

Eat Your Grammar Spinach

The Word's Worth

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

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Благо: good, benefit

Among my absolute favorite things on earth are turkey dinners with all the trimmings and Russian word formation. So naturally, since last week – Thanksgiving, aka День благодарения – I’ve been very happy.

Did I lose you? It’s simple: Since День благодарения, I’ve been thinking about the word благо (good, benefit, blessing) and considering all the ways the word gets combined with other words to make a big pile of good things to be grateful for.

Благо is an ancient Russian word that has always meant something good or useful. Its first form was болого, which has been preserved in exactly one word in today’s Russian language: the town of Бологое, located — very happily and gratefully, I’d think — between Moscow and St. Petersburg.

Благо means anything that is good and brings happiness or a benefit. Блага (plural) can be physical: У него есть все земные блага (He has all the creature comforts.) Or intangible: Государство существует не для решения технических вопросов, но для служения общему благу (A government doesn’t exist to solve technical issues but to serve the common good.)

“Common good” sounds uncommonly good, doesn’t it?

You find Biblical благо in phrases that have entered everyday Russian, like всякое даяние благо (any gift is a blessing; be grateful for small mercies).

And when you say good-bye to someone and want to wish them well, you say: Всех благ! (All the best!)

There are a few curious aspects to this word. It is a noun in the examples above, but it can be a linking word that means something like “thanks to”: Я жил в Питере несколько лет,

сейчас стараюсь ездить летом, благо друзья там (I lived in St. Petersburg for several years, and now I try to go back in the summer, thanks to having friends there.) Or: Она гуляет, благо погода хорошая (She's taking a walk, thanks to the fine weather.) You'll notice that here благо is followed by a word in the nominative case, which to my non-native ear sounds strange. But not having to remember what case it takes is, I suppose, благо — a terrific benefit.

The other curious thing is when you want to say “for the good of...”. In Russian you have your choice of prepositions: во благо and на благо. This is apparently puzzling not only to foreigners but to native Russian speakers, too, since they have sent a gazillion queries about it to all the grammar websites. And here, for once, we get a break. All the experts say: Правильно и во благо и на благо (Both во благо and на благо are right).

But that's all they agree on. The grammarians disagree about what case (падеж) you should use with the phrases.

Let's use the construction на благо. One group says: you use на благо кому (“for the good of a person” in the dative case) when you cite people or name a specific person.

You use на благо чего (“for the good of a thing” in the genitive case) when talking about anything not named as a person.

So you'd say: Это мне на благо (That's good for me — dative because I'm animate), but Это на благо государства (That's for the good of the state — genitive because the state is an inanimate concept.)

Sounds okay, right?

But the other group says: Nope, the rule is different. You use the dative case when the thing getting the benefit is placed in the sentence *before* the phrase на благо: мне на благо, всем на благо, обществу на благо (It's good for me, for everyone, for society). And you use the genitive case when the thing getting the benefit is placed *after* the phrase на благо: на благо всех, на благо общества, на благо государства (the same as above). But even this group insists that you must use the dative with “me” no matter where the word falls in the sentence: на благо мне.

So what's a poor foreigner to do? I think you do what you want and if questioned, stick your nose in the air and say loftily: Спорный вопрос (It's a controversial issue.)

I know, I know. You hate this stuff, but I'm just doing my job. Think of me as the mean lady who makes you eat your grammar spinach every once in a while.

Besides, how cool is this? Language development is amazing.

With that happy thought, we'll leave благо behind.

We'll move on to consider some of the word formation that makes благо such a productive little root word. You've got благодарить (to thank), literally “to give good, to give a blessing” which is a lovely way of showing gratitude. And благосостояние (well-being, literally “good state, beneficial condition.” In government-speak, this is public welfare or living conditions:

Этот показатель даёт представление об уровне благосостояния населения (This indicator gives a sense of the living standards of the population.)

And then there is *благодать* (abundance, grace, literally “the gift of good”), like in the song: У природы нет плохой погоды, каждая погода — благодать (There is no bad weather in nature, every kind of weather is a blessing.) And *благоустройство* (beautification, literally “good organization”): Губернатор подписал указ о принятии программы по благоустройству города (The governor signed an order to start an urban improvement program.) This can be smaller in scale, of course: Они живут в красивой благоустроенной квартире в центре города (They live in a lovely, well-appointed apartment in the city center.)

And let’s not forget *благотворительность* (творить благо = to create good, i.e., philanthropy): Музыканты решили, что все вырученные от продажи билетов деньги потратят на благотворительность (The musicians decided that they’d give all the money from ticket sales to charity.)

When added as a prefix to an adjective, *благо* makes the meaning of the adjective more beautiful or intensified. Звучный (resounding); благозвучный (beautiful sounding, melodious, euphonious). Склонный (inclined, disposed); благосклонный (well-disposed, well-inclined).

Sometimes there is a slight revision of meaning. For example, take *родство* (bloodlines, relations), add *благо-* to produce *благородство* (nobility, generosity, literally “good bloodlines”). Or take *получить* (to receive), add *благо* (benefits, goodness), mix up the endings a bit to produce a noun and Presto!: *Благополучие*, well-being, prosperity — “the state of having gotten benefits.”

And on that happy note, I shall leave you — to plan a trip to Бологое.

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