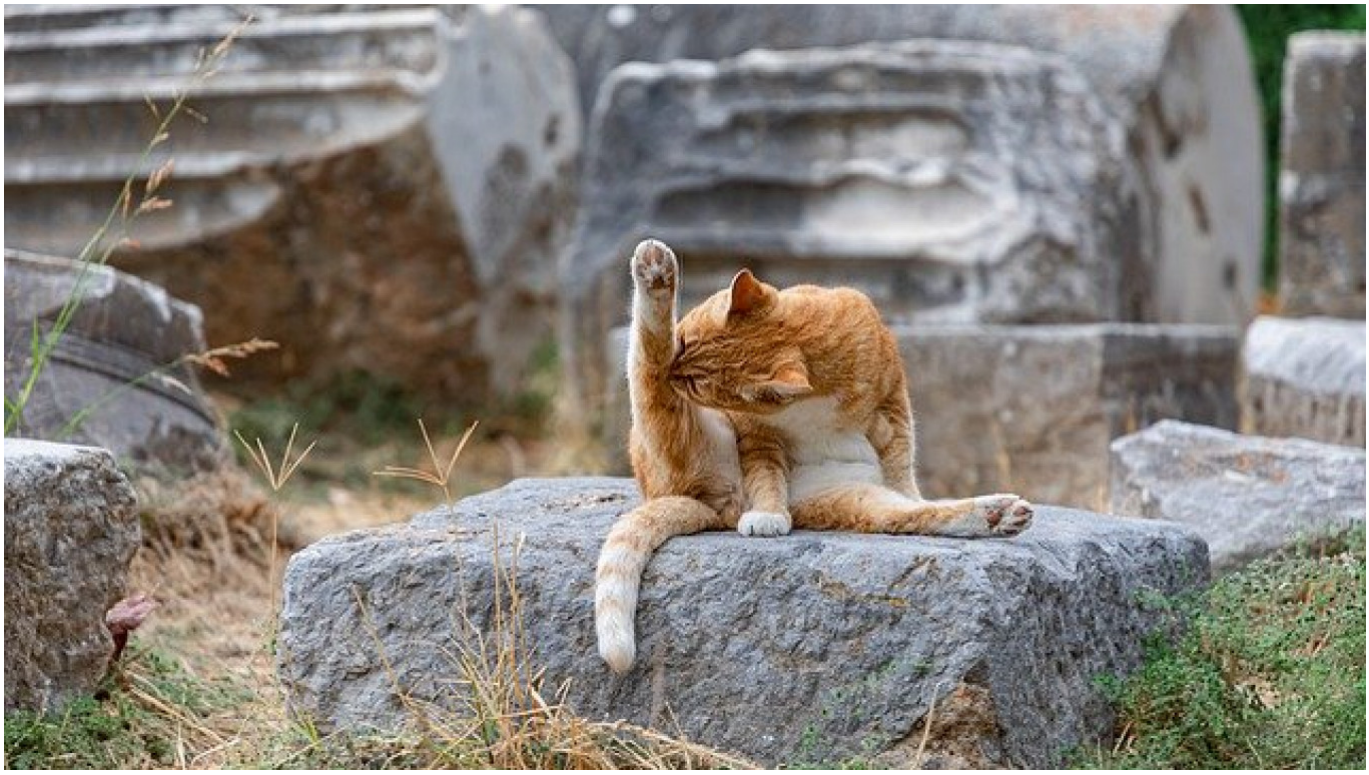
The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Clean Up Your Act the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

July 02, 2021



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На мыло: kick the bum out

It's the first Friday in July and that means it's time for our first summer pop quiz. Actually, I just made that up, but it sounds like a good idea. So put away your books, get out a pencil and clean sheet of paper. Now then: what basic verb do propagandists, teenagers, criminals, housekeepers and oceans use? No, not that verb! Oceans can't swear.

The answer, of course, is мыть (to wash). Play a bit of mix and match with prefixes, and you'll be able to brainwash the public, wash your hair until it's squeaky clean, launder money, clean away stains, and rue bad choices. All your language needs in one little verb.

Мыть is the plain vanilla form of the verb, used to describe washing just about anything with water and usually some cleanser. In Russian моют руки, фрукты, полы, окна (people wash

their hands, fruits, floors and windows). When they wash their hair, they call it their head: Надо мне мыть голову (I've got to wash my hair). In the natural world: Волны моют берег (Waves wash up on the shore). In the real world: Рука руку моет (one hand washes the other), apparently a calque from Latin that means: ты мне и я тебе (I'll take care of you, and you take care of me).

Washing yourself entirely, that is, taking a shower or bathing, uses the reflexive verb pair мыться/помыться. In the summer in Russian cities, it's not uncommon for someone you know well — or barely know at all — to call up and say: Можно у вас помыться? (Can I shower at your place?) This is, sadly, not an interesting development in your relationship, but rather the consequence of your friend's hot water being turned off for three weeks.

