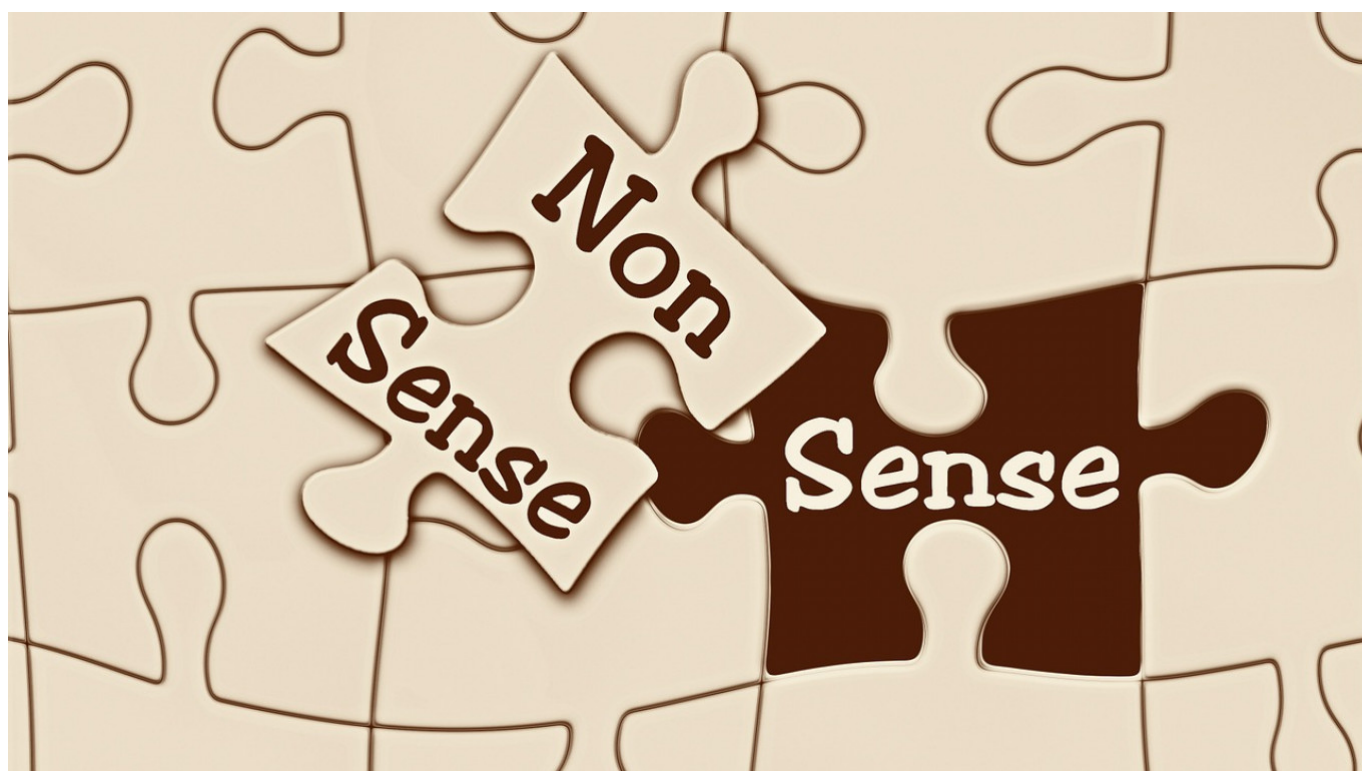


# Russian Sense and Sensibility

## The Word's Worth

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

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*В смысле: in the sense of; what do you mean?*

My inner nerd went crazy-happy a few weeks ago when I read an exciting announcement in the press: linguists at Tyumen State University discovered a new conjunction in the Russian language. Woohoo! Crack open that bottle of champagne!

As you might imagine, there wasn't a word being used that no one had heard or noticed before. But linguists studied usage of the phrase *в смысле* (in the sense of) and realized that it is now used as a conjunction that means "that is." That is, it's used to set up a clarification.

As one wit commented on the site under the announcement: *Лингвистам респект. В смысле – уважение* (Respect to linguists. That is, esteem.)

Now, you might not be as thrilled by this as I am, but you might be pleased to spend a bit of time with this very useful little phrase.

First of all, if you don't understand what someone said, this phrase is your new best friend.

You can use it alone. For example, someone says: ☒ Это как с кошкой. (It's like with a cat.) You have no idea what they're talking about. You ask: ☒ В смысле? (In what sense?) Of course, the answer might not help much: Когда сидишь в кресле, всегда хочется, чтобы она прыгнула тебе на колени (When you're sitting in an armchair, you always want it to jump in your lap.)

But sometimes the question “в смысле?” gets you the answer you need. —Он не честный. (He's not honest.) —В смысле? (What do you mean?) —Он не сказал мне всю правду об одной сделке (He didn't tell me the whole truth about a deal.)

You can also use it to get clarification. For example, you're chatting up a nice doctor. —Насколько опасна ваша профессия? (How dangerous is your job?) The doc replies: —В смысле заражения? Наверное, из всех врачей-специалистов венерологи меньше всех болеют. (In the sense of catching something? Venereal disease doctors probably get sick less than any other medical specialists.) See? The night is now full of options.

And then, if you are not asking the questions but answering them, you can shove an adjective in between the two words that make up this phrase to provide instant clarification. Let's say we're still talking about that business associate who isn't quite on the up and up. Your friend wants to know more. Он что — действительно преступник? (So, what is he — a real crook?) You say: Может быть, не в юридическом смысле. Но я ему не доверяю (Maybe not in the legal sense. But I don't trust him.)

Words and phrases can be understood narrowly or broadly, although sometimes you have to know the subject before either one makes any sense: Исследователями описаны два явления, обозначаемые как “этническое самосознание в узком смысле” и “этническое самосознание в широком смысле” (Researchers describe two phenomena, designated as “ethnic self-awareness in the narrow sense” and “ethnic self-awareness in the broad sense.”) Er, right, sure. Got it.

In other cases, you require less specialized knowledge to understand something, at least in the narrow sense: История в узком смысле слова есть наука о человеческом прошлом (In the narrow sense of the word, history is the study of the human past.)

Or you can use another couple of adjectives to do the opposite — instead of clarifying, they let you hem and haw and hedge. Add некоторый (some) or определённый (certain) to your sense. For example, when you are fighting with your Significant Other, realize you are wrong, but aren't quite ready to admit it, say this: В некотором смысле ты прав (In some sense, you're right.) Or if your SO is right in some ways, but not others, say this: В определённом смысле ты прав, но не во всем. (In a certain sense, you're right, but not about everything.)

There are ways to be adamant with adjectives and sense. В полном смысле этого слова (in the full sense of that word) is a great thing to exclaim when you are feeling categorical. На сегодняшний день она☒ единственная оперная дива в мире в полном смысле этого

слова (Today she is the world's only true opera diva in the full sense of that word.)

And there are ways to be very specific: в прямом смысле этого слова (in the literal sense of the word). На привалах после длительного перехода мы в прямом смысле валились на землю от усталости (In the campsites after a long hike we were so exhausted we literally fell on the ground.)

And there are ways to be specific and figurative: И в буквальном смысле, и в переносном смысле совесть не дает спать нашей душе (Both literally and figuratively our conscience doesn't let our soul sleep.)

But sometimes it's not the real thing: Нет, конечно, никакой верой в настоящем смысле тут и не пахло. (No, of course not, there wasn't any faith in the true sense of the word.)

Ну, как? Вам понравилось в прямом смысле этого слова?

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