

Happy Russian Anniversary To Me

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Юбилей: anniversary and party

When you begin to study a foreign language, at first you are struck by all the differences — and how wrong all those differences are. I mean, six main cases in Russian — really? And aspect? You really think I can take the time to figure out if I'm talking about a habitual or a one-time action before I say when I'm going to go home tonight (возвращаться or вернуться)? And consonant clusters like in взгляд (view)? Come on, Russian! Give me a break!

And then slowly but surely something really strange happens. Not only do you get used to cases and declensions and aspect and tongue-twisting words with seven syllables... you begin to appreciate the internal logic of Russian. Finally, one fine day you realize: oh, this is so much better in Russian than in English.

Zing! A heavenly choir of Russian teachers get their angel wings.

One way Russian is vastly superior to English is in the language for celebrating special dates. First of all, there is one multi-purpose verb that is used for every occasion, from a wedding to a new job to a national holiday: поздравлять (to congratulate). Your neighbor's kid graduated from high school? Поздравляю! Your best friends just tied the knot? Поздравляю! It's Victory Day, Christmas, New Year's, International Love-a-Shrimp Day? Поздравляю! If you want to get fancy, just continue the sentence: Поздравляю вас (literally I congratulate you on...) с Днём Победы (Victory Day), с праздником (holiday), с жемитъбой (wedding), or even с разводом (divorce). In English, you have to say something 19th century like "I congratulate you on the occasion of Victory Day," or mumble something 21st century like "Great! Happy holidays! Best wishes! So happy for you!"

And then Russian has better words for "anniversary." The problem with the English word is its associations with the happy celebration of many years of wedded bliss. It sounds odd when coupled with the death of a poet or other sad event. Юбилей (jubilee) is mostly used for happy occasions. It means some variety of anniversary, usually, but not always, what Russians call круглая дата (a round number, a milestone) like 10 or 25 years.

Сегодня празднуем юбилей: в этот день 25 лет назад мы с мужем поженились (Today we're going to celebrate an anniversary: on this day 25 years ago my husband and I got married.) And it's also the celebration itself: Он любит ходить в рестораны, клубы, на званые обеды, юбилеи (He loves to go to restaurants, clubs, dinner parties and celebrations.)

The other great word is годовщина, which can be used for any kind of anniversary. Joyful: Сегодня они отмечают третью годовщину их союза (Today they are celebrating the third anniversary of their union). Mournful: В годовщину Сониной смерти, в октябре, мы поехали на кладбище (We marked the date of Sonya's death in October by going to the cemetery.) Or both, depending on your point of view: Раньше 7 и 8 ноября годовщина Великой Октябрьской социалистической революции (In the past November 7 and 8 marked the Great October Socialist Revolution).

To be super-grammatical, say годовщина смерти, победы, подписания (anniversary of the death, victory, signing) rather than со дня смерти, победы (from the day of death, victory), and so on.

So I can say: Сегодня пятнадцатая годовщина моей первой рубрики! Ура! (Today marks 15 years since my first column. Hurray!)

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