

Stand By Your Russian What?

The Word's Worth

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

February 23, 2019



Defenders of the Fatherland **Pixabay**

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Супруг: spouse

Feb. 23 in Russia is День защитников Отечества (Defender of the Fatherland Day), the latest iteration of a holiday that began as День красной Армии (Red Army Day) in 1922 and then underwent name changes as armies and regimes fell, rose, had new purposes and official titles.

But for most of the last almost 100 years, conscription was universal, and so the day to celebrate veterans really was the day to celebrate men.

Today my sense is that less men get together with their old army buddies to drink, eat, and generally carouse — sometimes with a баня (bath house) playing a major role — but there are still congratulatory phone calls, gifts (usually potable and potent), and women spending many hours in kitchens preparing the favorite meals of their men folk.

And so, it seems like the perfect occasion to discuss what to call the men in your life. Because it's Russian, it's not quite as simple as you think.

Let's begin with your husband. You call him мой муж (my husband), right? As in: *Моего мужа сейчас нет дома, но я скажу, что вы зашли* (My husband isn't home right now, but I'll tell him you stopped by.) There is nothing wrong with that if you're young and just starting out in life and your careers, or if you're talking to a neighbor or friend. But when you and your husband are older, and when he is a distinguished professor of widget optimization and the World Widget Society is calling for him, he is not мой муж. He is Иван Петрович (Ivan Petrovich). That is, the proper way to refer to him is by name and patronymic. *Иван Петрович не может подойти к телефону, но я обязательно скажу, что вы звонили* (Ivan Petrovich can't come to the phone right now, but I'll be sure to tell him that you called.)

For unarticulated cultural reasons, referring to your husband to outsiders as супруг (spouse); супружник (dear spouse); отец (father); папа (Papa) is definitely déclassé. And unless you are still on your honeymoon, don't even think of calling him мой спутник жизни (my life companion) or моя половина (my other half). It's so Not Done.

Moving on to the more general categories of men: мужчина and мужик. Both mean “man.” The first is the generic descriptive word, what you call a man you don't know or have no emotional or other connection to. *-Кто звонил? – Не знаю. Какой-то мужчина. Перезвонит.* (“Who called?” “I don't know – some man. He'll call back.”)

If you know the man or want to give more information about him, you can start playing around with diminutive forms. Is he a big hulking guy? Then he's мужичище. Он очень сердечный, хотя и грубоватый мужичище (He's very sincere, even though he's a rather coarse hulk of a man.) Or is he a little guy? Then he's мужичок or мужичонка. Он перерос свои пятнадцать лет, взрослый маленький мужичок с грубоватыми руками (He was bigger than his 15 years, a grown-up little fellow with rough hands.) This can also be used for someone who is small in some figurative way, the kind of little man you don't notice or who isn't that important. *На соседнем сиденье сидит мужичок-грибник в резиновых сапогах и с ведром* (In the passenger seat was some guy who was going to forage for mushrooms, wearing rubber boots and holding a bucket.)

Мужик is a trickier word. We all know that once upon a time it referred to a peasant man. *Орловский мужик не велик ростом* (The peasant men of Orlov aren't tall.) And then it referred to any uneducated and uncultured man who had coarse manners and appearance. *На кой чёрт мужикам надо было переться бомжевать тут?* (Why the hell do these bums come here to find a place to sleep?) And here is a distinction about the mayor of St. Petersburg, Anatoly Sobchak, that explains one person's understanding of мужик and мужчина: *Собчак был не мужиком, а именно мужчиной.* (Sobchak wasn't some yokel; he was a gentleman.)

But for other people, мужик is a positive description, something like “a real man” or “a real

Russian man” with connotations of strength, morality, and honesty. Ирина вдруг увидела в нём массу достоинств: немногословный, честный, трудяга, а главное ☒ мужик. (Irina suddenly saw he had a slew of good qualities: reticent, honest, hard-working, and the main thing — salt of the earth.)

If Irina’s beloved were Jewish, this мужик would be called a mensch.

And then there is the off-hand, friendly мужики (guys). You call out to the men chugging down beers as they work the shashlik grill: Эй! Мужики! Как там наш шашлык? (Hey, guys! How’s the meat coming along?)

Older fellows include дядя and дядька, both of which are uncles of a sort. Дядя is the word you use to describe your relative: Дядя Вова, for example. But the neighbor’s little girl, who is totally unrelated to Uncle Vova, might call him that, too: Дядя Вова научил меня плавать! (Uncle Vova taught me how to swim!) And although this seems to be less common these days, it’s still the polite way to refer to or address an unknown older man. Постой в очереди за этим дядей (Get in line behind that man.) Дядя, вы уронили печатку (Mister, you dropped a glove.)

Although дядька sounds like an affectionate diminutive, it has generally different and more negative connotations — perhaps because before the 1917 Revolution дядька was a servant who looked after the little boys in noble families either at home or at university and in the army. Today it can have the sense of an irrelevant old man: Стоят у мавзолея недовольные раскормленные дядьки (Very well-fed old geezers are standing by the Mausoleum looking mighty unhappy.) Познакомил её с какими-то дядьками, они целовали ей руку и говорили "мадам" (He introduced her to some old guys who kissed her hand and called her “Madam.”) Or he could be just be "some old guy": Там стоял дядька, раздавал листовки (Some old guy was standing there handing out flyers.)

And finally, there is one last kind of дядька, who famously lives in Kiev. He is part of the expression в огороде бузина, а в Киеве дядька (literally, “there is elderberry in the garden and an old guy in Kiev”). Makes no sense, right? It’s not supposed to. It’s what you say when your interlocutor says something ridiculous or compares apples and oranges.

But I hope that дядька has someone to raise a glass with on Saturday.

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/02/23/stand-by-your-russian-what-a64601>