

Russian Gaffes, Goofs, and Assorted Blunders

The Word's Worth

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

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Оплошность: misstep, misdeed, goof, gaffe

Last week after taking a look at my column on various ways to fail in Russian, a reader suggested another word and form of failure: the noun *оплошность* and verb pair *плошать/оплошать*. These aren't the words you'd use to describe a complete flop or disaster. *Оплошность* is a mistake, an oversight, or misstep.

That said, during an audition if you commit the *оплошность* of playing a B when it should have been B flat, that one little slip could cost you the job. So these goofs and gaffes loom rather large in Russian mentality: *Малейшая оплошность может сказаться на его судьбе* (The smallest misstep might affect his future.)

This group of words is derived from the adjective плохой (bad), which means that whenever I commit оплошность I desperately want to translate it as “my bad.” One day I’ll get my chance.

In the meantime, if you want to use the noun оплошность, Russian gives you a couple of verbs to use. Совершить оплошность (to make a mistake) is very common: Однажды совершил оплошность, и она имела для меня катастрофические последствия. (Once I slipped up and that misstep had catastrophic consequences for me). Он совершил оплошность: упомянул о позиции военных. (He messed up — he mentioned the troops’ location).

You can also use the verb допустить (to allow to happen): Ты пойдешь со мной, ✘ сказал он ей и тут же почувствовал, что допустил оплошность (“You’re coming with me,” he told her and instantly realized that he’d put his foot in it.)

Later you can try to fix the mess you made: исправить оплошность (to correct the mistake). Он хотел во что бы то ни стало исправить оплошность (He wanted to correct his faux pas, no matter what it took).

The real fun begins with the verbs. Плошать (imperfective) has two meanings. The first is closely related to the derivation of the word — bad — it can mean to become weaker or worse in some way. A house might start to fall apart over time: Дом из года в год всё плошает (The house is getting shabbier from year to year.) Of course, some people get better with age — or they have friends who say they do: Она не плошает, она всё к лучшему идёт! (She isn’t looking worse — she keeps getting better!)

The other meaning of плошать is to make a mistake — screw up — or do something thoughtlessly – screw around. Today most people know the word from a very common and pithy saying: На Бога надейся, а сам не плошай. This is often translated by the English almost-equivalent: God helps him who helps himself. But there are several English expressions that are much closer in meaning if much farther away in tone: Put your trust in God and keep your powder dry; pray to God but keep rowing to shore; and my personal favorite — Trust in God but lock your car.

Over the years Russians have played around with this expression.

На президента надейся, а сам не плошай! (Trust in the president but don’t mess up!)

На судьбу надейся, а сам не плошай (Trust in your fate, but don’t screw it up).

На других надейся, а сам не плошай (Count on others, but don’t drop the ball).

And, lo and behold! There are people who do follow this almost-commandment and do find themselves counting their blessings. Заповеди чти, но и сам не плошай. Макс и не плошал. Квартира от бабки осталась у него ✘ считай, повезло. (Honor the commandments but don’t make any missteps. And Max didn’t misstep. He was able to keep his grandmother’s apartment — that was a piece of good luck.)

The perfective form of the verb, оплошать, lets you describe goofs and gaffes you’ve committed that range from the minor to the life-changing.

Он долго репетировал свою роль, чтобы не оплошать перед именитым московским

купечеством (He rehearsed his role for a long time so that he wouldn't make any gaffes before the eminent Moscow merchant class).

Sometimes a thoughtlessly tossed cigarette can have terrible consequences: ☒ Оплошали мы с тобой, Паша, ☒ сказал Вася, кивнув в сторону черных остатков дома (“We messed up real bad, Pasha,” Vasya said, nodding toward the blackened remains of the house).

The one bit of grammar that has thrown me off — and sent me down a rabbit hole for several hours — is the reflexive form of the verb, which is either оплошаться or оплошиться. People say both, although neither can be found in contemporary dictionaries. That said, the reflexive form has been around for centuries, as testified by this usage in a letter from Peter the Great to Stepan Kolychev on Nov. 17, 1716: ...доношу вамъ, не извольте въ томъ оплошиться... (I impress upon you that you must not commit a misstep here).

And you find оплошиться today, although less than 1000 hits on Google. But here's one, when someone is asking for help translating a note on a birthday gift: Не хотелось бы в грамматике оплошиться (I don't want to mess up the grammar).

The form оплошаться is more common – about 3500 hits — but clearly still an outlier. Here is someone fussing about online shopping: Не хочу оплошаться при выборе товаров в интернете (I don't want to do something dumb when I'm buying online).

This leads to a question: Are these the last remnants of ancient usage or a revival?

Check back in, oh, 200 years.

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