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Russian Grammar Friday

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Согласование:⊠agreement

Okay, since⊠it's the start of a new school year, this is Grammar Friday.

Hey, come⊠on! Where are you guys going? This will be interesting — really!

Well, a big⊠round of applause for the 12 of you who stayed. Today's discussion is about an⊠aspect of Russian that is so confusing, even native speakers aren't sure about⊠it. It's all about words like большинство (majority); много (a lot); мало (a little); двое (two); пятеро (five); тысяча (a thousand); миллион (a million); масса (a mass); and пара (a couple). The grammatical⊠issue: what form of verb do they take?

Simple, you⊠say. Большинство is⊠a noun, singular, and neuter. So it takes a singular verb with a neuter ending.⊠Большинство пришло (The majority came.) Right,⊠but what if you are talking about the majority of the cats in the cattery? After⊠you call them, do you really say

Большинство кошек пришло? It sounds weird to use a singular neuter form of the verb when you're talking about a bunch of cats darting all over the place.

So which is right? Oh, you know the answer: It's complicated.

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There are, however, some cases when it's not complicated — there's only one right way to say it.

One case: when it's a collective noun used alone — when you say мало (a few) but you leave out what it is there are a few of. Here the noun and verb have to agree. Много пришло. (A lot came.) Двое стояло на улице. (Two stood on the street.) Большинство голосовало против. (The majority voted no.) Меньшинство выступало за поправку (The minority were for the amendment.) It doesn't matter if you mean people, cats, ostriches, or paddy wagons: if you don't say the words, it's simple noun-verb agreement in the singular.

Another case that I personally dislike — that is, that I constantly get wrong — involve the numbers тысяча (a thousand); миллион (a million); and миллиард (a billion). Here it's straight noun-verb agreement, even when you add what there are a thousand, million or a billion of. На столе лежала тысяча долларов. (A thousand dollars was lying on the table.) Миллион людей собрался на площади. (A million people gathered in the square.)

And here's a case when there's only one way that's right, but so many people say it wrong that wrong is becoming the new normal. This is with words that indicate quantity like много (a lot); мало (a little); столько (so much); and сколько (how much). The rule is: these are singular, neuter words that take singular neuter verb endings. Очень много людей пришло на концерт. (A whole lot of people came to the concert.) В парке в этот день было мало посетителей (There were few visitors to the park that day.) Сколько человек прописано в квартире? (How many people are registered in the apartment?) Много пришло...было мало... сколько прописано. That's what's called perfect формально-грамматическое согласование (regular grammatical agreement).

The thing is — speakers don't like it. Sometimes logical sense — lots of cats, people, dogsleds should use a verb in the plural — actually wins out over grammatical rules. So using the plural form of the verb is almost okay. Three cheers for reality!

In fact, sometimes it's preferable to use the plural verb. For example, when you want to emphasize the many individuals in a mass of много: Ряд избирателей написали 'против всех" на своих бюллетенях (A number of voters wrote "against all" on their ballots.)

And for our grand grammatical finale: the dreadful case of "one." "One" in Russian requires the singular verb regardless of whether it's one or forty one. So you have to say: На лекцию пришёл сорок один студент. (Forty one students came to the lecture.) But what if those forty one students get into a discussion? Then you switch to the plural verb: Сорок один студент обсуждали вопрос. (Forty one students discussed the question.) Why? Because a

discussion by definition involves more than one person, so it can't occur in the singular.

Got it? Next week: participles. Do I know how to have fun or what?

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