

Getting Your Snark On in Russian

The Word's Worth

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

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Неужели: Really? Come on! You're kidding, right?

One of my Russian language obsessions is “little words” — all those small words like как (how); так (so, that); да (yes, and); нет (no) and so on that can be mixed and matched to create and convey every emotion and every concept known to humankind. The trick for us non-native speakers is figuring out exactly which emotion and concept is meant in each particular case.

I somehow forgot about one of the coolest of them until a colleague mentioned it online: неужели. Sometimes it means one thing; something it means the opposite; and sometimes it

doesn't really mean anything on its own but flips the meaning of a sentence.

So much cool.

The very first cool thing is that it is so obviously made up of several words, but you probably didn't notice: не уже ли. This means literally "not already?" — ли is "translated" as the question mark. In most cases when you pop it into a sentence, it adds a question, disbelief or astonishment to a statement.

Take this simple statement: Я его больше не увижу (I won't see him again.) Add our new favorite word: Неужели я его больше не увижу? (Could it be that I'll never see him again?)

And here you instantly see one of the uncool aspects of this word: translating it so that you don't sound like Victorian schoolmarm. Today we'd probably say, "What if I never see him again?" or "I can't believe I might never see him again!"

In most cases it expresses astonishment, sometimes a wailing sense of "it just can't be!" Не пойму. Неужели мне столько лет? Мне? (I don't get it. How can I be this old? Me?) Or sometimes just a big dose of skepticism: Ваша концепция мне близка, но неужели это единственный способ? (I like your concept, but is it really the only option?)

As a stand-alone reply, it has two meanings. One, I have to confess, I don't hear a lot, perhaps because I don't hang around with the right set. In this usage, неужели means: "I don't agree with what you have just said" or "I don't believe it." The example in the textbooks is: — Он её любит. — Неужели! ("He loves her." "That can't be!") One of my friends says when she finds yet another broken glass and asks her butterfingers son if he was responsible, he says: Я не разбил! (I didn't break it!) and she says: Неужели! (Like I believe you.) The easy way to translate this is to exclaim "Really?!" with bulging eyes and a head shake. Да неужели! Что-то слабо верится, Петров! (Really?! Somehow it doesn't seem likely, Petrov.)

In the other usage, with which I am very well acquainted, the reply Неужели! — said with maximum snark — means: "Yes, you're absolutely right and I can't believe it took you this long to come to this conclusion." In long-term relationships, it means "What have I been telling you for the last 20 years?"

It was this meaning that my colleague showed me, with a possible translation that is perfect for those fun discussions on the home front when you want to scream "I told you so!" For example, your Significant Other (SO), who has ignored your pleas to fix the [insert appliance or electronic device essential for life maintenance], suddenly realizes it's not working. — Срочно надо вызвать мастера! (We've got to get the repairman here right away!) You reply: — Неужели? ("No s---, Sherlock").

Or it can be used to express agreement with someone's statement — because you've been saying the same thing for the last 20 years. — Пора купить квартиру и не бросать на ветер большие деньги каждый месяц! — Неужели? ("It's time to buy an apartment instead of throwing huge amounts of money down the drain every month." "Ya think?")

Another little word that operates some of the same way is разве, which indicates a question and usually disagreement. Chances are you've heard it in the very common exclamation said

by indignant parents, teachers, and bossy folks on the bus: Ну разве так можно! (Now is that any way to behave?)

You can combine разве and что to get “except, unless”: Травмы подучили многие участники чемпионата, но такие серьёзные, как англичане, ☒ разве что немцы (Many athletes in the world championship had injuries, but no one worse than the English, except for the Germans.)

You have, of course, other options for snarky comebacks. An oldie but goodie is Здравствуйте! When you walk in the door and say it, it means “Hello.” When you say it after your SO utters what you’ve been saying for what seems like 5,000 times a day, it means “Great grasp of the obvious there, bub!”

You can also say Что ты говоришь? But you have to master a tone of feigned astonishment. —Слушай. Ты права. Начальник меня подвёл. —Что ты говоришь? (“Listen. You were right. My boss pulled a fast one on me.” “You don’t say?”)

Another winner is А ты как думал? (What the hell did you expect?)

But that’s all for the sarcastic usage of неужели. If you just want express surprise, you can say something like: Не верится! (I don’t believe it!) Не укладывается в голове! (I just can’t get my head around it!) Не может быть! (It can’t be!) Я не ослышался? (Did I hear you right?)

But I highly recommend mastering the неужели intonation: Pull your head back, shake it slightly, give a half eye-roll, purse your lips and channel extreme exasperation with a dose of adolescent sarcasm. Неужели?!

Oh snap.

Hat tip to Carl Schreck.

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