The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Two Hundred More Ways to Get Russian Wrong

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

February 05, 2021



Pixabay

Хлопок: pop or cotton

The Russian language has a plethora of ways to trip up the foreigner trying to have a conversation or read a newspaper article. Aspect, prepositions, idioms, verbs with no first person singular (just try to say you'll win — you can't!), "fleeting vowels" (so the vowels in Russian run away?!), false friends... and let's not even think about participles (shudder).

How about words that are spelled the same but pronounced differently and have different meanings? Or words that sound the same but are spelled differently and have different meanings?

These tricky little sets of twins are called омографы (homographs: words spelled the same but with different pronunciations and meanings); and омофоны (homophones: words that sound the same but have different spelling and meanings). An example of an омограф is замОк (a lock) and зАмок (a castle). An example of омофон is бал (a dance) and балл (a point, as in a score). The first is easy to mess up when you're speaking; the second is easy to mess up when you're writing. This ensures that you'll always get something wrong no matter what you are doing in Russian.

This topic came up, in a way, a few weeks ago when a man confessed that he had put the nerve agent Novichok on something. If you read it and didn't hear it, you might have thought he meant he poisoned people who were cowards, since he put it on трУсы, the plural of трус (coward). True, that didn't make much sense, but nothing about this story was sane. But if you heard it, you got a different kind of crazy: he snuck in a hotel room, rummaged through a drawer and put the poison on underpants — трус▣Ы.

The Russian words appear to be the same, but their etymology is different: the coward трус shares a root with трясти (to shake), which is presumably what cowards do. ТрусЫ (always plural) comes from English trousers or possibly (depending on your etymological dictionary) the French culotte troussée. And because underpants are plural, when you pack, you ask your significant other: Я беру пятеро трусов ▣ нормально? (I'm taking five pairs of underpants — is that okay?) To which the response might be: Ты что?! Мы уезжаем на два дня! Двое трусов или трое максимум! (Are you nuts? We're going away for two days. Two pairs are fine, maximum three.)

But if this is beyond you, use the diminutive трусики (panties), which is nicely unisex and delightfully hard to confuse with human beings.

No one who visited the Soviet Union can forget another set of homographs. The first time I saw a container truck with МУКА (suffering) on the side in big letters, I thought: "OMG! It's true what they say about Slavic suffering. They deliver it by the truckload."

Of course, that wasn't мУка (suffering). It was мукА (flour). These words also have different roots, but it takes a while to bash the proper stress into your foreign head. I still chuckle as I read recipes: Понемногу всыпать муку (Gradually sprinkle misery- er, flour). But it's actually not funny: Борьба за право собственности больше походит на "хождение по мукам" (Fighting for property rights is more like walking through hell).

Among the hundreds of confusing pairs, you are likely to come across хлопОк (a clap or pop) and хлОпок (cotton). As usual, context will illuminate the meaning when you are reading: В этом сезоне популярен натуральный хлопок (This season natural cotton is popular). В нервном гуле автомобильного потока то и дело слышались хлопки (Over the excited buzz of traffic you could hear pops from time to time).

In restaurants you might be puzzled by what seems to be a plate full of hot: жаркое. Just the adjective, no noun. But actually, it's жаркОе, a traditional dish of fried meat, usually mixed with potatoes and vegetables. That is different from жАркое лето (a hot summer).

And, just to add a dab of adjectival confusion into the mix, жаркий (hot) is generally used to describe weather and горячий (hot) is usually used to describe objects and food. That's just to

keep you from getting complacent.

I particularly like words that are spelled the same but are actually different parts of speech and, of course, are pronounced differently and have different meanings. For example: Мы сидели на кухне и пИли чай (We sat in the kitchen and drank tea.) That's пИли, the past tense plural of пить (to drink). But there is also the command: ПилИ скорей дрова! (Saw the wood quickly!) That's the second person imperative of the verb пилить (to saw).

Are we having fun yet?

The second type of these confusing word sets is омофоны (homophones). The words are pronounced the same (or almost the same) but spelled differently. Since I am a terrible speller, these are my constant little Waterloos.

Sometimes they sound alike due to pronunciation rules, when voiced consonants become unvoiced. You remember this, right? When б becomes п, з becomes с, and so on. I know, I know. But the upshot is that you will confuse везти (drive) and вести (lead) and год (year) and гот (Goth), although the latter is harder to confuse just because you probably don't discuss Goths that much.

Another delightful mess is луг and лук, which might be a field (луг), an onion (лук) or a shooting bow (also лук). You'd think the лук-sounding words would be hard to confuse, but these guys are at a shooting range: Мы стреляем примерно до часа, потом мы идём ко мне пить чай, оставляем лук в покое (We shoot until about one, then we go to my place for tea and leave the bow in peace).

I guess they leave a bow, but what if they were supposed to pick onions that day?

Sometimes vowels are unstressed and therefore reduced. I think Russian vowels should just stay fat and stressed, like they are in the Urals, and make our spelling life easier. But here in Масква there is virtually no difference in pronunciation between полоскать (to gargle) and поласкать (to caress), and since both are actual words and not misspellings, spellcheck will let you cheerfully suggest gargling your girlfriend or fondling your Listerine.

Or how about this? Мы женаты! (We're married!) Мы же на ты! (But we're on friendly terms!) This misunderstanding could be a plot device in a movie. Or it could get you punched.

With this one, you could get arrested. Imagine sitting in an official's office waiting for a meeting to get a building permit. The official is, of course, running late. You tell your partner: Надо ждать! (We have to wait.) The secretary hears: Надо ж дать (We really have to give him [a bribe]). She calls the cops.

Be careful out there. Russian is a very tricky language. And I don't think claiming bad pronunciation will stand up in a court of law.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/02/05/two-hundred-more-ways-to-get-russian-wrong-a72844