

He Said, She Said Russian-Style

The Word's Worth

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

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Якобы: supposedly

If you are one of those people who hates to make a commitment, or doesn't want to go on the record, or is just not sure about things — the Russian language is for you.

There are lots of ways to say that something supposedly happened, or someone purportedly said something, but really, the sun was shining in my eyes, my phone was ringing, and I was distracted by work problems so I just can't say for sure. But maybe. It could have happened. Someone said so, but I'm just passing that along. Don't quote me on it.

For quality hedging, first of all, there is *будто*. It can mean “as if”: Я смотрела на это так, будто всё происходило не на моей кухне, а где-то в кино (I watched it as if everything was happening in a movie somewhere and not in my kitchen.) Or it can be a way of indicating that you, the speaker, aren’t quite sure if something is true. Он рассказывал про событие, будто он сам там был и участвовал во всём (He told about the event as if he were there and took part in everything.) Maybe he is a good storyteller and makes you feel like he was there. Or maybe he really was there but just isn’t owning up. You don’t know, and *будто* means you’re not saying one way or the other.

Вроде is the cousin of *будто*. On the one hand, *вроде* can indicate similarity: Он вёл себя как настоящий меломан, вроде меня. (He behaved like a real music lover, like me.) On the other hand, you can add *вроде* or *вроде бы* any time you’re not quite sure of something. You know, it’s sorta like it happened, but hey, maybe it didn’t. Вроде, всё понимаю правильно (It seems like I get it all.) Sometimes while translating this you get to use “like” as an interjection, like, you know, to state a generally held opinion, like. По отдельности тётки, вроде, и ничего (I got to say that if you took each woman alone, she’d be, like, not too bad).

Якобы (supposedly, purportedly) is used whenever you are uncertain about something or you’re passing on someone else’s opinion or information. Их дочка якобы красавица (Their daughter is supposed to be a real beauty). In journalist-speak this is sometimes “allegedly”: Их обвиняли в том, что они якобы нанесли несколько ударов древком флага сотруднику милиции (They were accused of allegedly striking a police officer several times with a flagpole.)

There is one dreadfully tricky aspect of *якобы* in compound sentences, which was discussed recently on a listserv I subscribe to. Sometimes it’s hard to figure out what is being called into question. Take this sentence: Актёр добавил, что в России планируют снять свой сериал по трагедии на Чернобыльской АЭС, в котором вину якобы возложат на ЦРУ (The actor added that some people in Russia are planning to shoot their own series about the Chernobyl tragedy in which the guilt is supposedly placed on the CIA). The native Russian speakers understood this in two ways: the actor is saying that the CIA is supposedly guilty, or the writer is saying that the CIA is supposedly guilty. Who is calling it into question is, well, being questioned.

Now, if Russian speakers — well-educated, professional translators — disagree or find the usage ambiguous, I figure I’m not ever going to know on my own. So, my plan is that if I come across *якобы* in anything but a five-word, simple declarative sentence, I’ll call up 12 close personal friends and bug them until I get a consensus.

In the meantime, I am more confident about ways to clearly report other people’s words. This is incredibly convenient in Russian. None of the English nonsense like “according to them,” “they said,” “I heard that they think.” Nope. In Russian, you just stick in a word — *дескать* or *мол* — and they indicate “this is what the other person or people said.” How cool is that?

So, you can say: Дескать, в странах-экспортёрах нефти доход на душу населения снизился с 1979 года на 30% (They say that in oil-exporting countries the per capita income has fallen by 30 percent since 1979). Or you can say: Другие оспаривают название нашей политической партии мол, вы не настоящие правые (Other people object to the name

of our political party — they say that we aren't real right-wingers). Or this: Слышал вчера разговор двух женщин, обсуждавших телевидение. Мол, кроме сериалов смотреть по «ящику» нечего, только убийства и пошлость. (Yesterday I heard two women talking about television. They were saying that there's nothing to watch on the tube but series, and they're all just murders and vulgar behavior.)

Or, if you don't want to commit, you can use one of several impersonal constructions. These allow you to express an opinion without actually owning up to it. Говорят, что он нечестный (They say he is dishonest.) Считается, что некрасиво зайти в гости без звонка (It is considered ill-mannered to stop in on someone without calling first.) Слышано (it has been heard); видно (it has been seen); читано (it has been read); and ведомо (it is known) are also useful for the commitment-phobes out there. Слышано, что ваш сосед разбогател (Word is that your neighbor came into some money.)

Of course, all this “someone said, heard, knew, read” stuff gets on people's nerves. Он слушал без особого интереса, будто всё это ведомо, слышано (He listened without much interest, as if everything was already known and heard before.)

With all this reporting of other people's opinions and statements, you might need to make sure your listeners understand it's hearsay. For that, use this handy little phrase: за что купил, за то и продаю (for what it's worth, literally “I sell it for what I bought it for”). За достоверность этих слухов не ручаюсь, ☒ за что купил, за то и продаю (I can't swear to the authenticity of those rumors, I'm just passing on what I was told.)

So, like, maybe it's right but maybe it isn't. I just don't know.

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