



Meet the Pupkins!

The Word's Worth

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

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ППКК: I agree with every word (see below)

In my never-ending quest to make mastering the Russian language less onerous and more fun, I've come up with a new metaphor. It is, I admit, pretty lame. But here it is: Russian is really just a huge tub of blocks. Each block is either a prefix, a suffix, or a root. All you have to do is put a couple blocks together to get instantly recognizable verbs, nouns, adjectives and so on. So easy, a child could do it!

How did that go over? Not so good? Hey, I'm trying my best. Especially because I really love Russian word formation. Once you get used to taking words apart and putting them together, your comprehension goes through the roof.

Let's take the verb писать — stress on last syllable — (to write, to draw, to compose). The

word shares a root with the word пёстрый (multi-colored) and first meant to paint or color something. Ancient folks probably first drew some pictures on the cave wall or in the sand and had a word for that: писать. When they switched to writing, they just used the same verb for drawing letters. Писать still means both write and draw or create, although we need separate verbs in English: Он очень талантливый парень — пишет книги, музыку и даже картины (He's a really talented kid — he writes books, composes music and even paints pictures.)

So we've got our verb. Let's find a family — the lovely Пупкины (the Pupkins) — and then grab a pile of prefixes. The prefix the Pupkins stick on to писать most often is на-. Написать is the perfective verb in the pair of писать/написать and means completion or doing something once. Grandfather Pupkin, the creative one in the family, tells us: Однажды мне попало на глаза стихотворение "В День Святого Валентина", на которое я впоследствии написал музыку (One day I happened to see the verse "On Valentine's Day," and later I wrote the music to it.)

Being a creative type, Дедушка Пупкин (Grandpa Pupkin) might use the prefix до-, which has the meaning of adding something to finish it, or пере-, which means to do over something. Дописать can mean to tack on a bit of something: По самому низу листа дописал от себя самого (At the very bottom of the page, he added something personal.) Or it can mean to add something in order to finish writing, painting, or composing: Наконец-то он дописал роман (He finally finished his novel, that is, added what was needed to complete it.)

Переписывать/переписать means to write over: Он переписывал концовку десятки раз пока не был доволен (He rewrote the ending dozens of times before he was happy with it.) In a more bureaucratic sphere, переписать means to make an inventory of things or a census of people (to write down everything again). The result of the latter is перепись населения (census).

Next up is за-, a prefix that usually has the sense of starting an action or doing something quickly. So записать can mean to jot something down: Запиши его номер телефона (Write down his phone number.)

When we move to the wonderful world of bureaucracy, organizations, and offices, записать is what the receptionist does to give you an appointment. Господин Пупкин, я записала вас к Ивану Никифоровичу в 15 часов в среду (Mr. Pupkin, I've got you down to see Ivan Nikiforovich at 3 p.m. on Wednesday.) And then Mr. Pupkin can use the reflexive form of the verb записаться to tell Mrs. Pupkin: Я к нему записался на среду (I've got an appointment with him on Wednesday.)

The Pupkins, being a loving couple, use another reflexive verb to describe their relationship, which is rather metaphorical in Russian. Расписаться means to sign something, but is most often used to mean "to sign the marriage register." This is different than венчаться, which is literally "to wear a wreath" but really means "to have a church wedding." Мы с мужем расписались 20 лет назад, а теперь я очень хочу венчаться (My husband and I were married in a civil ceremony 20 years ago, but now I really want a church wedding.)

In either case, they need to sign documents. This is подписать – literally "to sign under,"

which is usually where you put your signature: at the bottom of a text. You will hear this word a lot in Russia. Every time you buy something, order something, get registered, or grab your pizza from the delivery guy, you'll hear: Подпишите, пожалуйста (Sign here, please).
Нужна ваша подпись (I need your signature.)

You can also use подписываться/подписаться to sign something or sign up for something. You can even sign for someone else: Госпожа Пупкина подписывается за мужа (Mrs. Pupkin signs for her husband.) Meanwhile, her husband uses this verb to sign up for access to a television channel: Я подписался на канал «Спорт» (I subscribed to the "Sports" channel.)

Their teenage kid uses the word подписываться, too — or rather its abbreviation. When he likes something that he sees in social media, he writes ППКС!!!! Подписываюсь под каждым словом (literally "I sign under every word") or "I couldn't agree more."

Mr. and Mrs. Pupkin are very concerned about their son's tendency to sit at the computer chatting on social media all day and night. They use the word приписывать (to attribute, literally "to write onto") in their worried discussions. Mr. Pupkin says: То, что он ничего не успевает, я приписываю лени (I attribute his failure to get things done to laziness.) His wife doesn't agree. Да нет. Приписывать нужно возрасту (Not at all. Chalk it up to his age.)

But Mr. Pupkin is so worried that he makes his wife take Пупкин младший (Pupkin Junior) to a doctor. There she first describes her son's behavior with the verb описать — the prefix о- (doing something comprehensively, inclusively) added to писать (to make a picture) to create the notion of describing something. Она подробно описала поведение сына (She described her son's behavior in detail.)

Before the doctor examines her son, she has to be sure he's registered in her district. Прописать is to register someone at an address, after which прописка (registration) is stamped in the resident's passport.

That formality taken care of, the doctor checks over the teenager and decides that he shows signs of stress. So she used прописать in the sense of prescribing a procedure or medicine. That evening Mrs. Pupkin tells her husband: Она прописала ему две недели в больнице! Без гаджетов! (She prescribed two weeks in the hospital with no electronic gadgets.)

Пупкин младший is distraught. But his grandfather consoles him using yet another verb in the писать family: выписать (to release, literally "to write out," that is, to write a document that releases someone from a hospital or other institution). Ничего, ничего! Там красивое место. Ты будешь жалеть, когда выпишут тебя! (Don't worry! It's a beautiful setting. You'll be sorry when they sign you out!)

ППКС! Now that's something I could sign up for!

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