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How to End Arguments in Russian the Slangy Way

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Забей!: Let it go!



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Let's take a pause in our analysis of the language of treaties, propaganda and diplomacy for something useful for a change — like a couple of Russian slang words that every foreigner should know. They are particularly helpful in a number of potential tricky everyday situations. But if you're not careful, they can lead you into trouble, too.

Like almost all slang terms, these words have standard meanings in what is called "literary Russian," i.e., the Russian of dictionaries, Russian language teachers, and your insufferable neighbor on the third floor who loves to correct your use of verbal aspect.

Let's start with сойти, which has the primary meaning of getting down off something: Сойдя с поезда, он прогулялся по вокзалу (He got off the train and wandered around the station.) You can also go off your head, as it were — сойти с ума is to go crazy: Мир сошёл с ума (The world has gone mad.) Or things can come to nothing: Их отношения совсем сошли на нет (Their relationship petered out completely.)

But there is another meaning of сойти — to be good enough. You use it when something is bad, but you hope no one will notice. Он не старается сделать лучше — зачем, если и так сойдёт? (He isn't trying to do it better — why should he, if what he does is good enough?)

This is an extremely handy word when doing any project around the house with your significant other. When doing spring cleaning, for example, you realize that your partner will throw a wet sponge at you if you say that the windows still aren't clean, say instead: Ладно, и так сойдёт (All right, I guess that'll do.)

But if your significant other tries on an evening outfit and asks: Ну как? (What do you think?), do not say: Сойдёт! In this context it means: Well, it's totally inappropriate and looks bad on you, but it will have to do.

It is also a marker of the end of the world as we know it when a publisher, house painter, teacher, or any other person in charge looks at a mediocre piece of work and says: И так сойдёт (That's fine as it is.) Or even worse: Всё сойдёт (Anything goes.) Or absolute worst of all: Ему всё сойдёт с рук (He can get away with murder.)

The other handy slangy verb is забить, which has the primary meaning of nailing something in or hitting something, including a goal or basket in sports. The nailing might be figurative, in a way: Мы забили места на верхней трибуне (We staked out seats at the top of the bleachers.)

But the slang meaning is to forget about something. You can use забить when you decide not to do something: Хотел плавать, но увидев большое количество народу на пляже, решал забить на это дело. (I wanted to swim, but when I saw a huge crowd of people on the beach, I decided to forget about it.)

It can also mean to not let something get you down. When your partner complains about gossipers at work, you say: Забей! (Screw 'em!)

Or let's go back to those filthy windows. Your partner points out some streaks on the outside at the very top. You look at the ladder. You look at each other.

Partner: Забьём? (The hell with it?)

You: Сойдёт! (It'll do.)

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Word's Worth'' (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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