

The Art of Russian Mumbling, Grumbling, and Babbling

The Word's Worth

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

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Anna Bondarenko / pexels

Под нос: under your breath

Russian – I suppose like all languages — has a bit of fun with various words for speaking outside the normal range of шептать-говорить-орать (whisper-talk-shout). Here we get into onomatopoeia, which in Russian is the more immediately understandable звукоподражание (literally “sound imitation”). This kind of colorful speech might be divided into three categories: mumbling, chirping, and growling.

Mumbling is very expressive in Russian: мямлить. This is the word you use for any kind of slow, indistinct, meandering speech. Sometimes it is just a sign of shyness or not wanting to offend: Я что-то мямлил, пытался подобрать слова, деликатничал (I mumbled

something, tried to choose my words and be tactful). More often it is a sign of embarrassment or shame: Мама что-то мямлила в ответ, рассматривая пол. Ей было стыдно (My mother mumbled a reply as she studied the floor. She was ashamed). Or a sign that someone is lying or trying not to, like this couple who was clearly up to no good: Она же мне бессовестно врёт, Феликс тоже мямлит, отвечает уклончиво, но я-то знаю, что у них происходит! (She shamelessly lies to my face, Felix mumbles, too, and avoids a straight answer, but I know what they are up to!)

Бубнить is related to бубен (tambourine) and барабан (drum), and means to mutter, mumble, babble, or yammer. If мямлить is drawn out and slurred, бубнить is a more rapid-fire monotone. This is the sort of prattling you might do when annoyed. It might be under your breath, which is “under your nose” in Russian: Обычно я бубню себе под нос что-то невнятное (I usually mutter something unintelligible under my breath). Or you might grumble in someone’s face: Васька пыхтел, скрипел, бубнил ругательства ☒ но новое окно поднимал, ставил, вытирал, отмывал (Vasya huffed, puffed and muttered swearwords, but he lifted up the new window, installed it, dusted and washed it).

When you or your loved ones — particularly small loved ones — babble in a birdlike manner, you can quote them using the lovely verbs лепетать (to lisp, babble) and лопотать (to prattle, rattle off). Both verbs can be used to describe the way a baby or child speaks. I think of лепетать as the lispy, incorrectly pronounced first speech of a child: Большая семья, взрослые дети, и тут такая девочка, такое маленькое чудо, бегают, падает, поднимается, лепечет детские слова (It’s a big family with grown children, and then there is this little miracle running around, falling, getting up and gurgling baby talk). I think of лопотать as the babbling brook of baby talk: Дочка улыбалась в своей кроватке и что-то весело лопотала (My daughter smiled in her crib and cheerfully babbled something). But they aren’t all that different in meaning.

When used to describe adult speech, лепетать suggests incomprehensible or senseless babble. Here it’s used by a political opponent to denigrate Mikhail Gorbachev: ...он предатель и отступник, каких не видел свет, но, как ни в чём не бывало, живёт среди нас, лепечет про социал-демократию... (...he is a traitor and a turncoat, the likes of which the world has never seen before, but here he is like nothing happened, living among us, blathering about social democracy...)

Лопотать can also mean to speak quickly and incomprehensibly, swallowing syllables: Пойманный за руку в трамвае маленький вор дрожал от испуга и лопотал что-то невразумительное (The little thief grabbed on the tram shook from fear and gibbered something unintelligible). But in the next example it is the pleasant babbling of the radio in the background. In this excerpt the radio is репродуктор — a kind of radio box that was once in most Soviet kitchens: Бывало, сидишь у знакомых за чаем, слушаешь уютные московские разговоры, тикают стенные часы, лопочет репродуктор, но его никто не слушает, хотя почему-то и не выключают (You’d be sitting with some friends over tea, listening to homey Moscow small talk, while in the background the wall clock ticks away and the radio natters on, but no one listens to it, although for some reason no one turns it off).

Лопотать can also be used to describe someone jabbering in a foreign language, I suppose because it sounds like gibberish. И нянька, и горничная, и папин денщик со знакомыми

ему солдатами ☒ все татары, и Ксюша лопочет с ними на местном наречии (The nanny, the maid, Papa's orderly and his soldier friends are all Tatars, and Ksenia jabbbers away with them in the local tongue).

The chirpiest word for chattering and twittering is *щебетать*, which can be used for actual birds or for birdlike speech. *Здоровая птица выглядит бодро, подвижна, щебечет, поёт, хорошо потребляет корм* (A healthy bird looks chipper and spry; it warbles, sings and has a healthy interest in food). It is, in general, a rather sexist word; it is almost exclusively used to describe women's speech: "*Здравствуйте, девушки. Всё щебечете?*" "*Девушкам*" было лет по пятьдесят, но они захихикали ("*Hello, girls! You still chattering away?*") The "girls" were about 50 years old, but they began to giggle).

Another good word for this is *чирикать* (to twitter, chirp): *20 лет назад я вполне сносно чирикал на английском* (20 years ago I could rattle off English pretty well).

At the other end of the spectrum are the verbs *ворчать*, *бурчать* and *бормотать* — all in the baritone to bass range, all forms of growling, grumbling, and general belly-aching.

Бормотать is similar to the mumbling, grumbling verbs above, but done at a lower pitch. *Учитель рядом бормотал про себя: "Я же говорил, я же говорил..."* (The teacher next to me was muttering to himself, "I told you so, I told you so...")

Ворчать can be used for dogs and unhappy humans. *Наша собака ворчит на всех прохожих* (Our dog growls at everyone who walks by). *Дедушка перестал ворчать и просто сидел с кислой рожей* (Granddad stopped grouching and just sat there with a sour expression on his face).

Бурчать is the trifecta winner. It describes growling and grumbling by people, things and bellies. *Всю дорогу она бурчала себе под нос* (She grumbled under her breath the whole trip). *Чайник бурчит* (The kettle is burbling away). *Наступает такая тишина в театре, что слышно, как бурчит у кого-то в животе в пятом ряду* (It is so silent in the theater that you can hear someone's stomach growling in the fifth row).

So now you know: go forth and burble, babble, grouse, grumble, mumble, chirp and natter on...

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