

# The Sound of Silence

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Тихий час: nap time

Close to the top of my list of Russian words I wish we had in English is молчать, which conveys so succinctly in two little syllables what we need a dozen for in English: to not say anything, to be silent. I don't begrudge adopting sputnik or perestroika, but why can't we borrow молчать as well?

Russian has two ways of expressing silence: тишина, which more or less describes the silence of things, and молчание, which more or less describes the silence of living creatures. But the key here is "more or less." In poetic and colloquial language alike, these two words happily cross over from animate to inanimate and convey a plethora of meanings beyond silence.

Тишина, the adjective тихий, or adverb тихо often have the connotation of being peaceful or peaceable, calm and slow-moving. Мы сели ужинать, погружённые в мягкую тишину

и приглушённый свет парижской столовой (We sat down to dinner, submerged in the relaxing hush and intimate lighting of a Parisian cafe). Тихий and тихо can mean quiet(ly). Музыканты тихо пели романсы (Musicians quietly sang chansons). Or they can mean that something is moving slowly — or should be: Тихо едешь, дальше будешь (slow and steady wins the race).

Тихий час is nap time or quiet time: Tuck in the kids, put your feet up and doze. Тихий человек is not only a quiet person but someone who is nonconfrontational and modest. The phrase потихоньку describes any action that is slow and easy, and is a good answer to the question, Как дела? (How are things?)

The verb pair утихать/утихнуть refers to anything or anyone who falls silent, calms down, slows down or quiets down. While you're in that Parisian cafe, дождь утихает (the rain is letting up) and страсти утихли (passions died down).

I suppose that if you wanted to announce your engagement in that cafe, you might stand up and shout: Тишина! (Silence!). This kind of silence covers chattering diners and clanking silverware. But you probably wouldn't shout: Молчать! (Shut up!). As a command, молчать is pretty harsh.

When used in reference to some kind of machine, молчать means that it's broken or not turned on. Радиоприёмник молчит (My radio doesn't work).

When used to describe a person's actions, молчать can mean either that he isn't saying anything or that in general he's been out of touch or keeping a low profile. Он три месяца молчал, а вчера он, наконец-то, объявился (He was totally out of touch for three months, but yesterday he finally reappeared). Or that a person is keeping a secret or not divulging some specific information. О его проблемах лучше молчать (It's better to keep mum about his problems).

It can even mean to refrain from complaining or criticizing: Про качество его работы я просто молчу (I'm not even going to get into the quality of his work). And when used with a negative and unadorned, "not not speaking" is better rendered in English as a strong positive. Больше не могу молчать! (I have to speak out!) It worked for Tolstoy — it's the name of his tract against capital punishment — and it will work for anyone filled with righteousness.

If someone swears you to silence, you can agree with the slangy молчок (I've got it zipped). Because, of course: Молчание — золото (Silence is golden).

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