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It's Not Surprising That It's Not Simple

By Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Мудрый: wise

In the pantheon of "hard things to get right in Russian" if you are not a native speaker — and sometimes if you are — right up there are "words that are almost, but not quite, alike." Sometimes one has an extra syllable, or they have different suffixes. You think you have them all sorted out until you don't.

Take, for example, the mistakes waiting to happen with what I have come to think of as the wise-guy words, starting with мудрый (wise). Maybe the problem begins with the etymology? The word seems to be related to a huge array of similar-sounding ancient root words that stretched from the Poles, Lithuanians and Latvians across to the Indians and Greeks. The definitions of these related words spanned from proud, devout and lively; wisdom, reason, sense, jealousy; to study and even win. It's impossible to find the ancient root that unites them all. Maybe humans simply like the sound "mu" that they all share.

In any case, мудрый is relatively straightforward: it is an adjective that means wise and can be applied to people or actions and objects. Когда-то давно об этом мне рассказал очень мудрый человек (A very wise man told me about that long, long ago). Мы надолго запомним его твердую руку и мудрый совет (We will long remember his steady hand and wise counsel).

The adverb мудро means wisely, which is how we should all act on the personal and state levels. Настало время мудро использовать воду и ограничить деятельность, загрязняющую ее (The time has come to wisely use water resources and limit activities that pollute them). Украина может мудро реформировать свою систему и стать процветающим государством (Ukraine can wisely reform its system and become a flourishing state).

The negative adjective немудрый (unwise) can similarly be applied to both people and things. There isn't much to say about people: Он — немудрый человек (He is not a wise person). Unwise things are more interesting, even if they raise more questions than they answer: Это немудрый выбор гардероба (That's not a wise wardrobe choice). And it's a good word to bandy around when you're feeling bossy: Это немудрый способ жить (That is not a wise way to live).

Then things get a bit complicated: same root, different suffix. Instead of мудрый (wise) we have мудрёный, which is something like "wise" on steroids. Мудрёный means mysterious and incomprehensible, difficult, ingenious, sophisticated, and/or abstruse.

Наука представляется чем-то очень мудрёным — смесью непонятных слов и длинных формул (Science seems to be something impenetrable — a mix of incomprehensible words and long formulas). Многие россияне рассматривают эти шаги, скорее, как позитивные перемены, а не как мудрёный политический заговор (Many Russian citizens regards these steps more as positive changes than some kind of intricate political conspiracy).

This adjective seems to be more commonly applied to things and events, but you can sometimes hear it in reference to people: Варвара, ты какая-то мудрёная, бог с тобой! (Vavara, you are one complicated lady, for God's sakes!)

Мудрёный has its opposite — немудрёный. When used to describe events or objects, it means plain or not sophisticated. When used to describe people, it means simple or simple-minded, straightforward and uncomplicated. Дело немудрёное (It's not a tricky matter). Она стала жить простой и немудрёной жизнью захолустного города в Бог знает какой глуши (She began to live a simple and unpretentious life in an out-of-the-way city out in the hicks, God knows where).

If food is called немудрёный it might be an unpretentious or a simple meal. That said, this meal in the rough sounds pretty good for plain fare: Наш немудрёный ужин, состоящий из рожек с тушенкой, огурцов, помидоров и обжаренных над углями костра ломтей хлеба, подходил к концу (Our simple meal of macarroni with tinned meat, cucumbers, tomatoes and hunks of bread roasted on the hot coals was coming to an end).

When used to describe people, немудрёный generally means a person of simple interests or

tastes: Человек он был немудрёный (He was a simple fellow).

The adverb мудрено (sometimes мудрёно) follows the general pattern as the adjective мудрёный. It means intricately, ingeniously, fancifully. It might be a straightforward assertion that something is really complicated and hard: Черт его знает, как мудрено устроена жизнь! (Good grief, life certainly is complicated!)

Or мудрено could be a criticism of something that is overly complex: Несколько раз, прочитав через силу какие-то из старых книжонок, вернее, не прочитав, а перелистав, потому что дочитать до конца ни одну из этих книг я не мог, слишком мудрено, ей-богу, через пять страниц я переставал понимать, о чем речь, а я ведь не самый большой кретин на свете (Several times when I forced myself to read some of the old books, or rather not "read" but "flip through" them since I couldn't read a single one of those books to the end, they're all too clever for the own good, for God's sake every five pages I would stop understanding what was going on, and I'm not the biggest cretin on earth...).

Немудрено is the kicker of the batch. Sometimes (rarely) it means "simply" or "it's simple" — that is, the opposite of all the intricacy, ingenuity, and way too much cleverness of мудрено. When it is used in this meaning, it can sometimes (now rarely) be written не мудрено. But today it seems to be more commonly written as one word: В этом лесу немудрено заблудиться (It's simple to get lost in these woods).

When it is written немудрено and (most of the time, but not always) followed by a comma and что (that), then it means "it's no wonder that," "it's not surprising that." С такими мыслями немудрено, что вы беспрерывно хвораете (When you've got thoughts like that in your head, it's no wonder that you constantly keep getting sick). Немудрено, что новая модная модель из стали по цене намного превышала классические золотые часы (It's not surprising that the new model made of steel costs much more than a classic gold watch).

Here's a clear example involving an apparently very good military commander: В его войске было множество крестьян, страдавших от сильного крепостного права, а потому немудрено, что он получил огромную поддержку народа (Among his troops were many peasants who suffered from the cruelties of serfdom, and therefore it is not surprising that he had great support from the population).

Here's a conversation the morning after that is also pretty clear: –Ни чё не помню... (I don't remember a thing). –Не мудрено... (Like that's a surprise...)

Sometimes you drink so much the night before немудрено, что (it's not at all surprising that) the old adages about the morning don't apply. After all, usually утро вечера мудренее (things are clearer in the morning).

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