Nicely, the word for what you wash things with is derived from the word for washing: мыло (soap). У моей мамы маниакальная чистоплотность ⊠ так, например, яйца перед варкой она моет с мылом (My mother has a mania for cleanliness — for example, before she boils eggs she washes them with soap). This word has also given us a snappy saying: менять шило на мыло (to trade bad for worse, literally to change an awl for a pick). The origins of the expression are contested — and none of them make much sense to me since I know absolutely nothing about work done with awls or small picks. But you get the idea — or maybe you've been there: Люба беспомощно посмотрела на подругу. ⊠ Шило на мыло, ⊠ сказала та. ⊠ Пьяницу на вора... (Liuba stared helplessly at her friend. "Out of the frying pan and into the fire," she said. "You're trading a drunk for a thief.")

Another soapy expression that's good to know, especially during football tournaments, is usually not said but shouted: Судью — на мыло! (literally, send the judge for soap!) This expression dates back to the days when old horses and farm animals were sent to soap-making factory when no longer useful. In a different part of the world, the practice was the same, but the factory was different. All the same, when the ref makes a bad call, stand up and scream: На мыло! (Send him to the glue factory!)

Now if you clean something really, really well so that it shines or is squeaky clean, you can add the prefix вы- to your basic verb pairs to get вымывать/вымыть. Remember this verb when you want a pat on the head: Ты посмотрел? Я вымыла всё на кухне! (Did you see? I scrubbed the kitchen til it shines). You find this verb a lot in recipes: Вымыть и выпотрошить рыбу под холодной водой, сбрызнуть лимонным соком и слегка посолить (Thoroughly wash and clean the fish under cold running water, squeeze lemon juice over it and lightly salt).

This verb can also be used for washing Bad Things out of the body, which is why you come across it in ads for expensive fake medicines you shouldn't buy: Препарат вымывает токсины, оздоровляет печень, почки и кожу и ускоряет пищеварение (This product washes toxins out of your system, improves the health of your liver, kidneys and skin, and it speeds up digestion). Do.Not.Buy. A bowl of borshch will do the same thing and taste delicious, too.

Отмывать/отмыть is the cleaning pair you use for getting a stain out (от) of something. You might remember it with this nice saying: Чёрного кобеля не отмоешь добела (You can't whitewash a black dog).

It is also the verb pair you use for laundering your ill-gained millions. Было время, когда половина риелторов были бандитами, а половина бандитов отмывала деньги с помощью недвижимости (There was a time when half the realtors were gangsters, and half the gangsters laundered their money through real estate).

Another washing-up verb pair has equally illegal and immoral connotations: промывать/промыть. Its first meaning is to flush a wound — хорошо промыть рано — or rinse something in copious amounts of water to clean it — поверхности промывают тёплой водой (the surfaces should be wiped down with warm water). The rinsing in a lot of water gives us another meaning, albeit less useful in our daily urban lives: Стоя по колено в бледно-голубой холодной воде, я целый день промывал золото (Standing up to my knees in freezing, pale blue water, I would pan for gold all day).

However, you can also wash someone's brain. In Russian, this can be used in the sense of bringing someone to their senses. Надо промыть мозги у сотрудников отдела — осталось три дня до выпуска нового продукта, и ничего не готово (I've got to read the riot act to the department — the product launch is in three days, and nothing is ready).

But it can also be sinister: Этим людям советская тоталитарная система вручила тотальную же власть над средствами массовой информации, возможность промывать мозги сотням миллионов людей (The totalitarian Soviet system gave those people total power over the media and the capability to brainwash hundreds of millions of people).

This brings us to what you might want to do in this situation: смыться (hightail it out of here). This slang expression comes from the verb смыть, which suggests washing something away, like a stain; or high tides washing away a shoreline; or a wave washing someone overboard. Я смыл чернильные пятна со стола (I scrubbed the ink stains from the desktop). Во время шторма их смыло волной в океан (A wave washed them overboard into the ocean during a storm).

With all this washing away, it's easy to see how смыться came to mean taking off, dashing away, or doing a runner. Мы сидели у двери, чтобы можно было легко смыться (We sat by the door so it would be easy to slip out).

The prefix раз- has the sense of diffusing or scattering, and when added to мыть it has the meaning of eroding something, diluting or degrading it. This can be a natural phenomenon: Наводнением склон размыло (The hill was eroded by flooding). Or it can be a physical phenomenon: Дождь размыл рукописный текст в книге (The rain blurred the handwriting in the book). Or it can be figurative: Жаль, что граница между благодарностью и взяткой размыта (It's a shame that the line between gratitude and a bribe has become blurred).

And finally, there is one other very useful verb that is only used in exactly one expression: замыливаться (to get soaped up). What gets sudsy are your eyes when they are tired: Глаз замылился, ничего не читаю. Вернусь к тексту завтра утром (I've gone cross-eyed, and I can't read anything. I'll get back to the text tomorrow morning).

Which exactly what I said last night.

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