

Who Is To Blame For Everything in Russian?

The Word's Worth

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

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Valery Sharifulin / TASS

Винovat: I'm guilty, I did it, sorry

Apologizing in Russian isn't, at first glance, very complicated. You get used to rattling off *извините* (excuse me) or *простите* (forgive me) whenever you step on someone's toe in the metro or whack someone with your backpack on the street.

In Russian you don't say you're sorry the way English speakers do. The closest to "sorry" in Russian is *мне жаль* (I regret it) or *сожалеть* (to regret), but both are generally used to express remorse and contrition for greater sins than forgetting to pick up the dry cleaning.

Прошу прощения (I ask forgiveness) is for fairly serious offenses, or when you want to

impress someone with your sincerity. You might have been a bit brusque with someone: Прошу прощения, если вас чем-то обидела (Forgive me if I've offended you in some way). Or you might have to apologize for some truly terrible transgressions: Он приснился мне, во сне он очень просит прощения, а я не могу простить (I dreamed that he was begging for my forgiveness, but I couldn't forgive him).

Another way to apologize quite seriously is прошу извинения (I ask you to excuse me): Еще прошу извинения за то, что так долго не писал — чёртовское настроение (I ask your forgiveness again for not writing for a long time — I was in one hell of a dark mood).

You might also hear прошу простить (I ask you to forgive me), but this might come off as a bit mannered: Прошу простить меня за мою нетактичную прямоту (Please forgive my tactless candor).

You can also just say Простите! (Forgive me!) This is good for a big apology: Простите, если задела вас за живое (Forgive me if I touched a nerve). But it's also good for a more casual "excuse me": Простите за любопытство, а сколько лет вашему ребёнку? (Forgive my curiosity, but how old is your child?)

Простите can also be used to apologize not so much for what you did but for your words. А вот это уже, простите, хамство (Now that's plain rude, if you don't mind me saying). You can toss it in whenever you know that what you're saying will annoy or offend your listener: Простите, если мужчина обязан заботиться о машине, то почему такой обязанности нет у женщины? (Excuse me, but if a man must take care of the car, why doesn't a woman have the same responsibility?)

Пардон (pardon me) is used like простите: Пардон, а какое отношение бывший муж имеет к квартире? (Pardon me, but what is your ex-husband's relationship to the apartment?) It's fine to use, but don't go overboard: Миль пардон, мадам, мы не поняли друг друга (Pardonnez-moi a thousand times, Madame. We misunderstood each other.)

Another way of apologizing is извиняться/извиниться (to apologize, ask for forgiveness). You can say this in the past tense: Сонька звонила утром, в день похорон ❑ извинялась, что не сможет прийти (Sonya called in the morning on the day of the funeral. She apologized for not being able to come). Or you can use it in the infinitive: А я что могу сделать? Только извиниться (So what can I do? Only apologize). Or refuse to use it in the infinitive: "Буду я перед всякой (он выругался) извиняться!" (Apologize to any old so-and-so? Ha! Never!)

But you can't use it in the present tense. Извиняюсь is Bad Russian. That's what most of your friends, teachers, grammar books and grammar sites will say. They tell you that you're not asking for forgiveness – извините (forgive me) — but using the reflexive form (извиняться) to essentially forgive yourself. So when you bump into someone and say Ой! Извиняюсь!, you are saying "Oh! I excuse myself!"

But other grammarians – the pro-извиняюсь group — disagree. First, they point out, if the reflexive form is so bad, why is it fine in the past tense? When you say, Я извинился перед ней (I apologized to her, literally "before her") or Я извинилась, и она меня простила (I apologized, and she forgave me) no one accuses you of being rude and excusing yourself. No,

the pro- folks say, not all reflexive verbs indicate action done to oneself. For example, собака кусается (the dog bites) doesn't mean that the dog bites itself, right?

They say that извиняться/извиниться are performative verbs. Performative verbs are verbs whose action is carried out simply by saying them out loud. For example, when you say, "I resign," you resign. It's the same with deny, forbid, confess, order, promise and several other verbs. So when you say извиняюсь, they argue, the act of saying it is the act of apologizing. It's fine.

But most linguists and grammarians don't agree — even one who agrees it's performative considers it substandard language all the same. And most importantly for us foreign speakers of Russian, the well-educated people at the university and the nice older couple in your building think it's Bad Russian. So you should probably not say извиняюсь.

There is, however, one exception. If you are from Odessa or are in Odessa, you can use the local expression я дико извиняюсь (I'm terribly sorry, literally I ferociously apologize). Бросилась девушка ко мне: "Я дико извиняюсь, вы меня, конечно, вряд ли помните..." (A young woman ran up to me and said, "I'm so awfully sorry, you probably don't remember me...")

Instead, to keep everyone happy and believing that you are a well-educated Russian speaker, say извините. Извините за резкие слова (Forgive my blunt talk). And to show how truly classy you are, you might say: Извините, что я говорю, когда вы перебиваете (Forgive me for speaking while you're interrupting me).

There is, however, a curious form of извините that doesn't really mean an apology at all. Sometimes извини, извините and especially уж извини/извините are a way of expressing disagreement with a statement or a protest against it. Уж извините, это никакая не научная работа, а перекладывание бумаг! (What are you talking about? That's not scientific work at all! It's just paper pushing!) It is also a way of saying "I'm sorry... not"): Ребята, я у вас впервые, возможно мой вопрос не в тему, вы уж извините (Guys, I'm here with you for the first time, and maybe my question is not on topic, but... sorry). Or it's even a way of saying "and I don't care what you think": Мне плевать на короля, и на его баб ☒ тоже плевать, уж извините (I couldn't care less about the king or his women, for that matter. What of it?)

Instead of all this asking for forgiveness, you can just come out with it and admit you're wrong: Виноват! (I'm guilty!) Конечно, я виноват (Of course, it's my fault).

Or here's an interesting option: as I was searching the Corpus for examples, I kept finding people who could always be blamed. For example: Если возникнут какие бы то ни было экономические проблемы, виноват будет Кудрин (If there are any problems with the economy, blame it on Kudrin).

But there is one person who can always be blamed. This is A Thing: Во всём виноват Чубайс (It's all Chubais' fault). Обыватель может спать спокойно: во всём виноват Чубайс (Your average guy can sleep peacefully: Chubais is to blame for everything).

Everybody does it whenever they need a scapegoat: Ещё одна беспрюирышная тема,

которую намерено эксплуатировать "Яблоко" в преддверии выборов: "Во всём виноват Чубайс" (There is another never-fail topic that Yabloko intends to exploit before the elections: "Chubais is to blame for everything").

So remember, if someone yells at you, don't apologize! Just say: Во всём виноват Чубайс!

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