The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

What's in a Russian Word? Just About Everything

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

August 10, 2018

MS-DOS installation diskettes/ Daan Berg/ Flickr

Многозначность: polysemy (multiple meanings)

You know how you can tell ahead of time that you're going to have trouble with a Russian word? It's when its synonyms include агрегат (rig); цель (goal); уклон (leaning); монтирование (mounting); and характер (character) — just to name a few.

Really, Russian?

The word I'm thinking of is установка, related to the verb установить. The noun and verb have the literal sense of installing or setting something up and the figurative sense of establishing a fact, instituting some measures, or organizing something. Sounds simple, but there are нюансы (nuances).

Of course, in many cases you can tell what variety of установка is meant by the context, especially when the word has a literal or physical sense. For example, this is the word you use when you want a company or worker to put in your phone, refrigerator, or shelves. Not everyone can afford to pay someone to do this, as one person writes: Деревья посадить, мусорный бак поставить, помочь кому-то с установкой телефона ◙ в общем, решить какие-то малые, но реальные проблемы граждан (Plant a tree, put in a garbage can, help someone hook up their phone — basically solve some small but real problems citizens have.)

It's also one of the words used for installing computer programs and apps. You can find a gazillion versions of this on the internet: Установка Windows с диска: пошаговая инструкция (Installation of Windows from a disc: step-by-step instructions.)

And then, a bit weirdly, установка can be the thing being hooked up — a device, machine, or mechanism of some kind. One Russian city brags: В прошлом году нам удалось закупить 20 стоматологических установок для больших и малых городов региона (Last year we were able to buy 20 pieces of dental equipment for our region's large cities and small towns.)

After that, we leave the physical world and head into the fog of figurative meanings. Sometimes what is put in place is not a phone but something intangible. Установка фактов

means the establishment of facts. You can read about установка факта супружеской неверности (establishing spousal infidelity) in law texts — and private detective ads.

Or you might put in place rules. Here, just to make you crazy again, установки are the rules, not the process of instituting them. Наше руководство дало новые установки для составления плана и мониторинга результатов (Our management gave new guidelines for writing plans and monitoring results.)

Установки-guidelines might be psychological — something like a particular orientation. For example, a theater director says: Установка на классику не означает, что нельзя ставить современные произведения, но они должны так или иначе продолжать отечественные культурные традиции (Being oriented toward classics doesn't mean that you can't put on contemporary works, but they must in some way continue the national cultural traditions.)

Or установка might be more clearly a goal: В конце концов его установка на успех не оказалась пустым чудачеством (In the end, his goal of success was not empty eccentricity.)

Sometimes установка is something like an attitude, like ментальная установка (mental outlook) or культурные установки (cultural attitudes). Attitude is key for teachers: С правильным образованием, правильными ориентирами и мировоззренческими установками студенты способны творить чудеса (With the right education, the right goals and appropriate worldviews and attitudes, students can create miracles.)

Of course, we don't know exactly what these correct goals and attitudes are, but we like the sound of miracle-working students.

And here's another meaning: character, mentality, how people are wired psychologically: Для каждой группы ☒ своя информационная кампания, которая рассчитана на определённые установки аудитории (A communications campaign was done for each group based on the specific mentality of the audience.)

Установка or установки can mean principles, which are something like a different form of guidelines. Будут ли востребованы в своей стране эти молодые специалисты, повально получившие высшее образование, не придётся ли им потом переоценивать свои жизненные установки? (Will those young specialists who got higher educations en masse be in demand in their own country or will they have to reconsider their life principles at a later date?) The principles can be moral, ideological or economic: В лекциях профессора имеются отпечатки партийных требований и идеологических установок прошлых лет (The professor's lectures are marked by Party mandates and the ideological principles of the past.)

How many meanings did we hit? Установили рекорд? (Did we break the record?)

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Original url:
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