

How Low Can You Go in Russian?

The Word's Worth

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

September 04, 2019



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Пустослов: windbag, talker

In honor of the start of the new school year, here's a pop quiz.

What do deserts, nonsense, missiles and indulgent parents have in common in Russian? 1) Absolutely nothing and I refuse to play this game; 2) They all figured in news stories in the Russian press last week; 3) They are probably connected etymologically because you like that sort of thing but I can't see how; 4) They are all originally from the French.

And the answer is, of course (3) although (2) is probably true and I have great sympathy with

(1). Only (4) is patently wrong, although — when guessing a Russian word origin, French is never a bad choice.

We begin with the root of пуск or пуст. In my etymological dictionaries, the original meaning way back when mammoths roamed the earth was some kind of bare place or hill. Over time, this evolved into пустыня (desert); пустой (empty); пустяки (nonsense); or пустослов (someone who is all talk, “empty words”). Somewhere along the centuries the notion of emptying something out appeared in nouns like пуск (lift-off, start), which led — in a much more meandering way than I’m implying here — to the notion of verbs that start to move something. These are the verbs based on пускать, which in its unadorned — that is, unprefixed — state means to shoot off, to launch, to let in or out, or to allow. В дом пускали только близких друзей (They only let good friends into their home). I like, for some reason, the imperative пускай! (Let ‘em!) Референдум? Ну, пускай ☒ хуже не будет точно (Hold a referendum? Let them! It’s not going to make things worse, that’s for sure.)

The other form of the imperative is пусть which can be a smidgeon more highfalutin’ in phrases of good wishes: Пусть всё будет хорошо. (May everything turn out all right.) Or just one wish: Пусть она будет моя! (Let her be mine!). But sometimes it’s more down-to-earth and can have the sense of “maybe”: Деньги будут? Пусть не сразу, но с гарантией (Will it pay? Maybe not right away, but it comes with a guarantee.)

There are so many prefixed verbs derived from пускать that we’d need a week to go through all of them in all of their permutations. That’s not happening. I thought I’d concentrate on just two verb pairs — опускать/опустить and отпускать/отпустить — since that one little letter “т” is all that divides letting go from letting down.

Let’s begin with отпускать, which easily reveals its meaning: to let something/someone go from you (от). This might be your boss in a good mood: Начальник отпускал нас всех домой раньше по пятницам, в три часа. (Our boss would let us go home earlier on Fridays, at three o’clock.) Or it might be a prison warden following the parole board’s recommendation: Заключённого отпустили из колонии раньше срока (They released the prisoner from the penal colony before his sentence was up.)

Отпускать is what you do to a tight string: Натягивая и отпуская струну, находим оптимальное звучание (By tightening and loosening the string, we find the optimal sound.) It’s what you hope pain does to you: Боль наконец-то отпускает (The pain is finally letting up.) And what winter weather always does, eventually: Мороз отпускает (The cold snap is weakening.)

In the marketplace, отпускать/отпустить is a kind of release, like a release of goods in a store. Кладовщик со склада отпустил товар (The storeroom clerk moved the goods out of the warehouse.) Or the release of earmarked funds: Правительство решило отпускать значительные средства на предоставление народу дешёвых зрелищ (The government decided to release a good deal of money to put on cheap entertainments for the population.) Or the revocation of a regulation: В первый день месяца правительство отпустило цены на бензин (On the first day of the month, the government deregulated gas prices.)

And in a very different place, a church, there is also some letting go: Священник меня исповедовал и отпускал мне грехи (The priest listened to my confession and absolved me

of my sins.)

Now let's move to the second verb pair: опускать/опустить. Here the basic sense is to lower something physically or otherwise. It's the word you use in the sad ceremony of a funeral: Без слов молодые люди опускали гроб в могилу (The young men didn't say a word as they lowered the casket into the grave.) But it's also the word you use whenever you are putting something down: Моя соседка по даче опустила ведро грибов на скамейку и с облегчением вздохнула (My neighbor at the dacha lowered a bucket of mushrooms onto the bench and sighed with relief.)

Опускать is also what you do when you drop, dip, push, slip or slide something into water or a container. Я осторожно опускала ножку в воду — холодно! (I cautiously dipped my foot into the water — it was cold!) Дописал ей письмо, положил в конверт, написал адрес и быстро пошёл опускать в ящик чтобы не передумать. (He finished writing a letter to her, put it in an envelope, addressed it and quickly went to slip it into the postbox so he couldn't change his mind.)

And, in a bit a hyper-specificity, опускать is the verb you use when you shut something by moving it from a vertical to a horizontal position: После выступления помощники опустили крышку рояля (The assistants shut the piano lid after the performance.)

There is also a slangier meaning of опускать — it's when you lower a person, metaphorically. I learned this meaning when I told a friend how a colleague, who never said a word about my accent, would suddenly start exaggerating it and making fun of me when men were around. My friend exclaimed: О! Она тебя опускала! (Oh! She was making you look bad!)

And finally, there is one more very important noun derived from the verb отпускать: отпуск (work vacation), as in what I'll be on for the next two weeks.

До встречи!

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/09/04/how-low-can-you-go-in-russian-a67141>