

All That Glitters is Russian Gold

The Word's Worth

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

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Слово — серебро: speech is silver...

This year Moscow is having a real winter with lots of snow — in fact, снежный апокалипсис (snowpocalypse) — and plenty of cold, sunny days. These days are a real treat. When the temperature plummets, the sun comes out, giving us the most beautiful gift of winter: silvery slivers of ice and snow that dance and sparkle in the bright sunlight.

Russian, of course, has a word for this: серебриться. You find this in poetry — Alexander Pushkin used the image in several poems, like the one that begins: В поле чистом серебрится / Снег волнистый и рябой... (In an open field snow — downy, dappled — glistens like silver). Sometimes the effect can be seen in warmer weather, too: По ночам зелёная трава покрывалась тонким слоем инея, который сверкал и серебрился на утреннем солнце (At night the green grass was covered with a fine layer of frost that would

sparkle and glitter with silver in the morning sunlight).

Серебриться can also refer to shiny gray hair: Он именно тогда так сильно поседел ☒ прежде волосы только чуть серебрились (That's when he went completely gray — before that his hair just had a bit of silver in it).

Серебриться can refer to anything that is silvery and shiny, including lovingly described fish: У входа магазина стояла бочка, серебрящаяся изнутри селёдками (By the door to the shop was a barrel, from which you could see the silvery sheen of herring).

The verb серебриться is derived from the noun серебро (silver), which shares the same root as the word in other Baltic and Slavic languages. It is thought to come from Anatolian — where subau-ru meant “shining.” Серебро is used in Russian pretty much the way silver is used in English. Before a party your significant other might say, “Достань, пожалуйста, родительскую посуду, хрусталь и серебро” (Please get out my parents' dishes, crystal and silver). Or your teen may announce: Я ношу только серебро (I only wear silver jewelry). Or you might say, “У нашей команды очень успешные выступления на Играх — два золота и три серебра!” (Our team has had great success at the Olympics — two golds and three silver!)

And in both languages sound can be silvery, too. I don't know why, exactly, sound has silver associations, but it does: Серебром заливается колокольчик (The silvery tones of the bell ring out.)

If silvery things can glisten and glitter, so can golden things with the verb золотиться. It seems that most of the time the verb is used to describes leaves turning color in золотая осень (golden autumn): За окном золотились деревья во дворе, и ветер горстями подбрасывал листья (Outside my window the trees in the courtyard had turned golden and the wind tossed about handfuls of leaves).

The verb can also refer to something golden that is seen, often in the distance: В дали тускло золотится купол знаменитой мечети (The gold cupola of the famous mosque shone dully in the distance). And very occasionally it can refer to the same quality of air as серебриться, although I think this phenomenon must take place at dawn or dusk: Речка играла переливами утреннего света, изморозь по прибрежной траве сверкала миллионами весёлых бриллиантиков. Сам воздух приятно золотился (The creek sparkled with the iridescence of morning light, and the hoarfrost on the shore grass glittered with millions of cheery little diamonds. The air itself had a lovely glimmer of gold).

And of course, золотиться can describe fish because we love our metallic swimmers. Can you guess which fish are glistening and golden? Aw, that's an easy one: На столе золотилась баночка шпротов (A tin of golden sprats glistened on the table).

Золото (gold), which appears to share a root with the word жёлтый (yellow) actually comes in a variety of colors. Чёрное золото (black gold) is probably familiar. Растущая китайская экономика нуждается в большем количестве нефти, что приводит к росту цен на "чёрное золото" на мировом рынке (The growing Chinese economy needs more oil, which leads to higher prices for “black gold” on the world market). But what about белое золото (white gold) and мягкое золото (soft gold). Any guesses? Not exactly a sea of hands. Белое

золото is cotton and мягкое золото is fur.

Now you know.

Sounds in Russian can also be golden, although this tends to refer to bells, specifically church bells, like in this lyrical passage from 1926: Всё так же гудит золотой звон “сорока сороков”, по-прежнему чист снег и ярко звезды... (The golden sound of the multitude of church bells still rings out, and the snow is as pure and the stars as bright as they ever were...).

One thing to note about both silver and gold: they have two adjectival forms — серебрянный (made of silver) and серебристый (silver-colored) and золотой (made of gold or golden) and золотистый (gold-colored). This distinction is key when you ask a salesperson about jewelry.

Gold more than silver is the measure of a good person in Russian: Она из золота, это я тебе говорю (I tell you, she's made of gold). This is different than the English-language golden boy or golden girl, which is someone who is easily successful, but often only temporarily. This is a case of не всё то золото, что блестит (all that glitters is not gold).

Gold also seems to have produced more expressions than silver, although the two metals share one common phrase: слово — серебро, а молчание — золото (speech is silver, but silence is golden).

There are certainly a great many things made of gold, like золотая середина (golden mean) and золотая молодёжь (golden youth, aka rich kids). A treasure trove might be deep in the ground — золотое дно (a gold mine, a mother lode) — or piled high to the sky — золотые горы (mountains of gold, the moon and the stars). But the latter is usually only what is promised, while the former is what is real. Все кандидаты обещают избирателям золотые горы и молочные реки с кисельными берегами (All candidates promise voters untold riches and the land of milk and honey). Она открыла свое собственное частное предприятие ☒ службу знакомств. Это было золотое дно (She opened her own private business — a dating agency. It was a gold mine).

Another gold mine is the business Муж на час (Rent-a-Husband), where you can summon someone to do chores around the house that are more than you can handle but less than a licensed carpenter or plumber would do. There all the “husbands” have золотые руки (they can fix just about anything).

Guys like that купаются в золоте (are rolling in dough).

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