The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Linguists Get Ready to Play the Blame Game

By Michele A. Berdy

September 01, 2016



Засекать: to▣catch someone

Every December Russian linguists vote on their favorite word of▣the year — one that sums up the previous 12 months. This year I'm▣anticipating a slew of words all connected with accusation, blame and▣getting caught. It's not the Summer of Love, it's the Summer of▣J'accuse!

In the ladder of blame, you start with the verb pair▣обвинять/обвинить (to accuse). This pair can be used▣for everyday fights in the communal kitchen and official charges.▣Accusations have filled the sports pages every day this summer:▣Лучшую российскую биатлонистку обвиняют▣в применении допинга (Russia's best female▣biathlon athlete has been accused of doping.)

Then you blame someone — винить. This is what you do when▣your kid comes home from

school with a bad mark on his exam: Родители▣в этой ситуации, как правило, винят▣педагогов (In this situation, parents usually blame the▣teachers.) But you might blame someone closer to home: Виновата▣я, одна я, сына не вините! (I'm to blame — just▣me! Don't blame my son!)

More colloquially, you can pile blame on someone: сваливать.▣While the other blaming and accusing verbs are neutral as to the▣truth of the claims, сваливать is used when the blame is▣unfair: Саша высказался в том, что не надо▣сваливать на Алёшу, Алёша здесь ни при▣чём (Sasha said that we shouldn't dump all the blame on Alyosha▣because Alyosha had nothing to do with it.) This is not a nice thing▣to do: Сваливать свою вину на других — это▣не трудно, но очень противно (Blaming others▣for what you did isn't hard to do, but it's disgusting.)

Next up is упрекать/упрекнуть (to rebuke,▣reproach). With these words, we're upping the accusatory ante.▣Упрекать generally means to scold someone, but it implies▣that you've already accused them, blamed them, and now have moved▣on to the first part of the punishment: a tongue-lashing. Я упрекал▣вас в конъюнктурности (I accused you of▣opportunism.) Sometimes it's hard to see the sin: Его упрекали▣за то, что он носит фрак, ходит на балы,▣знает иностранные языки, за то, что он▣обаятелен и красив (He was chided for wearing a▣tailcoat, attending balls, knowing foreign languages and being▣charming and handsome.) Какой позор (What a disgrace!)

This can also be expressed with the description of a gesture —▣тыкать пальцем (to point the finger). В нас, врагов,▣вечно будут тыкать пальцем (They are always▣going to point the finger at us, their enemies.)

The jig is up with поймать (to catch). Я поймала▣его на лжи (I caught him in a lie.) A slangy way of saying▣this is засекать (to catch someone out), often used to mean▣seeing someone doing something they shouldn't be doing. Я пару▣раз сына засекала на посещении порносайтов▣(A couple of times I caught my son on porn websites.)

But with уличить, you're really in trouble. This means▣being caught in the act. The porn-watching kid's friend might ask:▣Уличил тебя в чём-то? (Did you get caught doing▣something wrong?) But sometimes it's more serious: Уличённые▣в допинге российские легкоатлеты сдали▣олимпийские медали (The Russian track-and-field▣athletes who were caught doping turned in their Olympic medals.)

What do you do if accused? Take a lesson from the kid: Я▣отмазался (I talked my way out of it.)

Michele A. Berdy is a▣
Moscow-based translator and▣interpreter, 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/2016/09/01/caught-in-the-act-a55176