

Take It for What It's Worth

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One of my more grim memories of early Russian language learning is sitting in my college dorm room, a textbook in my lap, eyes shut and repeating verb declensions over and over again: я пишу, ты пишешь, он пишет... (I write, you write, he writes...) The point was to sear those forms into my brain so that eventually, one day, just maybe I could say я (I) and automatically follow the word with the properly declined verb.

I'm happy to say that the old-fashioned rote method finally worked.

Now the problem is modifying those imprinted verb forms to accept idioms and constructions that violate them.

Take the idiom бери не хочу, which, thanks to years of declensions whispered into the night, I would translate as "you take — I don't want (to)." But it doesn't mean that at all. It means: There's a ton of something, and you can take as much as you want.

For example, in a comment contrasting the shopping experience today with the Soviet period,

someone said: Теперь каждый магазин ломится от товаров — бери не хочу (Today every store is crammed full of goods. You can buy to your heart's content).

This construction can be used with other verbs, too, most of them involving some form of consumption. Мама пекла весь день. Пирожков там — ешь не хочу. (My mother baked all day. I could eat all the pastries I wanted.) Свадьба шла три дня — гуляй не хочу (The wedding went for three days — you could party nonstop). Мы завели корову — молока пей не хочу! (We got a cow and could drink as much milk as we wanted!)

Language learners out there will note that the thing in abundance is in the genitive case — пирожков, молока — and that the idiom can refer to you, me, us, them or anyone and everyone, depending on the context.

You can often find this idiom in newspaper headlines: Доступное жильё! Бери не хочу! (The market is glutted with affordable housing.) But Russian newspaper editors love to do word play with headlines and sometimes jokingly flip the idiom so it has a literal meaning: Бери — не хочу: Почему столичные власти не смогли раздать москвичам по 350 тысяч рублей на открытие собственного дела (No takers: Why the capital's authorities couldn't hand out 350,000 rubles to Muscovites to open their own business.)

Perhaps because of media wordplay, or perhaps because the idiom fell into disuse, today some Russians now understand and use it to mean what I originally thought it meant. One of my respondents said, "Пойдёшь в магазин и там все возможные компьютеры, но цена не устраивает или ты уже купил. Скажешь: Бери не хочу." (You go into a store where there is every kind of computer imaginable, but either the price is too high or you already bought one. You say: There's lots of stuff but I'm not interested.)

So if a Russian headline about last week's post-Thanksgiving shopping frenzy in the U.S. was: "Чёрная пятница в США — бери не хочу," you'd have to read further to find out if sales were great or disappointing. If they were great, it means: Black Friday in the U.S. — they shopped till they dropped. If they were a bust, it means: Black Friday in the U.S. — they dropped and didn't shop.

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