

The Here, Now and Never

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Сейчас: now, just, soon, never

Way back in Russian 101, I was enchanted by the words *теперь* (now) and *сейчас* (now). How clever of Russians, I thought, to clarify so simply the distinction between right-this-moment now (*сейчас*) and nowadays-at-present now (*теперь*).

But *теперь* — or should that be *сейчас*? — I've come to realize that these seemingly simple words have several meanings. They can refer to the past, present and future and have a new now-word friend. They are still enchanting but not so simple.

Теперь is the nowadays now: *Теперь все квартиры должны иметь счётчики воды* (Currently, all apartments must have water meters). It's often used in then-and-now expressions: *Раньше я очень любила кататься на аттракционах, а теперь боюсь* (In the past, I loved to go on rides, but now I'm afraid).

But it's also used as a transition word to indicate a change of topic or task and might be translated as "next." You often hear this in the lecture hall: Мы решили первую задачу и теперь перейдём к второй (Now that we've solved the first problem, let's move on to the second). But you can also hear it around the house: Теперь добавляем немного муки и хорошо смешиваем (Next we add a little flour and mix it thoroughly).

Сейчас is the right-this-moment now: Я сейчас занята — перезвони мне через час (I'm busy right now — call me back in an hour). But сейчас time travels. It can refer to the future in the sense of "very soon." Я сейчас приду! (I'll be there in just a sec). Or it can refer to an action that just took place in the past. Он только сейчас вышел (He just stepped out).

In parental arguments with teenagers, сейчас means either "right this instant" or "sometime next year":

Mom: Убери комнату! (Clean your room!)

Teenager: Сейчас! (I'm on it, meaning "I'll get to it after I finish up on Facebook, try on my new jeans, eat dinner, walk the dog and spend three hours on the phone with my best friend.")

Mom: Сейчас же! (Now! I mean it!)

And sometimes сейчас leaves the temporal dimension and enters the spatial realm to mean "right next to": За домом сейчас же начинается лес (The forest begins right behind the house).

And then there's a new now word — щас. Okay, it's not a new word but a transcription of the way сейчас is pronounced. For now it seems to have the same meaning of сейчас. О чём ты думаешь прямо щас (pronounced прямщас)? (What are you thinking about right now?)

— Ты идёшь? ("Are you coming?")

— Щас ("In a sec")

I often get щас as a one-word e-mail reply after sending in work. It means: "Got it, give me a second to look it over."

My favorite slangy use of щас (or сейчас) is delivered dead-pan and means: Not now, not ever. Say you are listening to your teenage daughter complain she has nothing to wear to a party on the weekend. Her solution? Дай мне кредитку, и я поеду куплю новое платье (Give me your credit card and I'll go and buy a new dress). Your sarcastic response: Щас (When pigs fly).

Your solution? Теперь давай посмотрим твой гардероб (Now let's take a look at your clothes). Her response: Щас. (In a minute.)

Translation from teenagerese: Like that's going to happen. I'll borrow something from my friend instead. A satisfying щас.

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