

Flying Objects and Other Horrors of Russian

The Word's Worth

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

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Летучая мышь: bat, literally a flying mouse

Every once in a while, when I feel up to it, or when I get curious enough, I write about my least favorite topic in Russian: паронимы (paronyms). Paronyms, or paronymous words, are words that have the same derivation and sound similar but have different meanings.

In English they can be a bit tricky — people might confuse corporal and corporeal — but their usage is often quite well defined and distinct. After a certain age, native English speakers are unlikely to mix up industrial and industrious or imaginary and imaginative.

But in Russian they seem to be more problematic, even for native Russian speakers. For non-

native Russian speakers they are bottomless pit of misery, since they often all get translated with just one word in English and it is very hard to get the distinctions of meaning and usage.

But last week someone brought up the subject, and I got a bee in my bonnet, and I could not rest until I dealt with all the paronyms летучий, летающий, летательный, лётный, and летящий. All of them come from the verb летать (to fly) and all of them mean “flying,” more or less.

And it’s the “more or less” part that is the killer.

Deep breath.

Let’s start with лётный, which is a bit of an outsider in this list. Лётный is the adjective you use to talk about anything connected with flying or aviation — something used in flying, associated with the profession of a pilot, having to do with aviation, or convenient or favorable for flying. The last one is nifty: лётная погода (flying weather, i.e., good weather for flying).

Something used in aviation might be лётное поле (airfield). On the profession side, you can talk about лётная форма (flight suit) or other лётная одежда (aviation clothing), лётное училище (flight school), лётная часть (military air unit) or лётные испытания (test flights).

Here’s a good example of two usages of лётный: В авиации сейчас обеспокоены тем, что лётный состав стареет и пришедшие на смену ветеранам молодые пилоты не успеют перенять лётный опыт. (In aviation circles they’re worried that the flight teams are getting old, but the young pilots who are replacing the veterans don’t get a chance to take on their flying experience.)

And now to the flying words. Летучий is used, in general, to describe the phenomena of animals or inanimate, non-mechanical objects that have the ability to fly or anything that happens really quickly, almost (but not quite) “on the fly.”

So, we have flying animals: летучая мышь (bat, literally flying mouse); летучая лисичка (flying fox or fox bat); летучая белка (flying squirrel); летучая рыба (flying fish) and even летучая собака, aka нильский крылан (flying fox).

And we have flying debris, snow, and so on – anything lifted up by the wind or falling down and tossed around in the air. For example: В горле першило от летучей травяной пыли. (Bits of grass dust irritated my throat.) Other things that fly around in the air are described as летучий, like снег (snow) or мелкие семена (tiny seeds).

A third category of flying things are compounds that evaporate: летучая мазь (volatile liniment); летучее масло (essential oil); or летучая соль (smelling salts).

The only human — well, not really — that is described by this adjective is Летучий Голландец (The Flying Dutchman).

Летучий is also used for animals, people, and vehicles that move around very quickly, like летучий отряд (flying squadron) or летучая почта (flying post service — not airmail, but a

special wartime service). Airmail is авиапочта.

Finally, it is used for anything that is fleeting, fast, done and over in a minute. The one you hear about most often is the abbreviated летучка from летучее собрание (a briefing, a quick meeting). But there are more poetic usages: Мне нравится заводить летучие уличные знакомства (I like those fleeting meetings with people on the street).

And that's it for летучий. As you see, there is a kind of underlying concept and then categories of usage.

Летающий is a participle and describes two kinds of flying. The first is simply the act of flying. For example, you can say: Летающая в небе летучая мышь крутилась над нами. (The bat flying in the air circled above us.)

And then it is used to describe the ability to fly for anything that usually doesn't fly: летающая тарелка (flying saucer); летающий автомобиль (flying car); летающий замок (the flying/moving castle); летающий дом (flying house).

This is easy for me to remember. There is летучая собака (flying fox, a kind of big bat), which is distinct from my own летающая собака (flying dog), who likes to jump up on my back and sit on my shoulder. Since most dogs do not fly, she is летающая.

And then there is летательный, which means some kind of apparatus that can fly or something that aids in flight. It is not used very much and almost always refers to аппарат (machine). Их изобретение ✘ предшественник летательных аппаратов будущего (Their invention is the harbinger of future aircraft.) But here's an example of something that aids flight in some way: Пригласили ребят для увеличения набора на факультет аэромеханики и летательной техники (They invited kids to raise the numbers of students joining the department of aeromechanics and flight hardware.)

Are you still reading? Okay, last one, and it's easy. Летящий is also a participle and just means something that is flying, in flight, moving quickly, zipping by. It has nothing to do with something's innate or acquired ability to fly. It's just used to describe anything flying through the air or seeming to fly on the ground, usually with the phrase летящая походка (brisk step). Молодой человек преследует светящийся объект летящий низко к земле (The young man chases after the brightly lit object flying close to the ground) Мы смотрели видео девушки на коньках, словно летящей по идеально гладкому льду, в котором отражаются горы (We saw a video of a young woman on skates who seemed to fly over the ideally smooth ice that reflected the mountains.)

А сейчас летящей походкой лечу на летучку с моей летающей собакой.

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