

What's the Story, Morning Glory?

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

October 12, 2018



Pixabay

История: history, story, thing, incident

Sometimes in Russian it's the easy words that kill you.

Take, for example, история. It is immediately recognizable as borrowed from abroad (originally from Greek), so you see it and think: Easy! I know this one. It's "history."

And so it is. It can be history as the past, preserved in memory and records: Этот день вошёл в историю как дата судебной реформы (This day went down in history as the date of judicial reform.) Or the record of a particular part of the past, either big — история Древней Греции (the history of Ancient Greece) — or small — история московского зоопарка (the history of the Moscow Zoo).

That's easy, but the modifiers of history can make you scratch your head a bit. Древняя история is ancient history — got it. Современная история is modern history. So what's новейшая история? Really modern history? Yesterday? This might be recent history or even, if it deals with events within the past year or so, "current events."

What's всемирная история (literally, "all-the-world history")? How about "world history" or perhaps "all of human history"? What would you call известная история? How about "recorded history"?

But as you are beginning to see, история is much broader a term in Russian than history is in English, which opens the door to all kinds of false friends, semi-false friends, and misinterpretations. For example, история болезни (literally, "history of an illness") is a case record or chart. You need to sit on your hands and not type "medical history," since that covers all past illnesses, not just the one being treated (and is called, in case you were wondering, анамнез).

Another kind of история is a story — a narrative about something that happened. Я рассказываю историю, как через музыку и кино я попал в шахматы (I tell the story of how I got into chess through music and film.) This might also be любовная история, which on stage, screen, and in books is a love story. In real life, it can also be a love affair, romance,

or, for the unromantic — a thing or fling. У них была краткая любовная история (They had a brief thing.) Or it could be a hoot: Мы долго сидели за столом, слушали как наш сосед рассказывал всякие смешные истории (We sat around the table for a long time, listening to our neighbor tell all kinds of funny stories.)

But there's also a dark kind of story: a mess, an ugly situation or incident. Most of the time in Russian you fall into them with the verbs попасть (to fall) or the slangier влипнуть (to slip, mess up). You can simply say: Он попал в историю (he got into a mess), although most of the time people like to add some color: Он влип в скандальную/некрасивую/неприятную историю (He got himself into an outrageous/nasty/bad situation.) Better to forget it: "Всей правды никогда никто не узнает, ☒ говорят в нефтяной компании. ☒ Давайте забудем об этой истории" ("No one will ever know the truth," they say in the oil company. "Let's forget the incident.")

As I was pondering all of these kinds of histories and stories, a translation colleague pointed out that история has a new meaning, or rather a new set of meanings. It has become something of an "in" word, one of those all-purpose words that people use to cover everything, from an event to an object.

And like all "in" words, it's a headache for translators. It could be "a thing," like in this charming example: Любовь за деньги — это не моя история. (Being paid to love isn't my thing.)

In many cases people use the phrase история про (literally "a story about"). I'd probably drop the "story" altogether, like in this traditional, shall we say, view of men and women: Мужчина — это история про экспансию, про движение вовне, женщина — история про сохранение, наполнение, про внутрь (Men are all about expansion, moving outward, while women are all about preservation and inclusion, their inner world.) Or maybe a parenthetical "like" will help: Лия Ахеджакова — это история про силу тишины. И про смиренность тишины (Lia Akhedzhakova is, like, the power of silence. With her it's all about the humility of silence.)

Sometimes история seems to replace "моё." This is literally "mine" but often used to mean "for me." Современная авангардная музыка — не моё (Modern avant-garde music is not for me.) So you might hear: Единый стиль в живописи — это не моя история (Painting in one style isn't for me.)

One commentator, who can't stand this usage, points out that история seems to have replaced тема (literally "topic"), another "in" word that he also loathes. Селфи — не моя тема (Selfies aren't my thing.) Дети — это не моя тема (I'm not into kids.) And my favorite: Муж не занимается ремонтом, не его тема (My husband doesn't do repairs. He's just not into it.)

I have noticed one curious thing about this kind of "in" usage of both история and тема: whenever I hear it, I know I'm probably going to disagree with whatever statement they're in.

Вот такая история. (That's the story.)

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.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/10/12/whats-the-story-morning-glory-a63174>