

A Bit Much

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Раз-два и обчёлся: you can count the number on one hand

There is nothing worse than having a friend tell you the price of something when you have no idea if it's ridiculously expensive or the bargain of the century. She describes the apartment of her dreams and leads up to the great reveal — a ruble price tag with so many zeros your mental exchange rate calculator crashes. You know you are going to be a great disappointment, but all the same you ask: Это много или мало? (Is that a lot or a little?)

Мало is the word to describe a little of something — here, мало денег (a little money). If you don't like the adverb мало, you can use other more expressive words: бедно (poor), скудно (miserly), немного (not much), немножко (just a little bit), чуть-чуть (a tiny bit), небогато (not rich), негусто (low on; literally "not thick"), or нежирно (sparse; literally "not fat").

These words can be used in a variety of situations. Негусто (not thick) would seem to describe a thin soup, but it can be applied to anything from a meal to a corporate presentation. В ходе встречи президент несколько раз повторил: "Давайте конкретику!" Но с конкретными предложениями было негусто. (Several times during the meeting the president said, "Give me some specifics!" But specific proposals were few and far between.)

If you don't like those words, you can use that Russian specialty: whimsical combinations of little words with all the verbs and nouns left out: всего ничего (nothing at all), не так чтобы очень (not what you'd call very [much]), or не так чтобы много (not what you'd call a lot).

You can go left-brain: микроскопический (microscopic), по пальцам можно пересчитать (you can count them on the fingers of one hand). Or you can go right-brain and use various body parts as comparisons: горстка (handful); на один зуб (for one tooth, said of a small amount of food); or на/с мизинец (the size of my little finger).

If you don't like your own body parts as examples, you can refer to nature: капля (a drop) or капля в море (a drop in the bucket; literally "sea"). Or the animal kingdom: с гулькин нос (the size of a pigeon's beak, гулька or гуля being variants of голубь).

More expressive is как слону булочка (like a bun for an elephant). This is said with exaggerated self-pity when asked if you got enough to eat. If you really want to go expressive, try the charming phrase кот наплакал (literally "a cat cried"), used with a noun in the genitive case to describe a tiny bit of something — as much as a cat would shed in tears. Было трудно: опыта тогда было — кот наплакал, и веры в свои силы — ещё меньше. (It was rough. At the time, I had nada experience and even less belief in myself.)

Another wonderful expression for not much is раз-два и обчёлся, which means that there were one or two things — and that's it. Usually this is a bad thing: Хороших картин было раз-два и обчёлся (You could count the good paintings on the fingers of one hand). But sometimes being one of a very few can be presented as a good thing: Таких, как я — раз-два и обчёлся! (People like me — they're thin on the ground!)

To which one must say: И слава Бору! (Thank God for that!)

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