

My Resolutions for 2014

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Запок: pledge, vow.

Every year, like millions of my compatriots, I make New Year's resolutions, and every year, like millions of my compatriots, I fail to achieve them. But I'm never the least bit disconcerted to write "lose weight and get fit" for the 35th year in a row. If you want a textbook example of belief over reason, check out my annual resolution list.

New Year's resolutions are largely an American thing. Russians don't make them. I think this is because personal agency — the ability to achieve what one sets out to achieve — has been problematic in Russia for the last millennium or so: Tatars, tsars, wars and general secretaries got in the way. But also because Russians, by and large, don't buy into the whole "I can reinvent myself" belief that is the basis of American culture.

And so, resolutions defy graceful translation. They might be called **новогодние обещания**

(New Year's promises); обещания, данные самому себе (promises to oneself); цели, поставленные на новый год (goals set for the new year); or the rather lofty sounding новогодние зарюки (New Year's pledges). That said, my local fitness club was packed on a weekday afternoon, and the attendant said: Ждите месяц. Рассосётся. (Wait a month. The crowds will thin out.) From this I infer: Resolutions may be nation-specific, but marketing is universal.

In any case, here are some of my linguistic and lifestyle resolutions for 2014.

1. Вид (aspect). Yes, I know I've resolved to master the intricacies of verbal aspect before, but this time I'm serious. I'm starting with я не могу тебя забыть (I can't — imperfective — forget you — perfective) and я не смогу тебя забыть (I will not — perfective — forget you — perfective). So far I've asked 10 native speakers about the differences between these two sentences and why you can't use забывать (imperfective) and gotten 10 different answers. When I get a consensus, I'll let you know.

2. Ударение (stress). Ditto all of the above, except the 10 Russians I asked about stress in words not only have no idea why they place the stress where they do. They don't even put it on the same syllable. I'm going to concentrate on words like сковорода (skillet, stress on last syllable), which is сковороды (stress on first syllable) in the plural. I see the point of this — the shifting stress tells you if one or many skillets are under discussion — although achieving it is another matter. But I'm optimistic. After all, I'm going to lose weight and get fit this year, too.

3. Акцент (accent) and интонация (intonation). I don't really care much about accents. I want to minimize my accent and English monotone enough to be understood, but I'll never sound like a native speaker, so why try? Well, why not give it a try?

4. В природе нет плохой погоды (there is no bad weather in nature). This is my new credo. Жаловаться не буду (I won't complain). Really. Except when there is no snow for the entire winter holiday and the park paths are all covered with water-covered ice and my boots are falling apart because of the de-icing chemicals and there hasn't been a sunny day since October and ...

5. Нарушения (violations). I will not commit a single violation of anything — visa regime, registration, parking or taxes — because one mistake and you're out. So no violations for me. Обещаю (I promise).

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