Letter to the editor of Communications of the ACM

Vinton G. Cerf cited a common misconception that the word "robot" is derived from the Russian word "rabota" (work). The origin of rabota is actually more subtle: Unlike Russian, which has only one word for work, the Czech language (the native language of Karel Capek, who coined the term "robot") has two different words for work; the general term is "prace," and, the second, "robota" (similar to the Russian word), means "forced labor," as in the labor of a servant. Capek chose robota since his intent was for robots to be servants to humanity.

Both the Russian word rabota and the Czech word robota derive from the same Slavic word "rab" (slave), because in earlier times, work was seen as so undignified and shameful no self-respecting noble person would do it. Later, when work was seen as dignified (and it was shameful to be a non-working social parasite), the original word for work in Russian lost its shameful associations, while Czech added a new word to describe the dignity of work.

Vladik Kreinovich, El Paso, TX