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Ode to a Preposition

The Word's Worth

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При: very capacious preposition

When Russians are learning English, they complain about articles, verb tenses, modal verbs and prepositions. Having listened to a lot of Russian ranting about my native tongue over the years, I can attest that they eventually accept that the difficulties of the first three categories are just part of the structure of English. But they remain infuriated with preposition use. Take my advice: if your Russian friend starts a conversation about the difference between "in the restaurant" and "at the restaurant," invent a dentist appointment and run. You do not want to go there.

Russian prepositions are a mixed bag. Some are fairly easy, like около (around, near) which uses the genitive case and causes no trouble: Он ждал её около фонтана (He waited for her by the fountain).

And then there is при. При is a nightmare.

При has 12 different meanings that are so loosely related you need almost a dozen English prepositions and twisted sentence structure to translate them all. If they are united by anything, it's the concept of being attached to, a part of, or under something physically or figuratively. The only saving grace is that it always uses the prepositional case.

Welcome to the wide, wide world of при.

1. With. Use при to describe a person having something in their possession, on their person. Когда пойдёшь в Мои Документы, имей при себе оригинал паспорта и две копии (When you go to the municipal services office, be sure to have the original of your passport and two copies on you.)

2. Right by, near, next to. Use при to indicate that something or someone is very close to someone or some object. Маленькая гостиница стояла при дороге. (A little hotel stood right by the road.)

3. Under, part of. Use при to describe an object or institution that functions under or is part of something else. You find this a lot in descriptions of governmental institutions: У больницы при Президентской администрации очень хороший состав врачей (The hospital under the Presidential Administration has an excellent staff of doctors.) But it can also be more pedestrian: При вокзале есть приличный ресторан. (The train station has a decent restaurant.)

4. Has, always with. Use при to describe a person or job position that is attached to or with someone or some place. This is expressed in lots of different ways in English. For example, Он — переводчик при посольстве (He's the embassy translator.) Она была главной ассистенткой при Заведующем отдела (She was the main assistant for the head of the department.) It can also mean being with and responsible for someone: Моя сестра — хорошая мать. Она всегда при детях. (My sister is a really good mother. She's always with her kids.)

5. In the presence of. Use при when describing an event happening in the immediate presence of someone. Они подписывали контракт при свидетелях (They signed the contract in the presence of witnesses.) Я никогда не обсуждаю личные дела при посторонних (I never talk about personal matters in front of strangers.)

6. Under the reign of, during the rule of. Use при to describe events taking place during a particular period of time, under the leadership of a specific person or ideology, or while someone was alive or in a particular place. При Петре I мода кардинально изменилась. (Under Peter the Great fashion changed completely.) Люди не могли свободно передвигаться при советском строе (People didn't have freedom of movement under the Soviet system.) При жизни моего отца мы никогда не ругались между собой. (We never fought among ourselves when my father was alive.)

7. While wearing, by. Use при to describe an element of appearance, usually a person but sometimes the atmosphere and appearance of a space. Он всегда при галстуке. (He always wears a tie.) Мы ужинали при свечах (We had dinner by candlelight.)

8. Having, near. Use при to describe someone's state of mind, condition, health or quality. Sometimes this is very tangible: Она лежала при смерти (She was close to death.) But it can describe the state of possessing something: Мои соседи всегда при деньгах. (My neighbors always have lots of money.) Я не скучаю на даче — я при деле. (I'm not bored at the dacha – I've always got something to do.) It can often refer to some characteristic or quality that is the reason for something. При его характере он должен быть счастлив, что она согласилась выйти за него замуж (Given his personality, he should be happy that she agreed to marry him.)

9. Under, while experiencing. Use при to describe doing some activity while something else is going on. Most of the time this describes doing something under certain external conditions, like weather, temperature or light. Мы с мужем любили гулять при луне. (My husband and I liked to stroll in the moonlight.) В детстве я ночью читала книги под одеялом при свете маленького фонарика (While I was a kid I read books with a flashlight at night under the blankets.) Надо хранить эту муку в закрытом пакете при низкой температуре (You have to store this flour in a sealed package and at a low temperature.)

10. Even given. Use при to describe some kind of characteristic or condition, despite which something else occurs. При всём моем желании я никак не смогла помочь (Even given my ardent wish to help, there was nothing I could do.) При всей её открытости она не обсуждала свой развод с подругами (Despite her usual candor, she didn't discuss her divorce with her friends.)

11. With the help of, using. Use при to describe something that aided in doing or completing something. Мы получили ипотеку только при содействии моего родственника, который работал в банке. (We got our mortgage only with the help of one of my relatives who worked in the bank.)

12. Given, although, but. Use при in some expressions with pronouns to express in addition to, by the way. Он очень известный учёный, при этом очень дружелюбный и открытий. (He's a really famous scholar, but at the same time he's very friendly and open.) В прошлом сезоне средняя посещаемость была 93 процента. При том что экономическая ситуация не слишком хорошая (Last season halls were filled at 93 percent on average. And that's despite a rather weak economy.)

Ну, закончила. Правда, при лунном свете, но главное — дописала. (Well, that's it. True, I finished by moonlight, but the main thing is – I finished writing this.)

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