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# The Russian Blahs

## The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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**Embed:**

*Не очень: not so good*

Forget coronavirus; Muscovites have been zombified.

Well, not exactly zombified. But for some reason most of us are walking around in a daze, incapable of coherent thought or action, falling into bed at an uncharacteristically early hour and barely able to drag ourselves out of bed at a shockingly late hour. I personally blame the city-wide case of the blahs on the weather — you try living in dreary November for five straight months — but maybe it's the stars, or the water supply, or the general mess the world is in.

The only good thing? Russian's got a word for it.

In fact, Russian has a huge pile of words for feeling meh and for anything that is not bad but not really good — you know, stuff in that in-between zone between happy-making and lemme-outa-here-I-hate-this.

First of all, you can describe the blahs by eschewing verbs. What a treat for us foreigners. Of course, sometimes you need an interpreter to help you fill in the blanks. Here is what a friend said when I asked how she felt: Ну, как-то не очень. Может быть, это— как это? Не знаю. Но не особенно.

This translates more or less literally as: "Well, somehow not very. Maybe it's that — whatsit? I dunno. But not especially." Got it? But add a few words and translate into coherent thought and you get: "Not great. It might be that thing going around — what's it called? But I don't know for sure. In any case, I don't feel great."

Another verbless phrase to use is the classic так себе (so-so). This is said with a shoulder shrug or a careless toss of the head. –Как ты? –Так себе. ("How are you?" "Not too good, not too bad.") There is even an adjective from this: таксебейный (fair to middling). How great is that? You can use this cleverly constructed adjective to damn something with faint praise: Опера? Ну как сказать? Певец таксебейный, тексты таксебейные, костюмы - ничего особенного (The opera? How can I put it? The singer was so-so, the texts were so-so, and the costumes were nothing to write home about.)

If you want to stick with negatives, there is a slew of them to choose from. Here the basic concept is to negate a positive. You don't say something is outright bad; you say it isn't great. And to make it more interesting and expressive, you use some vivid images, like in this phrase: Не фонтан (literally "not a fountain"). I suppose the idea is that your state of mind or health is not like a beautiful, celebratory, refreshing fountain. Пару дней назад покупал бананы очень дешево, но качество не фонтан (A few days ago I bought some really cheap bananas, but the quality wasn't great).

Another even more mysterious phrase is не ахти — or не ахти какой and не ахти как. It also means: mediocre, not here nor there. You'd use не ахти какой to describe a thing and не ахти как to describe an event or action. Apparently it comes from the verb ахнуть (to gasp) and basically means: nothing to shout about. Торговля идёт не ахти как бойко (Trading isn't exactly what you'd call booming).

This is similar to не Бог весть как/какой/что (nothing special, less-than-stellar, literally "God doesn't know what/how"). Не бог весть какой, но всё-таки дом (It's nothing much, but we call it home).

If you don't like those options, you can pare it down to basics: не то (not it). Платье красивое, ничего плохого не скажу, но всё-таки не то (The dress is pretty, I can't say anything bad about it. But it's just not right.)

For health and general mood, неважно (literally "not important") means "not great." There are plenty of slangy versions of this, too. –Как он после концерта? –Неважнецкий. Считает, что плохо сыграл ("How is he after the concert?" "He's not doing too good. He

thinks he performed badly.")

Then the ни-s have it: ни плохо, ни хорошо (neither good nor bad); ни шатко, ни валко (just middling). Становлюсь жестче, кожа становится толще. Это ни хорошо, ни плохо: это вынужденно, чтобы выжить. (I'm getting tougher, I'm not so thin-skinned. It's neither good nor bad; it's just what you have to do to survive). Работа шла ни шатко ни валко, все поглядывали на часы (The work petered along with everyone watching the clock.)

Or you can simply say: никакой (not anything). –Как ты? –Никакая. ("How are you?" "Blah.") Very existential.

And let's not forget the all-purpose ничего (literally "nothing") which you can use to mean: it's okay, nothing special, nothing great, not too bad. –Как ресторан? –Ничего. ("How was the restaurant?" "It was okay.") That is: It was edible, but I probably won't go back.

Another approach is to stick -овато or -оватый at the end of your adverb or adjective of choice. This adds the notion of "somewhat," "more or less." Very convenient. That restaurant that was just okay? Дороговатый (It was a bit on the expensive side.) How was their speaking ability? Они русский знали плоховато (Their Russian wasn't great.) All very mushy in-betweeny.

Or you could just stick to the facts. If you were an average student, admit it: Учился я средне (I was a mediocre student, literally "I studied adequately"). Сочинения писал посредственно, почерк ужасен, в математике соображал слабо (I wrote just passably, had terrible handwriting, and was weak in math).

But it's not your fault. It's the mediocre school system, right? Социально-образовательный уровень школы оставляет желать лучшего (The social and educational level of the school leaves something to be desired).

Of course, sometimes your mental or physical health has left that fair-to-middling range and descended into the land of lousy. Be honest! Don't mince words: –Как самочувствие? –Хреново! Фигово! Паршиво! Ужасно! ("How are you feeling?" "Lousy! Gross! Crappy! Awful!")

The response to that will be: Ничего, ничего. И это пройдёт. (Not to worry. This too shall pass.)

К весне. (By spring.)

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