

When a Russian Bum Is Not a Bum

The Word's Worth

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

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Бомжевать: to live rough

Let's see.... I haven't checked my mail bag in a while... here's one: "Go home, you stupid-"
Oops, that one goes into the shredder... what else do we have... "I am selling a genuine, original, 100 percent real Faberge Easter egg..." Nope, my collection of genuine, original royal Easter eggs is pretty much complete... Oh! Here's a good one, actually about language: "Are the Russian word бомж and the English word bum related?"

The short answer: No. The long answer: I think I've written a bit about this before, but let me see what I can find...

And a week later, the answer is still "no," but with much more certainty.

Most of what I now know about the word бомж (also БОМЖ) and its derivatives comes from a fascinating article by Alexei Bulannikov published in the journal Русская Речь (Russian Speech). Bulannikov discovered that БОМЖ — the abbreviation of без определённого места жительства (without a fixed place of residence) — did not appear only in the 1960s in militia circles, as is commonly believed. The word actually dates back to the 1920s and was at first a neutral abbreviation used most often in documentation for arrests. It seems to have meant either that a person was without a fixed address or “exact address unknown” if the authorities couldn’t establish it. It was used along with БОЗ — без определённых занятий (without fixed employment) — until the mid-1930s, and then slowly faded from usage until the 1960s.

At first there were two kinds of бомж, as it were: БОМЖ in capitals, a semi-legal description, and бомж in lower case letters, a homeless person, someone living rough. Now the lower-case form is almost always used, but it still can be neutral: Человек без прописки ☒ бомж. Он не сможет устроиться на работу и даже встать на учёт в районную поликлинику (A person without a residence permit is like a homeless person. He can’t get hired or even get registered at the district health clinic.) It can mean a homeless person, more or less without a derogatory connotation: Бомжи жгли на заводе костры, чтобы греться (The homeless people would light bonfires at the factory to keep warm.) It can stand in for “the poorest of the poor”: Любой инакомыслящий ☒ начиная от олигарха и кончая последним бомжом ☒ может оказаться жертвой системы (Anyone who is a dissident, from an oligarch right down to a homeless person, can be a victim of the system.) Or it can mean someone who lives rough and is a wreck: Он одевался в грязные штаны и вонючий свитер как последний бомж (He looked like a vagrant in dirty pants and a foul-smelling sweater.)

Russian, being Russian, quickly spun off derivative words, like бомжиха (a homeless woman), бомжатник (a squat, a hellhole, a filthy mess), and the adjective бомжацкий, which might mean “associated with people who are homeless” or might mean “like something from the gutter”: От него запах улицы — страшный со смрадным бомжацким ароматом (He smelled of the street — noxious, with the vile stink of a bum.)

There is also the verb бомжевать (to live rough, to live without a residence permit). Sometimes it is definitely pejorative: Он опустился, пьянствовал, бомжевал по вокзалам (He hit rock bottom, drank all the time, and lived at train stations.) But sometimes it isn’t that negative at all — it can mean crashing with friends, renting a room, or looking for any place to sleep: Приехал в Москву учиться в институте, бомжевал, даже иногда на чердаках (I came to Moscow to study at an institute and lived all over, sometimes even in attics.)

English has a couple ways of making abbreviations, most commonly made of initials, in which you pronounce each letter (CNN) or acronyms, which you pronounce as one word (NATO). There are also ways to shorten a word, like saying “flu” for “influenza.”

Russian has many more categories for their abbreviations. I think this is because Russians just love them.

There are initials pronounced as separate letters, like СССР (USSR, pronounced EsEsEsEr); initials read as words, like бомж (pronounced as a word: bomzh); and a variety of what are

called **слоговые аббревиатуры** (syllabic abbreviations), that can be formed by putting together syllables of words in a variety of ways.

Most of the time it's the first syllables of each word that are combined to make a new word, giving us those really long names of factories that I, rather rudely, think of as SverdMashPromPishPosh.

You probably already use a lot of them, but you might have forgotten that they were abbreviations — or maybe you never knew. A lot of them come from the Soviet era, like **колхоз** (collective farm) is short for **коллективное хозяйство** (collective enterprise); **комсомол** (Komsomol) made of three words: **коммунистический союз молодёжи** (communist union of young people); and the ubiquitous **обком** (**областной комитет** — regional committee) or **партком** (**партийный комитет** — party committee).

Lots of them are used today, like **роддом** (**родильный дом** — maternity hospital); **детдом** (**детский дом** — orphanage); **теракт** (**террористический акт** — terrorist act), or **телесеть** (**телевизионная сеть** — television network). I confess it took a while before I figured out that the word I used for a “replacement part in my old Zhiguli” — **запчасть** — was actually **запасная часть** (spare part).

And to this day, I'm confused about another abbreviation: **санузел** (**санитарный узел**). It usually means the WC, but can refer to a separate room with a toilet, a restroom in a store, or a bathroom with toilet, sink and bathtub). Everyone has explained to me that **совмещённый санузел** (combined bathroom) is when you have everything in one room, and **раздельный санузел** is when the toilet is separate from the **ванная комната** (the room with the bathtub and sink). But even if you have **раздельный санузел** — two separate rooms — it's just **один санузел** (one bathroom unit).

Which just goes to show that abbreviations don't necessarily make anything short and easy to understand.

I particularly like the syllabic abbreviation **пиар** because it is an example of one based on English initials PR, for public relations. This is, in part, because the Russian version — **связь с общественностью** (literally relations with the public) — is more like a public information office. So Russian practitioners decided to go with English abbreviation to describe their Russian work.

This year you may be using another of these abbreviations and don't even know it — if you have been following or participating in the Facebook group **Изоизоляция**. It's not a typo, but the abbreviation **изо** (**изобразительное искусство** — visual arts) + **изоляция** (isolation).

There is a whole world of meaning in those little Russian abbreviations.

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