The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Let's Play in Russian

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

July 27, 2018

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Обыграть: outsmart, outplay, play someone

The World Cup games are over, the players and fans are gone, and cops no longer let happy souls drink beer on the streets... but I'm still linguistically stuck at the games. Actually, it's one word — the main one — and its satellites that have captured my imagination. I'm stuck on играть (to play).

The basic word is, well, pretty basic — and behaves much like its English counterpart. Играть is what you do in any kind of game or competition, from football to poker; it's what you do on stage or screen; it's what you do on a musical instrument or even on someone's emotions: В своих публичных выступлениях он играл на самых примитивных инстинктах толпы. (In his public speeches, he played on the most base instincts of the mob.) In Russian something plays when it catches the light or someone's attention: Как этот шарф играет на фоне тёмного платья! (Your scarf really pops against the background of your dark dress.)

And then when you're done playing, Russian nicely indicates if you've won or lost whatever game or competition you were in. It's all done with prefixes: проиграть (to lose) and выиграть (to win). If you play for just a little while, you add another prefix: поиграть. This is often a good thing: По возвращении домой не стоит сразу заставлять ребёнка садиться за домашнее задание, пусть он поиграет (When your child gets home from school, you shouldn't force him to sit down to do his homework right away — let him play for a bit.) Or you might play up to a certain time — that's доиграть. This can be literal: Мы почти доиграли сцену до конца, когда вдруг вырубили электричество (We had almost played our scene to the end, when they cut off the electricity.) But often it's metaphorical: Он был убит в первые дни войны и не доиграл свою песню до конца (He was killed in the first days of the war and didn't sing his song til the end.)

Переиграть has several meanings. It can mean to do or play something again: Будь у нас возможность переиграть рекламную кампанию, мы бы повели её осторожнее (If we had a chance to do the ad campaign over, we'd be much more cautious.) Sometimes it can mean to change behavior, often midstream: Надо переиграть наш подход (We've got to rethink our approach.) Or to overact on stage or screen: Она так переиграла, что трудно было досмотреть кино до конца (She overacted so much that it was hard to watch the film

to the end.) It can also mean “out play,” as in this assertion: Россия вновь впереди. Путин всех переиграл. (Russia is ahead once again. Putin outplayed everyone.)

I like отыграть for the sheer multitude of meanings. For performers, it means finishing up. This might mean getting in and getting out: Артисты приехали, отыграли утренники и уехали (The performers arrived, did their morning show and took off.) Or it might be a bit more poetic — someone finishing a career: Здесь мы видим тени великих людей, которые, отыграв свои важные роли в истории, запросто прогуливаются по Москве (Here we can see the shadows of great people who played their important roles in history and are now just strolling around Moscow.) In card games and the like, it means to win back whatever you lost: Он отыграл свои деньги, часы, золото ◙ и вновь проиграл всё (He won back his money, watch and gold — only to lose them all again.)

And then there is my favorite: обыграть. It means to get the better of someone in some way. Sometimes this is just a simple case of one football team beating another: Франция стала чемпионом мира, обыграв Хорватию (France beat Croatia to become the world champions.) Or it can have the sense of playing someone: Вы меня два раза обыграли, как мальчишку (You played me twice like I was a little kid.) Or outsmarting someone: Путин снова обыграл Трампа (Putin outsmarted Trump once again.)

Oh well. On the field and in the world, игра продолжается (the game goes on).

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/07/27/lets-play-in-russian-a62369