

# Who's Sorry Now?

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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*Извиняюсь: Sorry (sort of)*

In the Orthodox Church, the last Sunday before Lent is Прощённое воскресенье (Forgiveness Sunday). In church, around the table of a Maslenitsa feast, in homes and on the telephone, people ask forgiveness for anything hurtful they might have done over the past year: Прости меня, пожалуйста (Please forgive me).

The response is the humble: Я тебя прощаю, да простит тебя Бог (I forgive you and God forgives you.) The idea is to begin Lent in peace and harmony with the people around you, which, even if you don't share the religious beliefs, is not a bad thing.

My lofty thoughts about forgiveness led me to wonder about the verb pair прощать/простить (to forgive) and how it differs from the verb pair извинять/извинить (to forgive) — and that question led me right down a linguistic rabbit hole.

Russian has some sets of words, like истина and правда, that are synonyms — they are both “truth” — and not synonyms — they mean different kinds of truth. These are the very trickiest distinctions to catch and codify. In some contexts the words are interchangeable; in others they are not. Usage varies by generation and individual.

The прощать/простить and извинять/извинить verb pairs are this sort of synonym/not synonym. They are synonyms when used as a parenthetical “forgive me”: Сначала, простите за выражение, офонарели (At first — pardon the phrase — they went postal.) Он просто дурак, извините за выражение. (He's just an idiot, pardon the expression.)

But then you begin to notice distinctions. For minor infractions like шалость, ошибка, опоздание (a prank, mistake, being late) you can use either простить or извинить. Извини за опоздание (Sorry I'm late). Прости, ошиблась (Sorry, I made a mistake.) But for the big errors and sins, you can only use простить. Простите меня, пожалуйста, за мои грехи, за предательство, за оскорбление (Forgive me, please, for my sins, for my betrayal, for being hurtful.)

One linguist writes that простить is when you forgive душевно — всей душой, всем

сердцем (wholeheartedly, with all your heart and soul). It's the word you use in church and when your marriage is on the verge of collapse.

But извинить is for the smaller gaffes and errors: Извините, не могу найти качественные аргументы (Sorry, I just can't find the right arguments.) Извини, что я тебя перебила (Sorry I interrupted you.) Sometimes it's a slightly snarky "excuse me": — Ну извини, ✘ развёл руками Павел ("Well, excuse me!" Pavel said, throwing up his hands.)

You can say Давно тебя простил (I forgave you long ago) but Давно тебя извинил sounds odd to the Russian ear, like saying "I cleared you a while back."

But language is constantly changing. Today извините has also turned into something like an interjection that has only a whisper of "sorry" or "forgive me." When you make a phone call, for example, you might say, "Извините, можно Пашу к телефону?" (Excuse me, may I speak to Pasha?) Another linguist has noted that "извините" has become a general form of address, what you say to get the attention of a stranger on the street: Извините, не подскажите, где улица Тверская? (Pardon, can you tell me where Tverskaya Ulitsa is?) Извините, вы уронили билет (Excuse me, you dropped your ticket.)

And then there is the verb извиняться, or more specifically the first person "Извиняюсь" which has divided the Russian-speaking world into two irreconcilable camps.

One camp defines the word as a reflexive form of извинять — to forgive oneself. So, if you accept this, when people are scolded and they reply, "Извиняюсь" they aren't asking for forgiveness or saying they're sorry, they are just saying, "I was wrong and now I forgive myself."

This camp says this form appeared in 1914 during World War I and then became associated with crude, uneducated Bolsheviks: Прежде вам наступали на ногу и говорили: "Простите", а теперь вам говорят "Извиняюсь" — и наступают вам на ногу (Before people would step on your foot and say "Excuse me." Now they say "I excuse myself" and then go and step on your foot.) For these folks, using the word makes you sound like a thuggish, illiterate oaf.

Folks on the other side of the argument say that it has been around for centuries and is now just a way of saying простите/извините. They consider it colloquial, but widespread and acceptable.

Both camps, however, agree that the word can be used appropriately to excuse some bad behavior, like here: Он извинялся своей болезнью (He cited his illness to excuse himself).

So be careful with извиняюсь — and on Sunday, say "Прости меня!"

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