

Fixing It Up the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

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

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РЕМОНТНИК: repairman, builder, remodeler

If Hermes (god of translators) or St. Jerome (patron saint of translators) came to me in a dream and, in reward for spending my life darting between Russian and English, gave me one word from Russian I could magically insert into English, I'd say: ремонт.

РЕМОНТ, as you know if you have spent more than about three minutes in Russia, is an all-purpose word for repairs. It covers everything from fixing a broken necklace clasp to a gut renovation of a house or even the refitting of an ocean liner or reconstruction of a thoroughfare. The joy of the word is that it means a fix, repair, touch-up, redo,

reconstruction, remodeling, renovation, restoration. That is, it means taking something and fixing it, changing it, updating it, or making it better in some way.

This is very convenient. You don't have to think or specify if your neighbor just fixed up a leaking ceiling or remodeled his whole place. It's all just ремонт.

Actually, even without the gods and saints giving me permission, I've included this word into my personal lexicon. I have been known to say, "They remoted their house last year." And my American friends who have visited Moscow leave talking about remont in their Manhattan apartment.

Like so many good words, foods, and objects, ремонт came to Russian from French. Ремонт has a whole set of meanings that are now mostly obsolete — all connected with horses in the army: it can mean the care for the horses, remounts, the troops who take care of the horses and even the money to pay for everything connected with the horses. Russian kids reading "War and Peace" stumble over the part where Nikolai Rostov learns about назначение его в командировку за ремонтом для дивизии в Воронеж. They can't figure out what repair work he was supposed to pick up in Voronezh. In fact, he was "sent to Voronezh to buy remounts for his division," that is, procure fresh horses for the riders.

The horsey meanings are pretty much outdated, but there is another meaning associated with animals that may be useful if you decide to abandon city life, move to the country, and start a farm. You'll buy books that give this kind of advice: При планировании численности первотёлок, необходимых для ремонта стада, следует учитывать сложившуюся в хозяйстве продолжительность продуктивной жизни коров своего стада. (When planning how many first-calf heifers you need to manage the herd, you have to take into account the established length of the productive life of the cows in the herd.)

Got that? I'm a little foggy on the whole heifer thing, but ремонт стада is herd upkeep, said in animal-husbandry-ese.

But for the most part, today ремонт is all about fixing stuff that broke or fixing up stuff to make it look better. You see advertisements for ремонт in every shopping center and on most streets: ремонт часов (clock and watch repair), техники (electronics repair), одежды (clothing repair), телевизоров и кондиционеров (repair of televisions and air conditioners).

If велоремонт is bicycle repair, that means евроремонт is repair of euros? Just joking. For a while евроремонт (European quality repair work) was the expensive and fashionable way to redo your apartment, and meant repair and remodeling using imported materials and finishings. Now the distinction is almost moot, since at big box stores you grab caulk or wallpaper without having any idea where it came from.

If you just want to change the paint color and do the trim, you look for someone who can do косметический ремонт (cosmetic repairs). When you are dealing with more than a washing machine repair or paint touch-up, you are talking about the renovation, remodeling, restoration kind of ремонт. If your means are modest, you seek out бюджетный ремонт (affordable renovation work). If you want to gut your place and start over, that's капитальный ремонт, aka капремонт (gut renovation, total refurbishment, complete

rehab, major structural repairs).

When apartment houses do капремонт, a brigade comes in and changes all the heating and main water pipes, gas lines, and all the electrical wiring for the house before it enters your apartment. In some cases, they change out the sewage pipes. For several months you live in complete chaos and filth, and when it is over you pay hundreds of thousands of rubles for кап- or (if you are lucky) косметический ремонт (major or cosmetic repairs) to fix the walls they broke down and tile they bashed to get at 100-year-old pipes. Midway through the process you suspect this is just a ploy to support the repair and construction industry. But after it's all over, your apartment value goes up (because buyers are delighted that they won't have to go through this) and you sleep at night knowing that your house is unlikely to blow up from a ruptured gas main.

The main verbs for repairing are ремонтировать and починить. Both can be used for just about everything, although починить is often used more for fixing mechanical things. But you can ask a seamstress: Можно починить разорванный шов в кофте? (Can you fix the torn seam on my shirt?).

If the person who does this is male, you can call him ремонтник (repairman). Or you can specify the specialist by the kind of repairs being done: слесарь (plumber), электронщик (electrical technician), телевизионщик (television mechanic), and so on.

In Russian, many of the terms for repairpeople are male gender, even when the workers are usually women. For example, almost all house painters (inside and out) are women, but they are properly called маляры (painters), even though you'll hear малярщицы (women painters). Both women and men are плиточники (tilers) or штукатуры (plasterers).

Only sewing is gendered: портной (tailor, male) and портниха (tailor, female).

But don't fret. Russian has another great all-purpose word for the person doing repairs: мастер (a repair specialist). When you call for a plumber, you'll be told: Мастер будет сегодня во второй половине дня (The specialist will be there in the afternoon). It is very reassuring: a master is on his way. And it makes it easy for us non-native speakers. Just use мастер по ремонту (master to repair) and add the thing you need fixed. Мне нужен мастер по ремонту стиральных машин, шуб, багета... (I need someone to fix my washing machine, fur coat, picture frame...)

Russian has one more all-purpose word for someone who can do repairs, although it is gendered, sexist, a stereotype, and often just plain wrong. But here it is: муж (a husband). You can order some help with мелкий ремонт (minor repair work) from a service called Муж на час (Husband by the Hour). Yeah, yeah, yeah; I hear your chortling out there. Actually, this домашний мастер (household fix-it man) can do all the things you and your significant other can't do: проведёт сантехнические и электрические работы, соберёт мебель, отремонтирует квартиру (do plumbing and electrical repairs, put together furniture, or remodel the apartment).

Finally, you need to know one very important question that you should ask everyone before you put in a repair order: Купить новое дешевле, чем ремонтировать старое? (Is it cheaper to buy a new one than fix the old one?) If there is a pause, hang up the phone and head

to the mall.

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