

Fancy That

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August 15, 2013

The Moscow Times

In my ongoing effort to get a handle on all those little Russian words — you know, like так (so), как (how), что (what) and да (yes, and) — and their confusing combinations, this week I'm stuck on вот.

I like to say вот. On "в" you inhale a rich dollop of "o" and then end with a gratifying click of the teeth on "т." What a tasty little word.

Вот can mean "here" or "look" or "listen up." It can be used as an intensifier, like in the phrase вот что я скажу (here's what I've got to say about that).

And then, because this is Russian we're talking about, it can be combined with other little words to produce a wide variety of meanings, like вот как (so that's the way it is!) or вот это да (that's really something).

Or it can be uttered all by its lonesome to mean "and that's all I've got to say about that." Вот.

In the course of my *вот* research, I've gotten rather wistful about English. A hundred years ago, we might have translated *вот* expressions with interesting phrases and regionalisms like "that's a fine kettle of fish," "my stars and garters" or "I declare."

Or we might have even used the word "lo," which is pretty close to *вот*. It's derived from a word that meant "look" and was used to express wonder and amazement.

But these days, we can't render "*вот!*" as "lo and behold." And wonder or amazement generally gets expressed with "wow!" or an expletive in English today. *Вот и всё* (That's the way it is).

Take *вот тебе раз* (also *вот те раз*, *вот так раз*). This is a phrase you exclaim when you are unpleasantly surprised by something — what used to be expressed in English by such phrases as "of all the things!" and "my heavens."

Today it's probably just a bleeped-out expletive. "Наш самолёт вынужден совершить посадку в Москве," — объявила стюардесса. "Вот те раз!" — возмутился сосед. ("Our plane must make a landing in Moscow," the stewardess announced. "What the hell!" my outraged neighbor said.)

Or *вот тебе на* (also *вот те на*), which also expresses amazement, often about some bad or unpleasant news or event. In 1920, this was "Well, I never!" Today, it's probably "No way!" "Прокурор велел соседа арестовать." "Вот те на! За что?" ("The prosecutor ordered your neighbor's arrest." "You're kidding! What on earth for?")

And if it were 1856 — or if you were channeling Scarlet O'Hara — *вот тебе крест* (also *вот те крест*) would be "as God is my witness." Now it's likely to be the mundane "I swear!" *Вот те крест, он работает на ментов* (I swear to you, he's working for the cops!)

True, not all is lost. *Вот где сидит/сидят* is what you say when you are sick of some thing(s). "Мне этот киоск уже вот где сидит," — Анна проводит пальцем по шее. ("I'm fed right up to here with that stand!" Anna said, running her finger across her neck.)

And *вот поди ж ты* (also *иди ты*), used to express disbelief and amazement on hearing some news, has a pretty close English equivalent.

"Она вышла замуж за Борю." "Вот поди ж ты! За Борю?" ("She married Borya." "Get outta here! Borya?")

Reply: *Вот те крест!* (Honest to God!)

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/08/15/fancy-that-a26811>