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A Russian Boyfriend

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Sergei Kiselyov / Moskva News Agency

Ухаживать: to care for, to court

Ever since a question popped up about Russian language usage on social media a few weeks ago, I've been doing what I do best: making an insufferable pest of myself with every Russian friend, acquaintance, or stranger who looks more or less willing to discuss the finer points of the Russian language.

The word I became obsessed with is ухажёр (admirer, suitor, gentleman caller). It is derived from the verb ухаживать, which has a couple of meanings. The main one is to take care of something, like a house, a garden, or even your hair. Я отдал дачу детям ⊠ времени на то, чтобы за ней ухаживать, у меня совсем не стало (I gave the dacha to my children. I just didn't have the time for the upkeep anymore.) Если за орхидеей ухаживать не так, как положено, то вполне могут начаться проблемы с ее системой корней (If you don't care

for an orchid right, you're likely to have problems with the root system.) Как правильно ухаживать за волосами? (What's the right way to take care of your hair?)

You can also care for — ухаживать за — kids, sick people, and old folks. Они переехали в Москву ухаживать за стариками (They moved to Moscow to take care of their elderly relatives.) You can even care for an adult as if he were an infant: Таня ухаживала за Виталькой, как за ребёнком, и Гена понял, что брату повезло (Tanya looked after Vitaly as if he were a child, and Gena realized that his brother had lucked out.)

The noun for this kind of caretaking is уход, and it can be used to describe taking care of anything or anyone. Уход за собой — лучшее украшение для любой женщины (Taking care of yourself is the best adornment for any woman.) Она давала хорошие советы по уходу за больными дома (She gave good advice on how to care for people with health problems at home.)

And then we come to the crux of the matter. In addition to the usage above, ухаживать can mean to court someone, to show someone attention. Occasionally this can refer to, say, the courting of a business partner or boss: Предприниматель ухаживал за банкиром, явно надеясь получить кредит по заниженной ставке (The businessman curried favor with the banker, clearly hoping to get a low-interest loan.)

But most of the time it means to court someone romantically. Он влюбляется быстро, легко, начинает ухаживать за дамами (He falls in love quickly and easily and starts courting the ladies.)

So, the word ухажёр is simply "a person who is courting." That all seems fine. But the question that has been tormenting me: Does the word ухажёр have a pejorative connotation?

Having asked about 50 people in Moscow and Yekaterinburg ranging in age from early 20s to late 70s, I can say with all certainty: Um, sorta. But not always. It depends.

More than half the people I asked thought the word had a slightly negative connotation. This seems to be because the emphasis is on the guy and his courting, which suggests that he and his flowers might not be welcome. У неё появился ухажёр (she has an admirer) has a slightly condescending tone. It's a way of saying that a guy is showing her attention, but it's not clear that she's interested. Hence, the admirer isn't so admirable.

About 35-40 percent thought the word just sounded old-fashioned — "what a babushka would call her granddaughter's boyfriend." Even the folks who thought the word had a mostly negative connotation thought that a phrase like он очень красиво за ней ухаживал (he courted her very nicely) was perfectly fine and positive, especially if speaking about courting that succeeded and turned into a love affair — and very especially if it happened 50 years ago.

When I asked young men if they would like to be called ухажёр, almost all of them said no. As noted above, it seems to imply that their attentions are unwanted. But one young, handsome, cool dude with lots of tats and some piercings said he'd be happy to be called ухажёр — and the young woman next to him beamed proudly.

Which just goes to show that everyone has their own idiolect, that is, their own sense of

usage, connotation and meaning of words.

Now that we've settled that, what do you call that guy bringing flowers to your neighbor, who looks happy as can be?

If they are young, you might say: У неё появился молодой человек (She is seeing a young man). That means it's mutual attraction. If they are older, you could say, У неё появился мужчина (She is dating a guy), but it might sound slightly crude.

So, what's the all-purpose word? Бойфренд (boyfriend), of course. You can even use that word with an older couple, albeit with a smile.

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