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Negation Nation

By Michele A. Berdy

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Не уходи: stick around

As I was walking in the park the other day, a woman ran up to me and asked: Вы не видели маленькую собаку? This means: Have you seen a little dog? But she asked the question in the negative, something like: You haven't seen a little dog, have you?

Over the years I have noticed and written about the propensity for Russian speakers to use negative constructions where English speakers would use positive phrases. Today I decided to try to put all of those observations into a kind of Russian negation rule-book.

Rule 1: It is more polite and less intrusive to ask questions in the negative. I do not know why this is and I cannot yet determine the topics or situations that this rule applies to, but certainly it applies to asking strangers questions. It works for asking about a missing dog or asking for directions: Вы не подскажете, где улица Планетная? (Can you tell me where

Ulitsa Planetnaya is?) Mysteriously to me, it sounds slightly more accommodating to use this kind of negative construction with friends and family, too: Не хочешь пойти в театр в пятницу? (How about going to the theater on Friday?)

Rule 2: Not good is better than bad. That is, saying мне плохо (I'm in bad shape) is bald, categorical, and so strong that it will probably get you a quick ticket to the emergency room. But мне нехорошо (I'm not doing too well) is tactful, polite, and will get you a helping hand to the nearest lounge chair. Unless something is really, really bad, negate some "good" words instead of using "bad" words: нехорошо (not good), невесело (not fun), неинтересно (not interesting), нелегко (not easy), etc. Many times this kind of understatement is very pleasing to the Russian ear, too: Неужели за десять лет пальто не поменяла? Негусто живёшь. (You haven't bought a new coat in ten years? Money's a bit tight, is it?)

Rule 3: Не...не... (not...not) transforms a sentiment into a strong да (yes). That is, Он не смог меня не заметить (literally, he couldn't have not noticed me) is really a strong positive phrase: He had to have noticed me! And this kind of construction also sounds elegant to the Russian ear. Не удалось не ссориться (We could not keep from fighting.) Я не мог не напомнить, что деньги — не наши. (I had to remind them that the money was not ours.)

Rule 4: Не + a semantically negative verb = a positive. Не грусти (literally, don't be sad) = cheer up. It is possible to say развеселись (get happy), and saying it will make your friends wildly amused. But it is not good Russian. Не уходи! (Stay put!) Не пропадай! (Keep in touch.) Не болей! (Be well.) Не унывай! (Cheer up!) Не отчаивайся! (Stay positive!) Не вешай нос! (Buck up!) Не напрягайся! (Relax!)

Of course, sometimes English speakers use the same kind of construction. Не бери в голову! (Don't give it a thought!) Не принимай близко к сердцу! (Don't take it to heart!) But in general, English likes to use positive commands and Russian likes to negate a negative command.

But that may be changing. A few years ago the phrase береги себя (take care) sounded hilarious in Russian, but now the younger crowd has picked it up along with смайлики (smiley face emoticons).

Meanwhile, don't let all this negation get you down. Не волнуйся, будь счастлив! (Don't worry, be happy!)

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