

Extreme Russian Grammar

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

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Жареный: fried

Since I'm on the Russian language geek mailing circuit, I get a lot of fun, weird Russian emails. My favorites are the ones with fabulously bad translations, like the hands-down winner "ice cream in the ass" for "мороженое в асс." (ice cream, assorted flavors), although "Please do not worry" for the hotel door sign "Просьба не беспокоить" (Do not disturb) is a close runner-up. I also get lists of "untranslatable Russian words," which I love because one day I want to hand in a translation with holes in it and say, "Hey, not my fault. Those words just can't be translated."

Recently I've been sent the same Russian grammar joke a half-dozen times. And each time I've gotten it, I've responded: Да, видела. Схватила за голову и завыла (Yeah, I saw it. I grabbed my head and howled.) It's about fried potatoes.

It begins with the phrase жареная картошка (fried potatoes) — note the spelling of the word for fried: one "n." Then the writer adds mushrooms to the potatoes as they are being fried, and suddenly there are two "n's" in the word for fried: жаренная с грибами картошка (potatoes fried with mushrooms). Finally the writer returns to frying just the potatoes, puts them on a plate, and then adds the mushrooms. We're back to one "n": жареная картошка с грибами (fried potatoes with mushrooms). The moral of this grammar lesson? The number of "n's" "зависит от того, в какой момент вы добавили грибы" (depends on what point you added the mushrooms.)

Who wouldn't howl?

The thing is, it's actually right although it took me a while to understand the logic behind it. Let me share everything I've learned about this miserable bit of Russian grammar.

I was helped in this by my neighbors, who got their son through his graduation exams by papering the entire apartment with these rules. The poor kid couldn't go to the bathroom without staring at post-its about fried potatoes and crawling soldiers. But he passed the exam with his "n's" in the right place and right number.

First of all, you have to know what these words are called. They are причастия (participles) — actually страдательные причастия (passive participles) — which are words formed from a verb that act like an adjective and describe an action that took place in the past, like a painted door, burnt toast, written instructions, and so on.

In Russian participles are formed quite simply and the standard is to use just one “n” in 99 percent of the cases: читать – читанный (to read – read); ранить – раненый (to wound – wounded).

Then there are five exceptions which require two “n’s”:

First, participles made from perfective verbs. This is easy-peasy. Решить is a perfective verb, ergo решённая задача (problem solved).

Second, participles from verbs that have the suffixes –овать or –евать are written with two “n’s.” This is also pretty easy. Образовать produces образованный (to educate, educated); мариновать produces маринованный (marinate, marinated). This category has two exceptions: the participle from ковать (to forge) has one “n” – кованный (forged) as does the one from жевать (to chew) – жеванный (chewed). Don’t sweat it. Unless you are into medieval fairs or have a puppy, you’re not going to write about forged steel or chewed up slippers very often.

The third case of double “n’s” is when the verb has any prefix except не- (non), like сваренный суп (с+варить = thoroughly cooked soup); or выброшенная бумага (вы+бросить = discarded paper).

Then we come to the fourth exception, which is the explanation for our fried potato confusion. You use two “n’s” when there is a dependent or qualifying phrase. So you’d have вязанный шарф (knitted scarf), but вязанный бабушкой шарф (a scarf knitted by my grandmother, in which “by my grandmother” is the dependent phrase). My neighbors wrote two signs to bash this into their son’s head: раненый ползёт по руинам (the wounded soldier crawls across the ruins) and раненный на войне ветеран живёт на втором этаже (a veteran wounded in the war lives on the second floor). The participle in the second phrase has two “n’s” because the wounded man is qualified by the phrase “на войне” (in the war).

In our case we have two “n’s” when we make a dish of potatoes and mushrooms, that is, when we add a dependent phrase to the mushrooms that answers the question “potatoes fried with what?”: жаренная с грибами картошка (potatoes fried with mushrooms).

Let’s recap. You’re in the kitchen. You fry up some potatoes and plate them: жаренная картошка. Your Significant Other wanders in and says: Слушай, давай я быстро пожарю грибочки (Listen, how about I quickly fry up some mushrooms). You sit at the table, watching the news and sipping a decent dry white until he’s done. Then he puts them on your plate next to the potatoes. These mushrooms were not fried with the potatoes; they are not part of a dish called “fried potatoes and mushrooms.” Here the mushrooms play the role of a side dish, a garnish to the potatoes, as it were. So when you write your mother-in-law about dinner, you say you had жаренная картошка с грибочками, proudly showing off your mastery of Russian grammar.

And then, because she is your mother-in-law, she writes back that her son really loves them fried up together: В детстве Вася очень любил жаренную с грибами картошку (When he was little, Vasya really loved potatoes fried with mushrooms). She uses two “n’s,” showing off her superior cooking skills and supreme knowledge of Russian.

Finally, there are eight exceptions to the one-n rule. Native English speakers are not allowed to whine about this, because people who say work-worked, want-wanted, ask-asked and then do-did, eat-ate, have-had, and rise-rose — and let’s not even think about cough, through, and though — can’t complain about a few measly exceptions.

These exceptions don’t fall into any of the above categories and there’s no particular reason for them to have the double “n” – but they do. The only cool thing is that they all sound like they are a magic spell: невиданный (unseen); нежданный (unexpected); негаданный (undreamed of, unlikely); неожиданный (sudden); неслыханный (unheard of); нечаянный (inadvertent); данный (given); священный (sacred).

We can put this in practice right away. Friday morning Russian news sources announced: Сегодня мы получили неожиданную новость, что Олег Сенцов прекратил голодовку. Первой его пищей после 145 дней стала курочка, сваренная для него женщиной-доктором. (Today we got the unexpected news that Oleg Sentsov stopped his hunger strike. His first meal after 145 days was chicken, boiled for him by a woman doctor.)

If it's true? Best. Grammar. Lesson. Ever.

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