

Love as a Russian Chemistry Experiment

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

October 27, 2017



20th Century Fox Television

Химия: chemistry, as in test tubes

So there I am in the kitchen, busy at the stove while the television is on in the background. I'm paying more attention to the sauce I'm stirring than the TV, so the trailer for Как я встретил вашу маму (How I Met Your Mother) is just background noise with a few words breaking through: ... друзья (friends)... Нью-Йорк (New York)... бесстыдство Барни (Barney's brazenness)...

That is, until they get to: химия между Маршаллом и Лили (the WHAT between Marshall and Lily?) Stop stirring sauce. Oh, the "chemistry between Marshall and Lily," which was translated literally as химия. This must sound something like "the halology between Marshall and Lily" or "the mathematical statistics between Marshall and Lily." It makes no sense at all. Why haven't people complained?

Actually, after some poking around on the interwebs, it appears that lots of people here in Russia should have been complaining about mysterious chemical experiments being conducted on the population. In one text, a friend says to a couple in love: Мы знаем, у вас есть химия. (We know that you have a chemical reaction.) Another person comments about some married friends: Я бы сказал, что эти двое разбираются в химии (I'd say those two know their way around the science of chemistry.) Surely some translator or editor thought: Really? That can't be right...

Note to translators: If it sounds wacky, chances are your translation is wacky.

Just to clarify: in English, chemistry can be used figuratively to describe the interaction between people. People can have bad chemistry or great chemistry, meaning they rub each other the wrong way or they are totally compatible.

In Russian you don't call this chemistry, although you might call it a form of electricity, at least at a first meeting: Какая-то искра проскочила между нами, и я понял...она — моя. (A kind of spark passed between us and I realized — she was mine.)

This might be simply контакт (contact), as one woman describes it: У нас с ним сразу

возник контакт, и я поняла, что мы близки духовно (He and I felt a connection right away, and I knew that we were spiritually close.) Or связь (connection, tie) of one kind or another: Сильную эмоциональную связь, возникшую между нами, порвать невозможно (The strong emotional connection between us can't be broken.)

In Russian scientific terminology, this connection appears to be called аттракция (attraction), but this is probably about as comprehensible to the average lovelorn Russian on the street as химия. Когда появился Петя — умница и красавец — Оля среагировала на возможность (которую стала замечать благодаря своему развитию), и у нее возникла взаимная аттракция с Петей (When Petya appeared — smart and handsome — Olya reacted to the possibility — which she had begun to notice due to her level of development — and she and Petya were attracted to each other.)

Well, that sure takes all the romance out of it.

Among mere mortals, however, it's more common to describe the connection as a form of compatible linguistics: Мы говорим на одном языке (We speak the same language.) Мы поняли друг друга с полуслова (We finished each other's sentences, literally "we understood each other from half a word"). Разница в несколько лет нисколько не мешает нам с Сергеем находить общий язык (Several years difference in our ages haven't kept Sergei and me from finding a common language.)

People might be drawn to one another, which one woman describes in almost desperate terms: Мы испытывали необъяснимую тягу друг к другу. Пропал интерес ко всему. (We were inexplicably drawn to each other. We had no interest in anything else.)

Or they might just be right for each other: Мы созданы друг для друга (We were made for each other.) Now that's something everyone can understand.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/10/27/love-as-a-russian-chemistry-experiment-a59394>