The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

How to Talk Like a Russian Diplomat

By Michele A. Berdy

April 21, 2017



Imago / TASS

Слышь: Yo! I'm talking to you!

Not every diplomat can become an overnight "хит интернета" (Internet hit) after just one speech at the United Nations. That honor goes to Vladimir Safronkov, deputy permanent representative from Russia, who publicly took to task Mathew Rycroft, the U.K. Ambassador to the U.N. last week.

The brouhaha was not because one delegate yelled at another delegate — that happens dozens of times every day. And it wasn't because of the nature of Safronkov's accusations — everyone has heard Russia's version of the Syrian war a million times. No, the
скандал (scandal) was over the way Safronkov spoke to his esteemed British colleague. Officially it was called достаточно жестко (sufficiently harsh). Unofficially it was called everything from грубое панибратство (crude over-familiarity) to приблатнённое хамство (obnoxious thug slang). In fact, much of the Internet thought he sounded like a

гопник, one
of those squatting, sunflower-seed-spitting,▣good ole boys who do manual labor and a bit of robbery on the side.

You▣wouldn't know this from the official transcripts, which cleaned up
Safronkov's▣language, primarily switching his familiar, street-talking
ты to the more
decorous and collegial▣
вы. So he didn't▣actually say: Посмотрите на меня и не отводите
глаза (Look at me and don't look▣away). He
said: Посмотри на меня! Глаза не отводи! Чё
ты глаза отводишь? (Hey, look at me! At me, I said!▣Where you looking?) And he didn't end his tirade with the strong but literary: Не▣смейте, г-н Райкрофт, больше оскорблять Россию! (Don't you dare, Mr. Rycroft, insult▣Russia again!) He continued to use
ты: Не смей
оскорблять Россию больше! (Yo, quit putting Russia down!)

Should you▣ever need to put someone firmly in his place, let your business partners know▣how disappointed you are in them, or establish rules of behavior with your▣neighbors, you may want to master some гопник-talk. To channel your inner Russian Ratso▣Rizzo, all you have to do is remember a few simple rules.

First,▣forget the word
что (what). Practice saying чё or чо. Cut it short and spit it out: Ты чё?
(What's wid▣you?) Or stretch it out for five beats:
Чё-ё-ё-ё-ё-ё-ё? (What you▣saying? Say
again. Are you nuts or what?) Чё нет? (Whadya▣mean, no?) should be used whenever you are displeased or surprised by someone's▣refusal.
Чё да? (Whadya mean, yes?) should be
used▣when you either require more information or when you think you've
been▣disrespected.

Then, cut▣words in half. In fact, make as many words as possible one syllable, two at▣most. Remember: not слышите but слышь (listen); not сейчас or even щас, but ща (in a sec); not зажигалка but жига (lighter).

The more adventurous can try to master the▣sound б—я [blya], (an abbreviation of a very nasty word for a woman of ill▣repute), which can be used to describe anything really good or really bad; to▣express surprise; and of course to address people, from your significant other▣to a salesperson. Or it can be added to any word to imbue it with a kind of▣cheery informality. For example, на, б— я is a friendly гопник way of asking▣someone to take your payment for goods or services.

And, best▣of all, eschew cases. Instead of
Сколько времени, ask: Сколько время? (You got
the time?)

Got it?▣Great. Next week: how to squat and spit sunflower seeds.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/04/21/how-to-talk-like-a-russian-diplomat-a57781