

How Good is a Russian Not Bad?

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

November 02, 2018



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Очень неплохо: pretty darn good

For several weeks a group of language specialists on a listserv have been having a grand time with the phrase “not bad,” trying to determine where “not bad” is on a scale of one (bad) to ten (good), and how it measures up on the Good-O-Meter with the Russian word неплохо (not bad).

This is a case when the English seem less clear-cut than the Russian. The slow-building, general consensus is that in English “not bad” can mean anything from “one step above absolutely horrible” to “brilliant” depending on the intonation and speaker’s age, location, and idiolect. For some people, “Not bad!” is the highest compliment they can give.

On the Russian side, native speakers were more or less in agreement: неплохо is about a 7-7.5 on the Good-O-Meter, which corresponds, more or less, with the dictionary meaning: довольно хорошо (pretty good).

So why don’t people just say “хорошо” instead of “неплохо”? I don’t know. But it is typical in Russian to use a double negative (not + bad) more than a positive (good). За два года, благодаря своей тяге к знаниям, моя дочь выучила неплохо английский (Thanks to my daughter’s love of knowledge, in two years she learned English pretty well.)

Sometimes неплохо provides a nice little nuance: Профессионалы получают за каждую цитату по 1000 рублей — тоже неплохо (Professionals get 1,000 rubles for each quote — not too shabby.)

Or it can mean that in general a person is happy with things. Мне было неплохо на прежней работе (I was happy at my previous job.) Мне неплохо (Things are just fine.)

With бы or было бы (it would be) неплохо can be a suggestion to do something. Правительству было бы неплохо чётко продемонстрировать, какую политическую платформу оно намерено защищать (It would be a good idea for the government to clearly indicate which political platform they intend to support.) This kind of political conversation might lead to another usage: Неплохо бы выпить пива (I wouldn’t mind a beer about now.)

You can ramp up the goodness with one or more modifying adverbs. As one person said, *очень неплохо* (not bad at all — literally “very not bad”) is 8-8,5 on the Good-O-Meter. You might hear the amusing *очень даже неплохо* (literally “very even not bad”) which is “really not bad at all.” *Дальше всё у него шло очень даже неплохо* (And then everything went very well indeed for him.)

There is, however, one tiny little confusing issue in Russian (you knew it was coming). Sometimes it’s one word — *неплохо* — and sometimes it’s two — *не плохо*. And of course there are the dreaded grammar rules that determine which one to use.

The first rule is easy-peasy. You divide the words into two when there is a juxtaposition, that is, something like “it’s not bad, it’s good/great/truly horrible.” *Он работал не плохо, а на хорошем уровне* (He didn’t work badly; he worked at a decent level.) *Это не хорошо и не плохо. Это — нормально* (It’s not good and it’s not bad — it’s just normal.)

The second rule is not so easy-peasy. When you intensify the notbadness with words that are neutral like *весьма* (extremely); *очень* (very); *крайне* (utterly); or *почти* (almost), then it’s one word. And, except for *почти* (almost), these make “pretty good” into “really very good.” *Пианист весьма неплохо сыграл* (The pianist played really well.) *Пианист почти неплохо сыграл* (The pianist played almost well.)

But if you modify the notbadness with *далеко не* (far from) or *отнюдь не* (by no means), then it’s two words. *Пианист отнюдь не плохо сыграл* (The pianist did not by any means play badly.) *Пианист далеко не плохо сыграл* (The pianist played far from badly.)

Annoyingly, the adverbs *совсем* (completely) and *вовсе* (quite) can be used with *неплохо* and *не плохо*, but you get two different meanings. “*Она выступала совсем неплохо*” means “She performed quite well.”

But take this sentence: *Вопреки общему мнению, мне кажется, что она выступала совсем не плохо!* (Contrary to popular opinion, I think that she didn’t perform badly at all.)

Is your head spinning? Don’t worry, Russian speakers have trouble with this, too. One grammarian tried to simplify it: If someone asks *Как дела?* (How are things?), the answer is one word: *Неплохо* (Not bad!).

And if you’re not sure, use another word. *Плохо!* (Bad!)

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/11/02/how-good-is-a-russian-not-bad-a63388>