

An Ode to У

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

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У меня кошка. Кошка сидит у окна. **Thomas Meier / Flickr (CC BY-NC 2.0)**

У нас: at our house, in our practice, in our country

One of the nerdy things I like to do is read scholarly papers on Russian grammar. Hey — whatever floats your boat, right? Recently I plowed through 35 pages on the preposition “у,” which you probably know best as the preposition of possession — used with the genitive case, for all you fellow grammar geeks: У меня три кошки (I have three cats.) But there is so much more to this trippy little preposition.

First of all, “у” indicates proximity to something, which might be expressed English with the prepositions at, by, nearby, or near. Она сидела у окна и читала книгу (She sat by the window and read a book.) Мы договорились встретиться у большой церкви в центре города (We agreed to meet at the big church in the center of town.)

When proximity is so close it’s in your hand, as it were, then “у” means possession: У меня новое платье (I have a new dress.) But in addition to having cats or houses or four ex-husbands, you can have ailments and pains. This is very important to learn — it keeps you from sounding like a just-off-the-boat first-year Russian student. You never, ever say Мой зуб болит (my tooth hurts). You say: У меня зуб болит (literally something like “I have a tooth that hurts.”) У меня живот болит (My stomach hurts.) У него аппендицит (He has appendicitis.) Got it? Go forth and ail grammatically.

You use this construction in other ways that imply possession, that is, in cases when you might use the verb “have” in English. Does your new main squeeze have a nice feature? You bet: У него такие красивые глаза! (He’s got such beautiful eyes!) Does your buddy have a handle on things? У Ивана всё под контролем. (Ivan has everything under control.) Was he amazed? Yup, although in Russian he sounds more like a contortionist than someone in shock: У Алексея глаза медленно полезли на лоб (Alexei’s eyebrows slowly went up, literally, “Alexei had eyes that slowly climbed up his forehead.”) Yowza.

“У” with the genitive case is also used to mean “at someone’s house.” Вечером их можно найти у себя (In the evenings you can find them at home.) Только 13% выпускников собираются жить у родственников (Only 13 percent of graduates plan to live with their

relatives.) Russian likes a bit of redundancy here — у себя дома (at home at my place). For example, the kids polled talked about working at home: Наличие у себя дома работы именно по специальности отметили лишь 4% (Only 4 percent noted that the work they did at home was in their specialty.) Or this common phrase: Я была у себя дома весь день (I was at home all day, literally “I was at home at my place all day.”)

The preposition “у” and pronoun in the genitive case can also mean “at home” in the big-picture sense — in a country. Как у вас проводят выборы? (How are elections conducted in your country?) У нас в России (Here in Russia) is kind of a set phrase: У нас в России низкий уровень жизни (In Russia we have low living standards.) У нас в России весело! (It’s fun here in Russia!)

Or “у” plus pronoun in the genitive can mean “in our set” or “with us”: У нас очень талантливые ребята (We’ve got some very talented kids.) This could mean in our group, in our house, in our neighborhood, school or country. Perhaps I’m imagining this, but that “у нас” has a nice homey feel to it, like you’re talking about one big family even when you’re referring to a school of five thousand or a nation of 140 million.

Finally, you use “у” with three categories of verbs: requesting, taking or buying, and stealing. This is conceptually rather cool — it’s as if the language stresses that something belonged to someone else before you asked for it, grabbed it, bought it or stole it.

So, for example: Ему не надо будет просить у меня прощения потом (He won’t have to ask for my forgiveness later.) Or: Я не видел человека, у которого надо было взять документы (I didn’t see the person I was supposed to get the documents from.) На рынке мы всегда покупаем овощи у третьего продавца слева (At the market we always buy vegetables from the third vendor on the left.) Что будет делать вор, когда он украдёт всё у всех? (What is the thief going to do when he has stolen everything from everyone?) У меня украли сумку! (Someone stole my purse!)

The next time someone asks you Как дела? (How are you?), think about the ubiquitous “у” and say: Ничего! А у вас как? (Not bad? How’s about with you?)

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