

Usage 7—False Friends

There are many words which exist in both Russian and English but do not mean the same thing to the hearer. When people adopt a foreign word they seldom think about all the things it means in its original language. They generally take only one meaning and apply it to only one or two activities. For example, English speakers are surprised when they hear that “митинг” refers to only one kind of meeting: an open-air political rally.



Meeting



Митинг

The other reason meanings can differ between languages is that the meanings of words change over time. The meaning may shift in the borrowing language. Or it can shift in the original language to the point where speakers of that language remember the borrowed meaning only from old books. A case in point is “фальшивый” which carries the older English meaning “fake” rather than the modern “untrue”.

For each word in the table below we show the meanings which a modern speaker of each language is likely to recognize.

| Common English Meanings Today | Common Russian Meanings Today |
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| act—an action; a major division of a theatrical performance | акт—an official report of an incident such as an auto accident; an official record of a legally significant action; a major division of a theatrical performance (also known as “действие”) половой акт—the sex act |
| actual—real, not imaginary or hypothetical | актуальный—1) timely as in “актуальная информация”; 2) fully equipped and able to work; 3) valid, not expired (perhaps of a document) |
| accurate—precise, free of factual error | аккуратный—neat and tidy аккуратно—carefully so as not to damage anything; carefully so as not to give offense by one’s words |
| adequate—sufficient in quality and quantity to serve the intended purpose | адекватный—behaving in a way appropriate to the situation, dignified, giving evidence of a sound mind |
| affair—an ongoing matter; a sexual relationship, often illicit | афера—a scheme to enrich oneself by dishonest means |
| artist—one who produces paintings, sculptures, or other representations | артист—one who performs in a theater or a circus |

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| association—1) an organization; 2) a connection between two ideas; 3) spending time together as friends | ассоциация—1) an organization; 2) a connection between two ideas |
| authority—1) the right to make decisions for others, to issue orders; 2) a recognized expert qualified to speak on a particular subject | авторитет—one whose decisions and pronouncements are respected either generally or by a named person криминальный авторитет—a crime boss |
| automat—a fast food restaurant where food and drinks are served by vending machines | автомат—a vending machine; an automatic rifle; an automatic automobile transmission (gearbox) игральный автомат—a slot machine |
| barricade—an artificial impediment to traffic, either temporarily such as old tires piled to block a street, or permanent such as a gate across a road; a metaphorical obstacle, such as a legal or practical requirement which must be met before entering a market or other field of endeavor | баррикада—a obstacle hastily constructed from objects at hand to block a road, pass, etc. during time of war or civil unrest |
| basin—a wide open vessel for holding liquid, generally water for washing | бассейн—a swimming pool |
| combine (n.)—short for “combine harvester” | комбайн—any multi-function machine including a combine harvester, a mining machine, a food processor, a combined printer/copier/scanner |
| communication—the act of conveying information | коммуникация—1) a path over which information or supplies travel, a military supply chain; 2) the act of exchanging information; 3) a system of pipes or cables for supplying electricity, telephone service, water, heat, and the like. |
| competent—having the skills necessary to complete a given task | компетентный—qualified to render an opinion (in the English sense of “courts of competent jurisdiction”) |
| confetti—small pieces of colored paper thrown at a celebration | конфёты—candies |
| constructor—one who builds | констру́ктор—an erector set or similar toy having pieces which one can assemble to make arbitrary objects |
| control (as a verb)—to direct a process or activity | контроли́ровать—to monitor the activity of others being ready to step in if the situation becomes dangerous or rules are violated |
| cosmonaut—a Russian or Soviet astronaut | космона́вт—an astronaut |
| criminal—a person who commits crimes | кримина́л—criminality, criminal activity |
| demonstrate—to show how to do something | демонстри́ровать—to show (often of a photograph or a motion picture) |
| discipline—action taken, frequently by a parent, to teach good conduct and correct bad conduct | дисципли́на—a set of rules to which all members of a group must conform (the sense meant in the English expression “military discipline”) |

