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The Incredible Here and There

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Вон: out, off, away, over there

◙What with all the demonstrations and pre-election excitement — oh, wait! That's in other countries.

Let me start again.

What with all the stability and absence of pre-election excitement, I find myself somewhat linguistically bored. So I've drifted back to old language obsessions, like nailing down those little words like вот (here) and вон (there), which have a range of meaning that is nothing less than astonishing. ◙

I think of вон as the verbal equivalent of a head nod to indicate "over there" or "out." When someone asks where the metro is, you can nod in the right direction and say: Вон там (Over there). When an unpleasant person bothers you on the street, you can pull this phrase out of your pocket: Пошёл вон! (Get out of here!) (Note: Not recommended for use with the police).

And if all this chatting on the street distracts you so much that you've forgotten a business meeting, you can exclaim: Встреча выскочила вон из головы! (The meeting just completely slipped my mind!).

To continue in the вон vein, you might try to convince the person you stood up that your lapse of memory was случай из ряда вон выходящий (absolutely extraordinary). But you might hear an angry reply: Я из кожи вон лезла, чтобы пригласить тебя, а ты забыла? (I went through hell to get you an invite — literally, "I climbed out of my skin" — and then you forgot?)

Вот is "here" physically or figuratively: Вот мой дом (Here's my house). Вот что я тебе скажу! (Here's what I've got to say to you!) It can be used as an intensifier that draws attention to the word near it. Положите письмо вот сюда (Put the letter right over here.) Вот именно! (That's exactly it!)

Doubling вот doubles the meanings. Вот-вот can mean "any minute now" or "just a little more." A gloomy commentator writes: Пирамида власти вот-вот рухнет (The pyramid of power is about to come crashing down). Вот-вот alone — often pronounced without the final "т" and in multiples — is used as a warm approval when someone has caught on to something. When I'm doing my usual "stick the cables randomly into the DVD player and TV until there is sound and image," I wait to hear my helper's Во-во-во! (Now you've got it!)

A lot of вот phrases express surprise or astonishment, pleasant or otherwise. For example, вот как (sometimes вон как) means something like "It's like that, is it?"▣When you still can't get the DVD player to work and your helper finally reads the instructions to discover that you need an entirely different cable, you reply: Вот как! (So that's it!) Or you might say: Вот оно что (So that's the problem). And your helper might say: Езжай и купи кабель. Вот и всё. (Go and buy the cable. That's all there is to it.)

Another astonished and astonishing вот phrase is вот это да, which translates literally as "here this is yes" but means something like "That's incredible!"▣ Вот это да can be used when the expensive new cable breaks in your hands (Shoot!), or when the picture and sound are perfect (Now that's really something!)

After your DVD player is working and you suggest that your helper fix the cable TV box, you might hear: Вот ещё. Сама сделай. (No way. Do it yourself.)

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