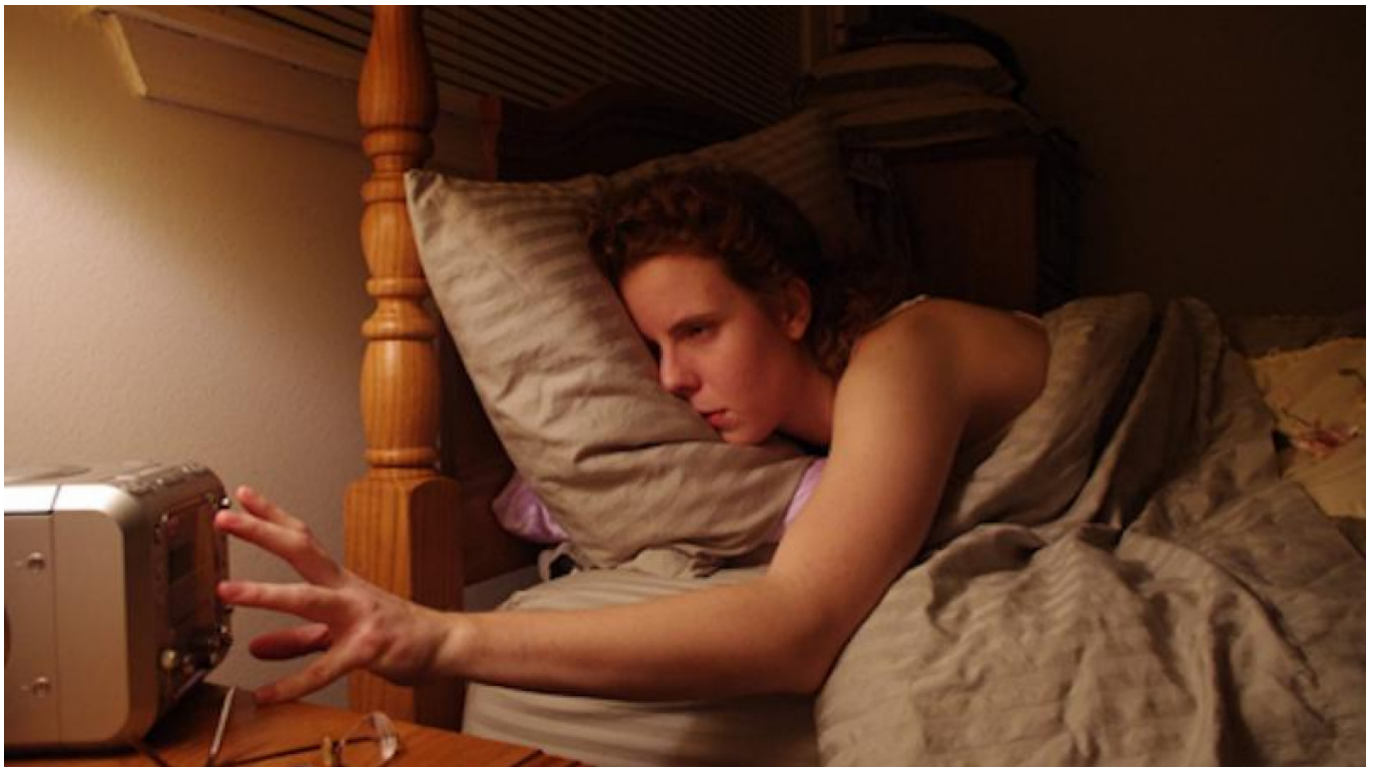


The Extraordinary Tale of the Ordinary in Russian

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Обыденный: ordinary

The Russian language is full of surprises. The other day I was puzzled by the name of a church:

Храм Илии Пророка Обыденного, which to the modern ear sounds like the Church of the Prophet Elijah the Ordinary. Now, it's been a long time since my Sunday school classes, but as I recall, Elijah rose up to heaven in a fiery chariot, which is hardly ordinary. So I thought that maybe this was a modest church of the Prophet Elijah, called Ordinary to distinguish it from another grander church dedicated to Elijah nearby.

Of course I was wrong. It turns out that the word *обыденный* was originally three words: *объ инъ днь*, in which *о* or *об* meant *в* or *за*; *инъ* meant

один; and дѣнь meant день. That is: в один день (in one day). It referred to anything that was done or could be done in a single day. In the case of the church near Ostozhenka, обыденный meant that it was built in a day — or rather the original wooden church was built in a day, and then the name stuck even when a stone church was built to replace it later.

In the old days, you could say путь обыденный (a one-day trip), or talk about обыденный мотылек (one-day moth), also called обыденка, or tell your significant other that cleaning the garage is definitely не обыденное дело (not a one-day task), or gossip about your neighbor's обыденна честь (fleeting honor).

I fell totally, helplessly in love with this word and wanted to use it all the time. Slight problem: the latest reference I could find to this usage was 1742. Later обыденный came to mean ordinary, nothing special — presumably because something you could do in a day, or a trip you could take in a day was something mundane — no big deal.

And that's the way you use it today:

Он произносил слова обыденным, нормальным голосом (He said the words in an ordinary, regular tone of voice.)

Идеалы если есть, то они берутся из обыденной жизни (If there are ideals, they are taken from everyday life.)

Russian seems to have a large store of words for what is ordinary and nothing special. Like

будничный (workaday), which suggests that what you do during the work week is a bit boring in contrast with what you do on a weekend or holiday.

Автор рассматривает многие стороны будничной Москвы: городской транспорт, в частности (The writer looks at all aspects of everyday Moscow, including public transportation.) This word is often used to describe speech patterns:

Они общались на будничном русском языке (They spoke in common everyday Russian.)

Curiously, you can say “everyday” in Russian three ways, starting with вседневный (literally all days): Выражаясь вседневным языком, надо было выпить (To use everyday language — we needed a drink.) And повседневный (literally like all days): Дореволюционные вещи из обычных повседневных предметов превращаются в "наследие прошлого" (Pre-revolutionary objects are transformed from ordinary, everyday things into “the legacy of the past.”) And even каждодневный (literally every day):

Она заявила о необходимости помощи миллионам граждан в решении их непосредственных

каждодневных проблем (She stated that it was essential to help millions of citizens solve their own mundane problems.)

Or you can go for
банальный (banal),
рутинный (routine),
прозаичный (prosaic) or
plain old обычный (usual, ordinary).

And consider how curious it is that a church built in a day is just so ordinary.

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