

Putting Everything In Its Place

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To put: about a dozen Russian verbs

Remember how I drove you all nuts with the innate propensity of Russian creatures and inanimate objects to stand, sit or lie? And how relieved you were when I moved on to other topics?

Well, I'm back.

You see, there's just one little, itty-bitty coda to all of those improbably standing plates and preposterously sitting birds. It's the verb you use to put those animate or inanimate objects in place.

In English, it's easy: You just put it there. It doesn't matter if it's your grandmother in the hospital or a rose in a vase or a frog in your little brother's bed.

In Russian, it's not that easy, which I'm sure will come as a great surprise to non-native

speakers.

But it's not that hard, either. In Russian, the verb you use to put someone or something somewhere depends largely on the position you put someone or something in. If you are putting it into a horizontal position, you use the verb pair класть/положить. If you are putting it into a vertical position, you use the verb pair ставить/поставить. This is worth mastering. If you get it wrong — and here I speak from decades of listening to the chortling of native speakers — you sound like a total jerk.

Here's another way of thinking about it: If something lies (лежит), you use класть/положить to put it there. If something stands (стоит), you use ставить/поставить. So: Мы положили бабушку в больницу (We put my grandmother in the hospital). Положи хлеб на стол (Put the bread on the table). Она решила положить деньги в банк под большие проценты (She decided to put her money in a high-interest bank account).

You also use класть/положить when putting food on plates. Положить тебе грибы? (Shall I serve you some mushrooms?) Although соль (salt), сахар (sugar), специи (spices) don't lie, all the same: В суп я всегда кладу лавровый лист (I always put a bay leaf in the soup).

And while we're on food, the fridge is controversial territory. Some people always say класть/положить when putting food in both the fridge (холодильник) and freezer (морозилка).

Other people seem to distinguish between a bottle standing upright and a bag of potatoes plopped on the shelf. Поставь вино в холодильник (Put the wine in the fridge). Я положила пельмени в морозилку (I put the pelmeni in the freezer).

When we go to objects that stand (стоит), we use ставить/поставить: Поставь поднос на стол (Put the tray on the table). Я поставила бутылку на буфет (I put the bottle on the sideboard).

Placing people or animals in a standing position also uses ставить/поставить: Пастух поставил лошадей в конюшню (The shepherd put the horses in the stable).

For some reason, ставить/поставить is also used to place something for a medicinal effect. So you use ставить with банки (jars), горчичник (mustard plaster), термометр (thermometer) and even пиявки (leeches), even though they lie — or wiggle.

Once you get the hang of it, these verbs are pretty cool. Think of them as value-added verbs: They tell you not only where something is but how it is positioned. Я поставила книгу на полку (I put the book on the shelf), meaning the book is standing upright. Я положила книгу на тумбочку (I put the book on the side table), meaning the book is lying flat.

And then there are things that sit, but that's for another day.

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