

Getting Married and/or Rejected in Russian

The Word's Worth

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

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Молодожёны: newlyweds

Recently I had one of those odd conversations in which you can't tell who's crazy — you or the person you're talking to.

Friend: “Слушай, ты не думала о браке”? (Hey, have you thought about marriage?)

Me: В каком смысле? (In what sense?)

Она: В том, что брак это хорошо и плохо (In the sense of it's both bad and good.)

Me: Ну да. Жизнь такая (Well, yeah. That's life.)

Она: Но почему же одно слово? (But why is there just one word?)

Ме: (не въезжаю) О чём ты? (not getting it: What are you talking about?)

Она: О том, что есть брак как свадьба и брак как дефект. Не странно ли? (About how there is брак that means wedding and брак that means defect. Isn't that strange?)

To be honest, I hadn't thought about it, but it is strange. However, it is easily explained: the words came from different sources. Брак (marriage) appears to be derived from the verb брать (to take), as in "take a wife." Брак (defect) came to Russian from low German, middle Dutch, or German via (possibly) Polish, depending on which etymologist you consult, and originally mean some kind of break. Judging by Webster's 1828 dictionary, we have the same word in English in the U.S. — brack — which means a breach or broken part, although now it seems to be archaic.

Вад брак and its related words — the verb pair браковать/забраковать and adjective бракованный — are useful words to know. Брак is commonly used to describe some manufactured or homemade product that has a defect or doesn't look the way it should. Молодые девчата угощали бракованными шоколадными медальками (The young women treated us to chocolate medallions that didn't pass quality control). But the verb can also mean to reject something as defective or not satisfying requirements: Редколлегия альманаха забраковала эту статью (The almanac editorial board rejected the article).

The marriage брак is richer, of course, especially if you start from the beginning of the marriage process. We'll take the case of significant others who are a man and woman. They begin as возлюбленные (a couple in love). If they are meant for each other, they are суженый or суженая (intended, male and female). And if the deal is clinched — as was the habit of wealthy families back in the day — then they become ряженный or ряженая (officially betrothed) as well. Ряженный comes from the verb рядить, a curious word that means both to dress in a costume and to agree to something. So your суженый-ряженный is the man who is yours, heart and contract.

In the old days, the process of becoming невеста (bride) and жених (groom) was organized by the families and codified, sometimes even on paper, in помолвка (engagement). This word comes from the verb молить, which originally meant to speak. This translates nicely: the woman or man is "spoken for." Today in the crowds I run with there are no prenups or intimidating talks with family lawyers, and the couple just announces their обручение (engagement), from a word that means "to promise."

Most of the time the verb pair обручаться/обручиться means to get engaged — cue romantic music, ring, tears and embraces: В день обручения с любимой девушкой юноша надел новый костюм (On the day of his engagement to the girl he loved, the boy put on a new suit). But sometimes the verbs are used figuratively. In English, we are a bit cruder in our terminology: Когда частная компания обручается с государством, то у них возникает общий, так сказать, "семейный" бюджет (When a private company gets in bed with the state, they open a joint "family" budget, as it were).

Next step: getting hitched. The verbs you use to describe this are different depending on whether you're a man or woman. The verbs are all very terribly descriptive and sexist. Men

женятся на женщинах (verb pair жениться/пожениться, literally “to get on wives”) while women выходят замуж (verb pair выходить/выйти literally “to walk after men”). The family of the bride can “give her away” — выдать замуж: Родители хотели выдать её замуж за сына богатых коллег отца (Her parents wanted to marry her off to the son of her father’s rich business associates).

What if you want to say that Vanya and Marina got married, not that one married the other? Then you use жениться: Мы с Володиёй решили пожениться срочно, я была на третьем месяце беременности (Volodya and I decided to get married right away since I was three months pregnant).

If you want to be neutral and decidedly not romantic, you can say вступить в брак: Он вступил в брак с нынешней женой два года назад (He got married to his present wife two years ago). Another phrase is сочетаться браком (to be united in matrimony): Наконец-то невыезжая и находящаяся под постоянным надзором КГБ балерина Майя Плисецкая сочеталась браком с композитором Родионом Щедриным (The ballerina Maya Plisetskaya, who was under constant KGB surveillance and not allowed to travel abroad, was finally married to the composer Rodion Shchedrin).

The wedding ceremony is the dreadful sounding — to my ear — бракосочетание. One can have a combining-in-marriage ceremony at one of the nation’s palaces of civil unions: В 1959 году в Ленинграде открылся первый Дворец бракосочетания (In 1959 the first Wedding Palace opened in Leningrad). If you get married at one of those places, you can use the verbs за/регистрироваться or расписываться/расписаться: Мы зарегистрировались в июне (We got married [had a civil wedding] in June). Когда они пришли расписываться в ЗАГС, все аплодировали (When they came to the registry office to sign their marriage papers, everyone applauded).

If you wish, you can also get married in a church. This ceremony is called coronation—венчаться— because in the Orthodox Church crowns are held over the heads of the bride and groom. Мы хотим венчаться в большом храме (We want to marry in a big cathedral). This is also “to walk under the nuptial crown” — something you should do when you’re sure about your future spouse: Это надо было замечать до того, как идти под венец (You should have noticed that before you walked down the aisle).

Sometimes church weddings were secret — either because they were against parental wishes before the Revolution or because they were against communist ideology after: Мы тайно повенчаны (We secretly got married in the church).

In any case, you need to be married in a civil ceremony to make it official: Маша, раз повенчаны — то и пожениться должны, и тогда моя московская квартира тебе достанется. (Masha, since we had a church wedding, we ought to have a civil ceremony too, so that my Moscow apartment will be yours as well).

Of course, you can just call any ceremony, religious or otherwise: свадьба (wedding). In Russian you “play” one: В октябре Петька с Зинкой сыграли свадьбу (In October Petka and Zinka had a wedding).

Now that you’re married, people are going to discuss what kind of marriage it is. Sometimes

we say this quite differently in English: законный брак (a couple that is legally married); брак по любви, по расчёту (a love match, a marriage of convenience); церковный брак (a couple married in church); гражданский брак (civil or common-law marriage); смешанный брак (mixed marriage – a couple of different nationalities or races); фиктивный брак (fictional marriage); or неравный брак (mis-matched married couple, that is, when they are of different ages, social or monetary status).

Whew. Now that all that is over, the couple are молодожёны (newlyweds), муж и жена (husband and wife) or супруги (spouses). And then you can start different conversations: У меня дочь от первого брака (I've got a daughter from my first marriage). После второго брака я не ищу идеальную жену (After my second marriage I stopped looking for the ideal wife). Мне, несомненно, повезло с третьим браком (There is no question that I lucked out with my third marriage).

Third time's the charm.

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