

This is How We Roll in Russian

The Word's Worth

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

October 15, 2021



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Катить бочку: to dump (on someone)

People often ask me where I get my ideas for columns. I wish I could say something exciting and mystical, like I put a volume of Dal's dictionary under my pillow and the words I need to write about come to me in a dream. But it's so much more mundane. Sometimes I hear or read something in a conversation or in the media — commercials are a great source of slang — that I begin to wonder about. Sometimes someone asks me about a word or phrase. But a lot of the time — let's be honest — it's because I've said something and my listeners have snorted with laughter. Mistakes are a wonderful learning tool.

And so it was with this week's column. I was talking with a friend and describing someone who is very high-strung. I said: Она катит истерику (She gets hysterical). And there it was: a snort. A chuckle. And then a pause as my friend tried to figure out how to explain why you use

one verb for hermetically sealing pickle jars, making a scene, and rolling up your sleeves.

It's not катить, but I was in the ballpark, just hitting the wrong ball. It's закатывать.

But let's begin with катить, which is something like the starting point from which everything gets rolling.

Катить (imperfective) is pretty much all about rolling things, or rolling along. It's what you do with a boulder: Мужчины срывали каменистый грунт выше, чтобы удобнее было катить камень в гору (The men broke up the stony ground above so that it would be easier to roll the boulder up the mountain). Or it's what you do when you push something on wheels: Носильщики в помятых картузах и запачканных передниках катят тележки с багажом (Porters in wrinkled caps and soiled aprons push baggage carts).

It's the verb you use when describing the bubbling, burbling flow of rivers or the tides rolling in on the seashore: Внизу маленькая речонка катила свои свинцовые волны (Below a small stream bubbled up its lead-colored waves). In fact, it's a good verb for any fast motion: Опять в армию, катим на фронт (In the army again, we're rushing off to the front).

But it can also be used to describe moseying along: Синий пикап, выехав из ворот, катил неторопливо, тормозя на колдобинах (A blue pickup pulled out of the gates and slowly rolled along, braking on the potholes). And to describe the slow progress of tears: Слёзы катили по её лицу (Tears rolled down her cheeks).

If someone катит бочку на тебя (literally rolls a barrel on you), it means they've been dumping on you, accusing you or blaming you for something. Подвыпивший сотрудник стал катить бочку на шефа, пенять ему на какие-то редакционные прегрешения, а под занавес и обозвал его хреновым редактором (A slightly drunken employee started to dump on the boss, blaming him for some editorial mistakes, and by the end of the evening called him a crappy editor).

In slang катит means things are going well: Работа катит! (Work is going great!). Не катит means something is rubbish, isn't going well, or is worthless: Бывают дни, когда всё не катит (Some days nothing goes right).

I have been desperately trying to make the English expression "that's how we roll" fit as a translation somewhere, but even if the image is almost the same, and the sense is nearly identical — не катит (it just won't work).

The reflexive катиться is used to describe something rolling along, like мяч катится по дороге (the ball rolls down the street). But when used in the imperative, it means "go": Катись-ка ты отсюда и скажи спасибо, что еще остался жив (Get the hell out of here and be thankful that you're still alive).

Закатывать (imperfective) rolls along, too, in a way. It can mean to roll something up, like what this poor guy did when he'd tried to quit smoking: Сбирал из пепельницы все бычки, крошил их, закатывал в газету и курил (I gathered up all the cigarette butts from an ashtray, smashed them up, rolled them in some newspaper and smoked it). Do not try this at home: Вкус ужасный, зато никотин в организм поступил (It tasted terrible, but at

least nicotine got into my body).

Instead, consider rolling up sleeves or pants, although in some places that's just not the done thing: Даже в жару никто рукавов не закатывает (Even in a heat wave no one rolls up his sleeves).

You will hear закатывать a lot when you have a teenager, since it's used to describe parental (or other adult) reactions: Бабушка театрально прикладывала руку к груди и закатывала глаза (My grandmother put her hand on her heart theatrically and rolled her eyes). Teens are good at it, too, of course: Закатывала глаза с видом "что конкретно тебя, мама, интересует"? (She rolled her eyes with an expression of "what exactly do you want to know, Mom?")

Закатывать is also what you do to seal jars filled with anything you want to put up for the winter. To do this you use закаточная машинка or закаточный ключ, which I think is called a crimping tool or a crimper in English. This device fits over a loose metal lid placed on top of a canning jar. Then you twist an arm on top of the device, which squeezes the sides of the lid until the lid tightens around the jar top. Nothing in this process is a rolling motion in my mental universe, but Russians call this закатывать банки (sealing jars, literally rolling), although it can also be called закручивать (to screw on) or закупоривать (to stopper) банки. Вечером дома помогал жене закатывать банки с помидорами (In the evening I helped my wife put up jars of tomatoes).

Закатывать also describes throwing a big party, or doing something spectacular. It might be a stylish party: Девушка закатывала прощальную вечеринку с изысканными кондитерскими изделиями и хорошими напитками (The young woman threw a big goodbye party with fancy sweets and good drinks). Or it might be a couple of bottles and not much else: Когда к нему алкаши приходят, он закатывает пьянку (When drunks come to see him, he puts out the booze).

And sometimes at those parties, one of the guests puts on a concert: Он будто бы сроднился с балалайкой, ✘ такие концерты закатывал, мама родная!..(It was like he became one with the balalaika — oh, the concerts he performed, my God they were something!)

And finally it's the word that I will now properly use to describe someone throwing a fit or making a scene. It's good for hysterics: Игорь видел себя таким трёхлетним ребенком, который топает ногами и закатывает истерику в магазине (Igor thought of himself as the kind of three-year-old who stamps his feet and throws a fit in a store). Or use it for making a big scene: После его неоднократных дешёвых попыток устроить "выяснение личных отношений", он стал закатывать мне сцены ревности (After his many cheap attempts to do "clearing the air," he got jealous and began to make scenes).

And that's it for закатывать. Now I'll go off and make some more mistakes for next week's column.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/10/15/this-is-how-we-roll-in-russian-a75301>