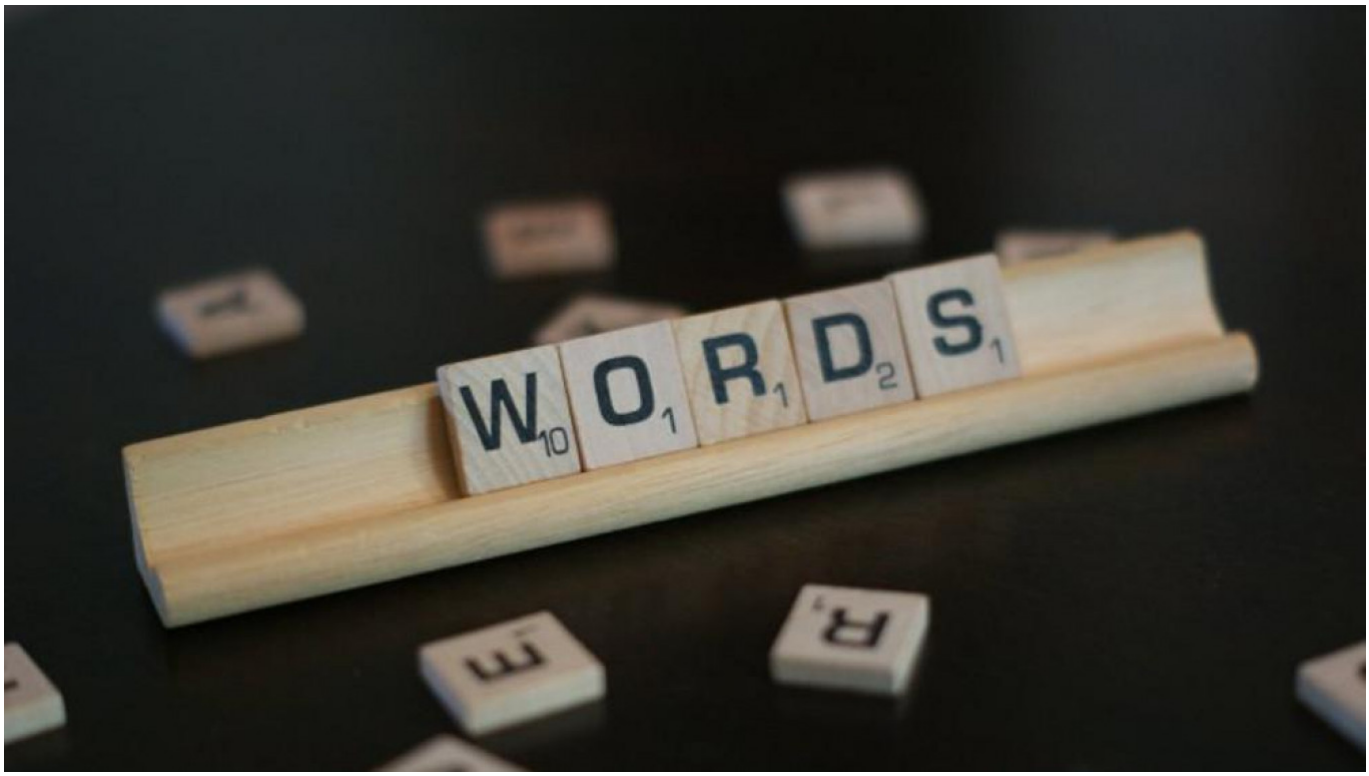
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The Secret Life of Russian Words

By Michele A. Berdy

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Лояльность:▣*loyalty (sometimes)*

Let's▣pretend for a moment that you're a word — say, an English word. One day when▣you're minding your business, a foreigner — say, a Russian — comes along and▣picks you up. Most of the time it's because you express concept or thing that▣doesn't exist in Russian, so you come in handy.

Usually you▣start your life in Russian with the same meaning you had in English. But then you▣begin to have fun. As you travel around Russia on everyone's lips, over time▣you begin to live your own Russian life, separate from your life at home. And▣then one day you have a new meaning or set of meanings.

An English▣word in Russian is like a long-time expat who, after a few years in Moscow,▣makes everyone wear slippers in his apartment and doesn't consider a meal▣complete unless there's soup.

I've been thinking about this strange life of words because of the noun лояльность (loyalty), adjective лояльный (loyal) and adverb лояльно (loyally). That's what they meant when they arrived in Russia, via English or French, several centuries ago.

And today, sometimes these words in Russian still carry the meaning of faithfully serving someone, a country, or an ideal. You find this meaning in political discussions: При Ельцине власть была заинтересована в поддержке и лояльности олигархов (Under Yeltsin the authorities were keen on having the support and loyalty of the oligarchs.) You can also talk about лояльная оппозиция (loyal opposition).

You also find it in discussions about products, stores and brands, like лояльность к бренду (brand loyalty). So marketing specialists might say: Создание и расширение лояльной аудитории издания — главная задача издателя (The publisher's main job is to form and expand the audience loyal to the publication.)

But then there are new meanings of лояльность. First of all, it can mean following the rules or laws: Я человек лояльный. Когда вижу красный сигнал "стойте", стою (I'm law-abiding. When I see the red light stop signal, I stop.)

Лояльный also means "tolerant." I can't quite figure out why — perhaps the idea of being loyal to someone despite his flaws led to the notion of being tolerant of his flaws? In any case, бар с лояльным отношением к лицам нетрадиционной сексуальной ориентации, literally "a bar with a loyal attitude towards people of non-traditional sexual orientation," is, in common parlance, "a gay-friendly bar."

Logically, менее лояльно means "less tolerant," like in this sentence: Городская администрация должна быть менее лояльна к тем, кто выбрасывает мусор не туда, где положено (The municipal government should not put up with people who toss their garbage in undesignated areas.)

Лояльно then stretches from tolerance to kindness. Sometimes is seems to mean "doesn't beat up, doesn't criticize" or even "is nice to." For example, the office crank goes on a tirade, but no one yells at him: Сотрудники вели себя лояльно (His coworkers left him alone.) В тот вечер знакомства Софьи со Светланой перед последней никаких особенных целей не стояло, кроме как наладить лояльные добрососедские отношения (On the evening when Sophia and Svetlana met, Svetlana didn't have any particular objectives other than establishing cordial, good-neighborly relations.)

In this example about feeding babies, лояльный seems to refer to someone who is an adherent of (loyal to?) a particular point of view: При нормальной ситуации Спок вполне лоялен к кормлению по требованию (In normal situations Dr. Spock is perfectly fine with feeding on demand.)

Is that strange enough for you? How about this: лояльные цены (literally "loyal prices"). They are "affordable" prices: Самые лояльные цены на автозапчасти лишь в одном магазине, в котором я покупаю уже более двух лет (The most affordable prices on spare car parts are only in one store where I've been shopping for over two years.)

Or take this, about a Jewish man during the Soviet period, where лояльный has the sense of

being similar to those around him, fitting in, passing for a Russian: Лёня был записан русским, по отцу, и его внешность была самая что ни на есть лояльная (Lyonya was registered as Russian, which is what his father was, and he looked as Russian as could be."

Sometimes you wish a word stayed home.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

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