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| document—a text which provides information, evidence, or records official or organizational matters | докуме́нт—an important official paper such as a passport or a driver’s license (but occasionally used in the broader senses at left) |
| douche—irrigation of the female genitals | душ—a shower bath |
| effectively—1) in a manner likely to produce the desired effect; 2) having nearly the same effect: “effectively the same”, “effectively prohibited” | э́ффекти́вно—in manner likely to produce the desired effect |
| familiarity—acquaintance with some subject | фа́миллья́рность—the act of being overly familiar in one’s manner |
| false—not in accordance with fact | фа́льшивы́й—fake or counterfeit (as in the English expression “a false beard”); insincere and affected |
| fanatic—one who is carried away beyond reason by his beliefs | фа́на́т—an enthusiastic supporter (fan) |
| fan—a device for moving air for purposes of cooling or ventilation | фе́н—a blow dryer for hair |
| focus—direction of attention, resources or activity toward a single point | фо́кус—a conjuring trick; a elaborate deception; a deliberately specious argument фо́кусник—a stage magician |
| inadequate—not sufficient in quantity or quality | неа́декватный—undisciplined or extremely eccentric in behavior, possibly mentally unsound |
| intelligent—having natural ability to reason clearly and solve hard problems | инте́ллиге́нтный—educated and cultured |
| kettle—a vessel for boiling water or cooking food over a fire; a vessel for boiling water for tea | ко́тёл—a boiler (device for producing steam or hot water for domestic heating or industrial use) |
| master—one who commands servants or slaves | ма́стер—a skilled workman |
| meeting—a coming together either by chance or by prior arrangement | ми́тинг—an open-air political rally |
| mystification—the mental state of one confronted by the inexplicable | мисти́фика́ция—a hoax |
| normal—ordinary, everyday, that which is expected | но́рмальны́й—not defective or damaged, of good quality, entirely suitable нено́рмальны́й—of an object: damaged or defective; of a person: not sound in mind |
| notebook—a notepad in the form of a book | ноутбу́к—a laptop computer |
| object—any distinct physical thing such as a pencil or the planet Mars; the goal toward which a course of action is directed | объект—a building, factory, or other facility, often with a military purpose |
| original—not a copy; the product of a new creative process | о́ригина́льный—unusual, strange, eccentric |
| pathetic—poor and dejected, wholly inadequate (of an effort or excuse) | па́фосны́й—impressive-sounding but empty (of speech) |

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| preservative—a substance added to a product such as food, drink, or medicine to keep it fresh and to prevent it from spoiling | презерватив—a condom |
| provocation—an action performed principally to anger or annoy another person | провокация—an action intended to annoy or inconvenience a political foe in order to provoke a response; a subterfuge in which agents of one political faction do something disreputable or illegal and make it look like it was done by their enemies. |
| principled—holding oneself to high principles of conduct | принципиальный—standing on principle in trivial matters (as in “It’s the principle of the thing!”) |
| scandal—the public attention which ensues when a shameful matter involving well-known persons is revealed | скандал—a noisy scene with voices raised in anger |
| school—a place where persons of any age are instructed in classrooms including colleges and universities | школа—a place where children (up through high school) are instructed in classrooms |
| seance—a meeting at which contact with the dead is attempted, frequently through a spirit medium | сеанс—a session (of artistic activity, of the use of a computer by a logged in user, etc.); a showing of a motion picture |
| separator—a partition which keeps things apart, a device for moving things further apart | сепаратор—a cream separator (a device used in a dairy) |
| sex—1) the character of being male or female; 2) attraction of one sex to the other; 3) sexual intercourse (since the 1960’s) | секс—sexual intercourse, viewed primarily as a physical act |
| sexual—related to the fact that humans are male and female | сексуальный—overtly sexual in appearance or behavior |
| site—the place where an event occurs or a building or other object is installed or constructed | сайт—a website |
| sportsman—one who hunts or fishes for sport | спортсмен—an athlete (of either sex) спортсменка—a female athlete |
| Sputnik—Sputnik I (an artificial satellite launched by the Soviet Union in 1957) | спутник—a traveling companion, by analogy a moon, an artificial moon спутник жизни—a spouse |
| student—one who studies, a school child, a university student | студент—a university student (of either sex) студентка—a female university student |
| transmission—the act of conveying something, especially something unseen or abstract such disease, electricity, or a television program; a mechanical device for conveying motive energy from a producer to the thing driven | трансмиссия—an automatic automobile transmission (gearbox) |
| trick—a deception, a slight-of-hand, a clever move | трюк—a stunt such as might be performed by an acrobat |

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| tsar—an emperor of Russia | царь—a king, except for Western kings (of England, France, etc.) who are “король” |
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