иностранных инвесторов (They came up with an irresistible package of guarantees for foreign investors.) Or perks: Предоставление им доли собственности как части пакета компенсации нередко является достаточной "приманкой" (Giving them an equity share as part of their compensation packages is often enough of an inducement.) And, of course, stocks: В итоге ни у кого нет контрольного пакета акций (In the end, no one has the controlling block of shares.)

Пакет-package are false friends in the grocery store. Пакеты are what you take your groceries home in — bags or sacks. They can be the ecologically sound бумажные пакеты (paper bags) or the environmentally damaging полиэтиленовый пакет, a phrase Russians use all the time. English speakers are not likely to say "polyethylene bag." In fact, you'd be lucky to find an English speaker who knows what a polyethylene bag is. It's just a plain old plastic bag.

And finally the Russian пакет can be пакет молока (a container of milk), пакет с яблоками (a sack of apples) or even something very nasty, like пакет с героином (a bag of heroin).

There is one other tricky packaging issue for non-native speakers of Russian: when to use пакет (package, bag) and when to use пачка (pack). I'm struggling to determine the rule. Пакет is a sack you fill or a container that is not a bottle but holds liquids: пакет молока, морса, сока (container of milk, fruit drink, juice).

Пачка is smaller and usually contains one kind of thing, like пачка сигарет (a pack of cigarettes). Or it describes a bunch of something held together: В ящике мы нашли пачку старых писем (In a drawer we found a bundle of old letters). Or: Он хватает толстенную пачку рублей (He grabs a thick wad of bills.)

But in the grocery store, пачки aren't small at all. They never hold liquids like пакеты. They are used with almost any pre-package food, from пачка риса (bag of rice) to пачка чипсов (bag of chips).

And then there's one more пакет, so tiny that it's the diminutive пакетик. It's what you use to make a refreshing drink: пакетик чая (teabag).

Definitely time for a cuppa.

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