

Sounding Smart in Russian – Sometimes

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

November 03, 2017



G Morel / Flickr

Смотри: check this out

I am a big fan of what Russians call вводные слова (parenthetical words), often used at the beginning of a sentence. These are words and phrases like кстати (by the way); так (so); ну (well); and между прочим (incidentally). I like them because they buy time for us foreigners — time to remember that noun and what gender it is, or come up with the right declension of an irregular verb, or basically just look thoughtful and smart.

Like everything else in Russian, there are some pitfalls — but also some nice nuances to master, too. I especially like the parentheticals that invoke sight.

First up: смотри (literally “look”). This is fairly straightforward, used to set up or draw attention to an explanation or piece of information. For example, a computer programmer asked a friend for help figuring out a realistic budget. She said: Ну смотри, мне кажется, что профессионалам платят по 10 000 рублей за задачу (Take a look at this — I think professionals get paid 10,000 rubles per job.)

Here the only trick is with translation. You will want to render this as “Look,” but in English that is often a sign of annoyance or exasperation — “Look, how many times have I told you...?” In Russian смотри is usually rather friendly: Ну смотри, по моим расчётам, всё получится. (Check this out — according to my calculations, it will work out.)

And sometimes смотри is friendly, but stern. Смотри can also mean “look out, be careful.” Смотри не заболейте! (Take care that you don’t get sick!)

Смотри can also be a way of deferring to another person’s opinion or choice. When a young woman tells her parents she wants to get married, her mother responds: Ну, смотри, девка, тебе жить (Up to you, girl. It’s your life.)

Next up: видите (or видишь) ли. This phrase is literally the question “do you see?” — and, of course, much of the time it means just that: Видишь ли там вдали дубовую рощу? (Do you see the oak grove in the distance?)

But as a parenthetical, it can be used in two ways. The first is to draw attention to something:

Видите ли, великий человек должен иметь великого противника. (The thing is, a great person must have a great enemy.) It can be translated as “you see”: Лёва, видите ли, боялся, что Алина может перепутать и прийти на час раньше (Lyova, you see, was afraid that Alina might get confused and come an hour early.)

But there is a snarky version of видите ли that may be hard to catch on paper but is very clear when spoken. Imagine tones dripping with sarcasm. Футбол отменился — погода, видите ли, "плохая" (The soccer match was cancelled because there was, if you can believe it, “bad weather.”) Here’s an example of two staff members discussing their lazy co-worker: Он не может нам помочь. Он, видите ли, очень занят своим отчётом. Бедный мальчик. (He can’t help us. He’s so very busy, you see, writing his report. Poor baby.)

Our audio-visual trio ends with гляди, which also literally means “look” — and is sometimes a simple command to look at something: Ты тоже гляди, а то я могу и не заметить (You look, too. I might miss something.)

But it can be used parenthetically to mean, “you’ll see,” or “looks like”: Гляди, сам будешь проситься на другую работу через неделю (You’ll ask for a different job in a week, you’ll see.)

Sometimes it is used to direct attention to something or someone: Гляди, какой помощник у тебя подрос, надёжной опорой будет (Look at how your helper has grown up. He’s going to be a real support to you.)

But гляди, like смотри, can be used to mean: Watch out! Beware! Гляди, не усни! (Careful that you don’t fall asleep!)

Finally того и гляди means: you never know, at any minute. This can be a driver’s lament: Водители плачут ☒ того и гляди, дорога развалится (The drivers are weeping — at any moment the road might fall apart.) Or a young parent’s complaint: Того и гляди ребёнок заплачет (The baby might start crying at any time.)

Смотри, какие интересные фразы (See how interesting these phrases are?)

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.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/11/03/sounding-smart-in-russian-sometimes-a59469>