

Russian Wisdom and Wiseguys

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

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Мудрый: wise, sensible

Wisdom, in Russian – and presumably in Russia – is a walk on a tightrope: one misstep and you plummet from the heights of virtue down to the gutters of sophistry. The really nasty part for students and non-native speakers? Some words mean both wisdom and the lack of wisdom. It just ain't fair.

As usual when dealing with a tricky patch of Russian, I like to start with the easy stuff and work my way into the messy bits.

Мудрый is an easy start. It's a very old word that means wise, rational, and sensible. It's real-life intelligence based on rich life experience. Она была мудрым дипломатом, умела улаживать любые конфликты (She was a wise diplomat who could smooth over any conflicts.)

Human activities can be wise, too. There is мудрый совет (wise advice); мудрая политика (wise policy); or мудрая пословица (wise proverb). Кнопка "стоп" ☒ самое мудрое техническое изобретение (The "stop" button is the most sensible technical invention.)

During the Soviet period, the leader was wise and all his decisions were wise. Well, that was the story, anyway. В.И. Ленин – великий основатель и мудрый вождь Коммунистической партии (Vladimir Lenin was the great founder and wise leader of the Communist Party.) The country was ruled by a мудрая политика (wise policy) with the verbal accompaniment of мудрые ленинские слова (Lenin's wise words)./Мудрость (wisdom) is something we all aspire to. Вспомнил народную мудрость: рыба гниёт с головы (I recalled the folk wisdom that a fish rots from the head down.)

All good so far. Trouble starts with the verb мудрить.

One meaning is to analyze, to brainstorm, to rack your brains. You can say Весь день мудрила над задачей (I spent the whole day working on one equation) or Он хороший работник – не ленится мудрить над каждой деталью (He's a good worker – he's not lazy and he'll really nail every detail.)

But more often than not, мудрить has a different, almost opposite meaning: to overcomplicate or overthink something – not to be wise about something, but to be a wiseacre.

Чего мудрить: поставьте вопрос на голосование и решите конфликт мирным путем. (Why make it more complicated than it is? Just put the issue up to vote and resolve the conflict peacefully.) Here's the same thought from a different angle: А, может быть, лучше сразу раздать взятки и не мудрить? (Maybe just pass around the bribes and not screw around?)

Мудрить can also mean to be deceptive – as if you were using your wisdom for nefarious activities. For example, here someone advises a friend to fill out a visa form honestly: Лучше не мудрить, выбрать "законопослушный вариант", и тогда путешествие в эту замечательную страну превзойдёт все ваши ожидания (It's better not to play around – take the law-abiding path and then your trip to this amazing country will be better than anything you can imagine.)

Мудрить над кем-то means to make fun of someone, to torment them. Отчим Фёдора мудрил порою над ним с машинкой да ножницами, оставляя чёлку на лбу и голый затылок (Fyodor's stepfather would sometimes make him look like an idiot, playing with his scissors and clipper to give him bangs but shave the back of his head.)

In all these cases, it's as if wisdom has been turned on its head, and all that life experience and knowledge has been used to torment people. But how do you figure out if он мудрил над статей means “he really put his mind to the article” or “he really overcomplicated that article”? The only salvation: context.

And then there are the adjectives and adverbs from this verb, which have two sets of complications: the first is that they can be spelling with ё or е – мудрёный or мудренный – and the second is that they can mean either genuinely complex or artificially overcomplex.

But a small help is that there seem to be standard expressions, like мудрёная наука (arcane arts, occult) or мудрёная книга (complex book). Or this common expression: Утро вечера мудренее (literally morning is wiser than the night, or “sleep on it”).

Another set expression is не мудрено which means “no wonder” (literally “it is not complicated” or colloquially “you don't have to be a rocket scientist to know that...”). Учитывая его график работы, не мудрено, что он чувствовал изнеможение, усталость (Considering his work schedule, it's no wonder that he feels weak and exhausted.) This is paired with a question: мудрено ли (Is it any wonder, that...?). Мудрено ли, что, окунувшись в здешние трудности, он опять рвался обратно, в море? (Is it any surprise that after immersing himself in the problems here he was dying to go back out to sea?)

When you start trying to figure this out, your Russian friends will say: В этом ничего мудрёного нет (It's perfectly simple!) And you say: Не мудри надо мной! (Don't make fun of me.)

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