

Good and Bad Manners the Frenchified and Russian Way

The Word's Worth

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

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Комильфо: comme il faut

Ah, the mail's here. Let's see what's in the post today... Question: "Can you explain the rules for comma usage in Russian?" Answer: No.... Question: "Do you have a favorite Russian word?" Answer: I have a new one every week. This week it's преимущественно (predominantly) just because I like the way it sounds. Question: "Is моветон having a moment?" Answer: I don't know, but let's find out.

Puzzled about the word? When in doubt, sound it out. Моветон is the Russian version of the French phrase mauvais ton (bad taste), which along with комильфо (comme il faut — properly, dressing or behaving in the right way) and бонтон (bon ton — good taste,

propriety) make up the once-French, now-Russian code of behavior.

Is **моветон** having a moment in the linguistic sun? According to the Google Ngram, it sure is. The word and concept of **моветон** appeared and began to be commonly used, presumably among the upper classes — and aspirational classes — in the early 1830s and then sputtered up and down until the early 1980s when it suddenly skyrocketed. And it's still rising.

I wanted to say that it was interesting to find Russians suddenly very interested in good taste and proper etiquette at the dawn of the post-Soviet era. And I suppose that is true. But if 200 years ago people were in agreement about what was **моветон** and what was not, today's society has not yet settled on what exactly is in good or bad taste.

For example, here is some of the range of behaviors deemed **моветон**: Избивать пьяниц и стариков ☒ это **моветон** (Beating up drunks and old folks is in poor taste). Also immoral and illegal, but okay. And then: Я знаю, что **моветон** ☒ ходить дома в тапочках, сама, как видите, только в туфлях и даже на каблук! (I know what poor taste is! It's when you wear slippers at home, and I, as you can see, only wear shoes, and even heels!) If slippers at home are in bad taste, 99.9% of Russians are in big trouble. And how about this, when bad taste stinks: Жителям Питера не любить свой город нельзя. Это пахнет **моветоном** (Residents of St. Petersburg can't help but love the city. Not loving it would smell of bad taste).

What's the proper way to do things? Today's notions of *comme il faut* also differ from those of the 1830s: Историки ушли из жизни, марксистская парадигма перестала быть **комильфо** (Historians have died off and the Marxist paradigm is no longer *comme il faut*).

But how about the proper way to dress? Всё на нем было **комильфо** ☒ согласно тому образу модного лондонского мальчика-денди в умах тех, кто шляется из одного московского клуба-андерграунда до другого (He dressed totally *comme il faut*, that is, he fit the image of a stylish young London dandy as imagined by people who spend their time going from one underground Moscow club to another).

One thing is certain, it is definitely **комильфо** to offer your guests chocolate candies called **Комильфо**.

Бонтон is used less frequently, although it has produced the related adjective **бонтонный** (in good taste) and verb **бонтонить** (to do something in good taste). The verb, however tantalizing, appears to be more of a joke than real usage. But you find interesting descriptions like this: Женщина милая, но вот **бонтонная**. Держит расстояние (She's a nice woman but does everything in good taste. She keeps her distance). Of course, that might be a Covid restriction, but when you think about it, **социальная дистанция** и есть **бонтон** (social distancing is in good taste).

Another way to describe this translates French rather than transcribes it: дурные манеры (bad manners). This is a Bad Thing. У него были дурные манеры, нескладная фигура, на которой даже дорогой костюм сидел как подарок из богадельни (He had bad manners and the kind of loose build that made even an expensive suit look as if it had been a gift from the almshouse).

That's all the Frenchified good and bad taste in Russian. But: Как это сказать по-русски-то? (How the heck do you say this in real Russian?)

Well, you might start with невоспитанность / невоспитанный (ill-breeding, ill-bred). Он невоспитанный и глотает слова, когда говорит (He is boorish and swallows his words when he speaks). In Russian, this is also the term used commonly to describe untrained pets: Какая невоспитанная собака (What a disobedient dog!)

Badly raised is one thing; rough hewn is something else. In Russian this is неотёсанность / неотёсанный from тесать (to cut, hew). This can refer to people as well as trees: Он оставался хулиганом, циником, его неотёсанные манеры шокировали публику (He remained a bad boy, a cynic with rough manners that shocked the public). Or it can even refer to countries: Россия для Европы ☒ страшная, неотёсанная, грубая сила, которая лишь пугает, потому что живёт по совсем другим законам, чем остальное человечество (Europe sees Russia as a terrifying, barbaric, crude power that can only frighten because it lives by different laws than the rest of humanity). This, it should be said, is one Russian perception.

Another aspect of bad manners and a poor upbringing is бесцеремонность / бесцеремонный (unceremonious, presumptuous, cheeky). This is the kind of person who makes himself at home as soon as you open the front door: he grabs a beer from the refrigerator, opens your bathroom cabinet and pokes around in your OTC drugs, and stabs a morsal of meat off his neighbor's plate. But sometimes you find this rather unattractive quality in otherwise interesting people: Краснолицый и энергичный до бесцеремонности, он редко соблюдал субординацию и никого не боялся (He was ruddy and energetic to the point of being discourteous, and he rarely observed the rules of subordination and feared no one).

Actually, he sounds like someone I'd enjoy meeting.

Another form of моветон is неделикатность / неделикатный (inconsiderate, insensitive). Solzhenitsyn had some good descriptions of what one person thought about this: Попросить другого помолчать она вообще считала неделикатным (She considered it very insensitive to ask someone to be quiet). Неделикатно было бы открыто заткнуть пальцами уши (Making a show of sticking your fingers in your ears would definitely be inconsiderate).

Can't disagree with that!

All of the above can also be called некультурность / некультурный (uncultured). Молодые женщины, студентки не курят, считая, что курение, ☒ это признак некультурности (Young women students don't smoke; they consider smoking to be a sign of coarseness). Зачем на территории дачи работников культуры такой некультурный деревенский дом? (Why is there such an uncultured wooden house on the grounds of a dacha for people working in the sphere of culture?)

When behavior is worse than uncouth, insensitive or in poor taste, it might be called грубо (crude). Грубить (to be rude to someone); грубость (rudeness); грубый (coarse, rude, crude); and грубиян (a crude person, a bounder, a cad — these are all quite strong words. Он грубил

даже тем, кто был старше его, ❏ явление на Востоке редчайшее (He was rude even to people who were his elders, a very rare thing to see in the East). In Moscow, we tend to use this to describe service personnel: Обратите внимание на продавцов-кассиров: грубят и обманывают постоянно (Take a look at the salespeople and cashiers: they constantly mouth off to the customers and shortchange them). But sometimes folks deserve it: Вот Руслану грубить надо, потому что он на редкость противный (You ought to be rude to Ruslan because he really is a pain).

Finally, you might call someone with bad manners невежа, which comes from the old word ведать (to know) and thus literally means “not knowing.” I have an idiosyncratic association of this word with медвежонок (bear cub), and so think of невежа as a big lug. That might be true in some cases: Да, я же забыл представиться, вот невежа: мое имя Леон, я оперный певец (Oh, what a dolt I am — I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Leon and I’m an opera singer). Interestingly, this noun can be either masculine or feminine, depending on whom it refers to. In any case, невежа is generally not just an uncouth person, but an unpleasant character: Невежа какой ❏ совать нос куда не звали! (What a lout! Sticking his nose where it doesn’t belong!)

So, there you have it. You can condemn bad manners in Russified French or pure Russian. Whatever you use, just be sure to duck afterwards.

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