

How to Add On, Try On, Pretend and Drive Everyone Crazy in Russian

The Word's Worth

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

December 17, 2021



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Слово-паразит: filler word

Several years ago a shadow fell over the land of Rus, and everyone started saying как бы.

There is nothing wrong with the phrase. It has a number of meanings depending on the context, including “somewhat” or “sort of”: Рай это как бы старое европейское кино (Paradise is something like an old European film). Or “no matter how”: Как бы ни сложилась французская гонка, все понимают кто чемпион (No matter how the French race goes, everyone knows who the real champion is). Or it can be part of a longer phrase that means “be that as it may,” or “regardless”: Как бы то ни было, но я стала всё-таки певицей (One way or another, I became a singer after all).

That's all fine, but somehow как бы became слова-паразиты (filler words, literally parasite words). Speakers stuck them in between every other word and muttered them in every pause. They didn't say: Я вышел покурить (I went out for a smoke). They said, Я как бы вышел покурить (I kinda went out to have a smoke). Я как бы думал (I kinda thought)...он как бы улыбался (he sorta smiled)...она читала как бы постоянно (she read, like, all the time).

Suddenly all life became virtual. You didn't do something, you, like, kinda, sorta did something. But in most cases как бы didn't even mean anything. It was just word stuffing.

And then, slowly but surely, the fad passed.

And now, slowly but surely, another one has appeared. I don't think this filler word is as universal as как бы in its heyday, but it does seem to be used a lot by the younger set. How do I know this? Mothers and grandmothers are complaining. A lot.

The word is прикинь, which sorta kinda means “can you imagine” or “get it?” or “look at that.” So you might hear: Покурить три раза сходил... Я папой буду, прикинь, чувак! (I went out to smoke three times... I'm going to be a father, can you believe it, man?!) But the complaining mothers and grandmothers say it's more like: Я пошёл, прикинь, в магазин, но не было, прикинь, молока... (I went to the store, you see, but there wasn't any milk, get it? ...) Now that might be an exaggeration, but if it's anything like the как бы phase, it might even be worse.

Where did прикинь come from? It is from a verb pair that is, in itself, quite interesting: прикидывать/прикинуть, which are easily decipherable as при (to, towards) + кидать (to throw). So the literal meaning is to toss something at or towards something. Игрок прикидывал мяч в сторону ворот (The player flung the ball towards the goal).

The second meaning is to add on to something — tossing something on top, as it were. This doesn't seem to be used much today, but you might come across it in literature, like here, from “The Portrait” by Nikolai Gogol: Господин, господин, воротитесь! Гривенничек хоть прикиньте (Mister! Mister, come back! At least add another ten kopeks!)

In the third meaning, you “toss” something on yourself to see if it fits. This can be rather archaic, as you can tell by the old-fashioned language here: Извольте прикинуть платок на голову, к лицу ли будет? (If you'd be so kind as to let me try on the scarf to see if it looks good on me). Or modern: Закусив губу, Марина прикидывала перед зеркалом свитера, платья, куртки (Biting her lip, Marina tried on sweaters, dresses and jackets in front of the mirror).

Then the verb jumps from the physical “try on” to the mental “estimate.” It might be sizing something up, as this snake does, grimly: Змея деловито изучала обстановку, будто прикидывала с кого начать (The snake efficiently studied the situation as if it was sizing up who to start with). Or it might be sizing up someone's character or strength: Парни смотрели на меня, словно прикидывали, на что я способен (The boys looked me over, like they were reckoning what I might be able to do). Or mentally trying out options: Я прикидывал то так, то эдак, мысленно проигрывая разные варианты (I weighed various options in my head, imagining doing it one way and then the other). Or coming up with a guesstimate: Я прикидывал ☒ где-то порядка 10 тысяч рублей у меня уходит на

еду (I added it up in my head and estimated that I spend about 10,000 rubles on food). Or figuring how much time it would take to do something: Он прикинул, что может ещё четверть часа побродить по аллеям парка (He figured he could wander along the park paths for another quarter of an hour).

You can also use the perfective прикинуть in this sense: Я прикинул в уме. Против наших двух неполных рот двигалось по меньшей мере полтора-два батальона. (I did the math in my head. At least one and a half or two battalions were moving against our two depleted squadrons).

Now you see where the command прикинь comes from. It could mean to mentally figure out something: Прикинь сколько тебе нужно времени (Estimate how much time you need). But in its slangy parasitic incarnation, it means “imagine that,” “just think,” “how do you like that?” Прикинь, я теперь тут главный (I’m the boss now. What do you think of that?) Прикинь! Я еду учиться в Англию (Guess what! I’m going to school in England). Прикинь, муж готовил мне завтрак (Can you believe it? My husband made me breakfast).

And then sometimes it doesn't really mean much of anything. It’s just a way of establishing that someone’s listening. Он, прикинь, переехал (You hear he moved?) Прикинь, я слышал, его выгоняют из школы (You know, I heard he got kicked out of school).

There is one more form of this rich verb pair that is very much worth knowing: прикидываться/прикинуться, which means to pretend, to make believe. You might think of this as trying on a new identity, although a lot of the time the identity is not very attractive. You might pretend to be unconscious: Вошёл в комнату Ваня и включил свет. Потом сказал: "Не прикидывайся. Я знаю, что ты не спишь". (Vanya came into the room and turned on the light. Then he said, “Stop pretending. I know you aren’t asleep.”) Or stupid: Меня ещё дед мой учил: как где трудно придётся, Ванька, прикидывайся дурачком (My grand-dad taught me way back: whenever the going gets tough, Vanya my boy, act dumb”).

Pretending to be stupid is a big thing with this verb: прикидываться + object = look dumb. But it’s the objects you pretend to be that are so delightful: прикидываться (pretend to be) шлангом (a hose); валенком (a felt boot); пиджаком (a jacket); урной (a trashbin); столбом фонарным (a lamp post). I want to pretend to be a garden hose: Шлангом прикидывается, будто ничего не знает (He acts dumb, like he doesn’t know anything) Or make my face look as stupid as a boot: В следующий раз — прикидывайся валенком (Next time — act stupid).

Прикинь?

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