

On Russian Time

The Word's Worth

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

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Время летит: time flies

In the old days, before the linguistic Powers That Be deemed кофе (coffee) a noun that could be either masculine or neuter, кофе was solely masculine and a kind of litmus test of Russian language mastery. There was, of course, an old joke about it. A fussy professor sits in the university café and sputters in annoyance every time a student asks for Одно кофе (using the neuter form of the cardinal numeral). Finally, a young foreign exchange student comes up and asks for Один кофе (using the masculine form of the cardinal numeral). The professor beams at him. And then the foreigner adds, “И один булочка, пожалуйста.” (And one roll, using the masculine form of the cardinal numeral with a feminine noun.)

That's the way I am with time expressions. I cheerfully announce: Я заеду на этой неделе! (I'll drop in this week!), which is perfectly correct. And then I generalize the rule and cheerfully add: Мы обязательно увидимся на этом месяце (We'll definitely see each other this month), which is perfectly wrong.

Дайте один правило, пожалуйста! (Give me one rule, please! — with masculine cardinal numeral and neuter noun). Do not say this with your Russian friends!

Russian time expressions are very fussy. There isn't one rule and a couple of minor exceptions; there are seven different rules. I don't know how to master them without simply memorizing one correct version of each paradigm — post-its on the bathroom mirror might work — and hoping that when the time comes to note how long you were in the library last night or for how many days you plan to be in Portugal you'll say the right thing.

After poking around, I found a pretty good way to codify it. Here goes:

The first kind of time expression deals with duration and answers the question: How long? Blessedly, all time expressions of this sort use the accusative case.

How long did it take you to drive to the dacha? Мы ехали три часа. (We drove for three hours). Мы весь вечер ехали. (We drove all evening). Ощущение, что мы ехали целую неделю! (It felt like we drove a whole week!)

The second kind of duration is of an action that is completed and answers the question: How long did you go for? Here the time period is expressed with на and the accusative case.

How long were you at the dacha? Мы поехали на дачу на целый месяц. (We went to the dacha for an entire month). У нас было мало времени, так что мы пошли в музей на пару часов (We didn't have much time, so we went to the museum for just a couple of hours.)

The third kind of duration is an action in the future and answers the question: In how long will you do something? It uses через and the accusative case. Я позвоню через час. (I'll call back in an hour.) Он пришлёт перевод через неделю. (He'll send the translation in a week.)

The next type of time expression deals with frequency or repetition and answers the question: How often? There are two ways of talking about this. The first uses каждый (every) and our friend the accusative case.

How often do you see your parents? Я заезжаю к родителям каждую неделю. (I go to see my parents every week.) Я бегаю каждое утро. (I jog every morning.) Он каждый день пишет три часа (He writes for three hours every day). Notice the double time expression in that last sentence. All accusative case.

The second kind of frequency answers the question How many times per week/month/day etc.? For this you use раз (time) plus в and the accusative case. Я хожу в фитнес-клуб раз в неделю. (I go to the gym once a week.) Мы встречаемся с одноклассниками три раза в год (My classmates and I get together three times a year.) Мои друзья обычно приезжают два или три раза в месяц (My friends usually stop in two or three times a month.)

And then there is a way to describe doing something repeatedly that uses по and the dative

case. По субботам мы всегда ходим в кино. (We always go to the movies on Saturdays.) По вечерам я читаю (I read in the evening). По утрам я занимаюсь медитацией (I meditate every morning.)

Moving right along to exact time, which answers the question: When did/does/will something happen? This is where I get a headache or get it wrong or both. The problem is that there is one rule for something that happens in less than a week, another rule for a week, and a third rule for more than a week. Nasty.

If something is happening in less than a week, use **в** and the accusative case. Он придёт в субботу. (He's coming on Saturday.) Наш хор выступает в пять часов сегодня (Our choir is performing at 5 p.m. today.)

If something is happening this week, last week or next week, use **на** and the prepositional case. Советник президента планировал посетить Белоруссию на прошлой неделе. (The advisor to the president planned to visit Belarus last week.) Мы встречаемся на этой неделе. (We're meeting this week.) На следующей неделе обещают похолодание. (They say it will get cold next week.)

If something happened, is happening or will happen in a time period longer than a week, use **в** and the prepositional case. This is the rock upon which the little ship of my Russian crashes. В этом месяце мы обязательно доделаем ремонт. (We'll definitely finish our repairs this month). Они собираются купить новую машину в следующем году (They plan to buy a new car next year.)

And, if you can believe it, there is also an exception to the exception, although it's probably familiar to you: to express an event occurring in a season or time of day, use the instrumental case. Мы переезжаем осенью (We're moving this fall.) Мы будем отдыхать целый месяц следующим летом. (Next summer we're going to take a month's vacation.) Я зайду завтра утром (I'll stop in tomorrow morning.)

Next up: one point in time in the past. This answers the question: When exactly did something occur? If it's a date, use the genitive case. Why? No idea. Probably because we've used every other case and it's time for this one, too. Он ушёл в отставку 4-го марта 1895-го года. (He resigned on March 4, 1895.)

But if that one moment is a time or day, use **в** and accusative case. Он приехал в субботу. (He came on Saturday.)

Finally, there is approximate time. There are two ways to express this. The first is with **около** and the genitive case. Обычно урок кончается около пяти вечера (The lesson usually ends about five p.m.). The second way is my personal favorite: you switch around the word order. В пять часов is "at five o'clock." Часов в пять is "about five o'clock."

And that's it. The most boring column I've ever written. В пять часов пойду выпить. (At five o'clock I'm going to go for a drink.)

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