

Tricks of the Trade

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

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Измена: replacement (sometimes); betrayal (sometimes)

If there is one bit of Russian that continues to confuse me, it's prefixed verbs. You know — when you take a basic verb and then add при-, от-, из-, пере-, об-, за-, or по-, at the beginning of the verb to get seven new verbs with 27 meanings, except that almost all of the meanings can be translated with one verb in English and half of them seem like synonyms until you use one in the place of another and everyone snorts with laughter.

Good times.

The only slight consolation is that native Russian speakers sometimes have trouble with them, too, especially with usage.

Take, for example, the *менять* family of prefixed verbs: *сменять*, *поменять*, *заменять*, *обменять*, and *разменять*.

The only way I've gotten better in dealing with them is by bashing into my head certain common phrases until there is a nice, wide, unbreakable path in my brain between say, *разменять* (to change) and *пятитысячная банкнота* (a 5,000-ruble banknote) and I will always remember that *разменять* is the prefixed *менять* verb I need to use when I want to break a big bill.

So here we go with a maddening slew of near-synonyms and a few tricks to remember which is which.

One of my tricks is to take a look at the noun or adjective derived from the verb. For example, once upon a time you saw thousands of stands in Russia with signs reading *Обменный пункт* (currency exchange office) or *обмен валюты* (hard currency exchange). So *обменять* is to do an even exchange. However, note that "even exchange" can be understood differently by different people — and countries: *Виктора Бута обменяли на американскую баскетболистку Бриттни Грайнер* (Viktor Bout was exchanged for the American basketball player Brittney Griner).

This verb can be used for other more or less even exchanges, like exchanging a gift you don't like for something you do like. But: *Некоторые товары невозможно вернуть или обменять* (Some goods can't be returned or exchanged).

The good news about changing money — just as English speakers say *exchange money* and *change money*, Russian speakers also say *менять* and *поменять деньги*, so you won't be wrong when you ask, *Где тут можно поменять деньги?* (Where can you change money around here?)

Сменять and perfective *сменить* also have a helpful derivative noun, *смена*, that makes it easy to get a handle on usage. *Смена сезонов* (change of seasons), *смена обстоятельств* (change of circumstances or scenery), *смена профессии* (change of profession), even *смена постельного белья* (a change of bed sheets). This is not the kind of exchange of two things of equal value like with changing currency. It's a change, natural or otherwise, from one state to another. *Они были вынуждены сменить место жительства и работу* (They had to change their place of residence and work).

When there is a change of season, job or apartment, one thing replaces another. That's also *сменять/сменить*, but pay attention to what replaces what since the word order is often the opposite of English: *Время от времени танцы сменял вокал* (From time to time singing would take over from the dancing). You can remember it this way: *Весна сменяла зиму, лето ❑ весну* (Spring followed winter, summer followed spring).

Изменять/изменить is a change of a different sort — it means to alter, to make something different. No trade or exchange. It is not always easy: *Бесполезно пытаться изменить другого человека* (It's useless to try and change someone). On the other hand, you can change yourself, intentionally or not: *После всех его высказываний я изменила к нему отношение* (After all he said, I changed my attitude toward him).

There is another meaning to this verb pair connected with betrayal. Note that you know betrayal is meant because the thing/person betrayed is in the dative case. The betrayal might be of yourself: *На этом пути я ни разу не изменил своим принципам* (On the way I never

once betrayed my principles). Or it might be your marital vows you are betraying: Как изменить жене, чтобы она ни о чем не узнала? (How can I cheat on my wife so that she doesn't find out?)

Заменять/заменить is the verb pair of replacement, the out-with-the-old-in-with-the-new verb. Here the helpful noun is замена (replacement), which you see on signs and in advertisements for all kinds of goods and services. Just start to type the word in your search engine and it will immediately offer замена хрусталика (cataract surgery, literally replacement of lens). Заменял замок водительской двери (I replaced the lock on the driver's door). Для меня необычно заменять певицу (For me it's unusual to replace a singer).

Now for some tricky bits. It's great when you can describe a process several ways with one verb. It's not so great to remember how to do that, which means remembering which cases are used.

Заменять/заменить is a case in point. It's easy, as you see above or just heard, to describe replacing something or someone. But pay attention to how you replace one thing or person with another. You can exchange/replace a person or thing (accusative case, that is, кого/что) for someone or something in the instrumental case (кем/чем). This is easy to remember if you translate the verb as "replace": Такого талантливого игрока заменить никем другим (You can't replace such a talented player WITH just anyone).

Or you can replace something (accusative, что) for (НА) something (accusative, что). Лучше регулярно заменять старую зубную щетку на новую (It's better to regularly change out your old toothbrush for a new one).

Weird thing: The second usage is only for objects. But actually, now that I think about it, this makes good — and polite — sense: Нельзя сказать заменить старую певицу на новую. (You can't say "change out an old singer for a new one").

Well, someone might say that, but it would just be wrong.

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