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Russian Boys Just Want to Have Fun

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Отрок: young adolescent

What I love about Russian: every subject, no matter how mundane it may seem, can lead you down the rabbit hole of subtle distinctions, changing usages, and surprising discoveries.

What I loathe about Russian: the damn rabbit hole.

This week I thought I'd quickly finish up on words for the men in our lives, specifically the young and very young ones. But it got confusing fast. How old is отрок (boy)? Is he younger or older than подросток (adolescent)? What about парни (young guys)? Юноши (youths)? All of them are young men, but which word do I use to describe my 13-year-old neighbor, and which one fits the college kid?

My discovery: the reason it's a bit confusing for us English speakers is that we divide up age groups differently.

But let's start small — very small. When born, a little boy (or girl) is младенец (infant). Unless you're a parent or a close family member, you might never see a newborn. By tradition, no one is allowed in to see little Вася until he's three months old. Then he's ребёнок (child) or the old-fashioned and more poetic дитя (child).

When Вася has just been fed and is sweetly staring (or rather, appearing to stare) into his mother's eyes, he might be called крошка (moppet, sweetie, babykins, etc.; literally "little crumb" — something tiny and soft and delicious) or малыш (little one), an all-purpose, affectionate word for the littlest ones.

What is the age span for малыш? It apparently depends on the speaker. The famous kiddie show that has helped parents and grandparents get generations of kids into bed every night since 1964 is called "Спокойной ночи, малыши!" (Good Night, Little Ones!), and it is watched by kids from when they can sit up to the first grades in school. Большое значение для адаптации малыша к школьным нагрузкам имеет уровень его дошкольной подготовки. (How well a child will adapt to the pressures of schoolwork depends on his or her pre-school preparation.) For others, малыш is a little boy or girl through the toddler stage, like this one learning to eat: Дайте ложку малышу и направляйте её своей рукой ему в рот (Give the baby the spoon and use your hand to guide it into his mouth.)

Of course, for most parents, their children are always children, here affectionately called малышки: Малышки вы, малышки, скоро уж мамами будете, а для нас, стариков, всё равно малышки! (You're kids, always kids, and even though you'll be Moms yourselves soon, to us old folks you're still kids!)

So feel free to call your Significant Other малыш whenever he's sweet.

Next up: мальчик (boy) aka мальчишечка, мальчишка, мальчонка, мальчонок, мальчоночек, мальчоночка, мальчуга, мальчуган, мальчугашка. As a general rule of thumb, the more syllables, the greater the affection, although the diminutives ending in a consonant might be a bit derogatory. That is, it's better to be a sweet little мальчонка than a naughty little мальчуган.

These are generally little boys up to adolescence, although that does not guarantee that they will be regarded as little boys: Моему мальчику только 10 лет осенью, а им уже девочки интересуются! (My little boy will turn ten this autumn and the girls are already interested in him!) But sometimes it can refer to adult young men, often to stress their youth — and in many cases, to stress their youth sadly: Очень жаль тех мальчиков, что были расстреляны на баррикадах (I'm really sorry for those boys who were shot and killed on the barricades.)

Парень, паренёк, and парнишка are all lads that vary in age from the youngest парнишка (kid, maybe up to about 13 years old) through парень (guy), who can be an adult man, albeit a young one. And while I would not say this is an absolute rule, in general, парень is a good guy. Or perhaps it's better to say it the other way around: if a lad is bad, he's specified as плохой парень (bad guy), but if he's pretty good, he's probably just парень. Коля — простой

рабочий парень с завода, отслуживший в армии (Kolya is a simple working-class lad who had left his factory to serve in the army.)

With the next step up, age-wise, отрок, we leave contemporary lexicon and also begin to see some inter-cultural confusion.

In English, we divide age groups this way: boy (until age 13); teenager or adolescent (age 13 to 20); and then young man (usually starting with the 20-somethings). Only the word youth — or "yoot," as they say in Brooklyn and the Bronx — can refer to either an older adolescent or young man.

But let's look at Leo Tolstoy's books: Детство. Отрочество. Юность (Childhood. Boyhood. Youth.) I've done my usual unscientific poll of Russian speakers to find out that детство (childhood) stretches from the time the boy begins to walk until he is about 10- or 12-years-old; отрочество (boyhood) — when, in Tolstoy's time he was отрок— is from about age ten to 16; and юность (youth), from about age 16 to 23. Some people think юность ends with high school, at about age 18, and from then through his 20s, he's молодой человек (young man).

Where we English speakers perceive one age category — adolescence, from age 13 to 20 — Russian speakers see two: 13 to 16ish (once отрок now подросток or парень) and 16ish to 23-ish (юноша, youth).

I think I prefer the Russian age division, since putting a 13-year-old and a 19-year-old in the same age and maturity category is just plain wrong.

Except, of course, when the 19-year-old — or 35-year-old — acts like a 12-year-old. This is often, but not always, reaction to drinking a lot of strong spirits, when climbing naked on a bridge seems like a brilliant idea. In this case, as one of my (male) friends says: Мужчина всю жизнь мальчик (A man is always a boy.)

Hey, you didn't hear it from me.

Michele A. Berdy is the Arts Editor and author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

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