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I'm All For It!

The Word's Worth

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За спиной **Pixabay**

За и против: for and against

It's Friday on another weirdly warm winter day in the Russian capital, and to mark the weirdness, we're going to do a deep dive into a mass of weird Russian usage. But let's start with a pop quiz. Today's topic: yet another one of those prepositions that are the bane of Russian language-learners' existence.

За means: a) for; b) behind; c) outside; d) after; e) before; f) none of the above; g) all of the above; h) shut up I hate this.

If you chose (g) you're right. If you chose (h), no offense taken. Two little letters; so much misery.

I had hoped to go way back in the language to discover some proto-за that would tie up all these disparate meanings and usages into one word or concept. But instead, etymological dictionaries admitted: Вообще говоря, история этого предлога не из ясных (Basically, the history of this preposition is not what you'd call clear.)

Right. Got it. But there is some good news. За only uses two cases: the accusative when there is movement or action and the instrumental when there is no movement. Of course, there are exceptions; what would Russian be without its exceptions?

I've divided up за usage and meaning by categories, some broad, some very narrow. За работу! (Down to work!)

Behind, outside of, beyond. Here you use the instrumental case when you are located behind or beyond something: Театральные дети большей частью росли за кулисами в театре (For the most part theater kids grew up backstage.) Мы сидели за столом и делали уроки (We sat at — behind — the desk and did our homework.) Мы проводим лето за городом (We spend summers outside the city.)

You use the accusative case when you move behind or beyond something: Терпеть не могу ехать за город в пятницу (I can't stand going out of the city on Friday.) Он сел за стол и взял ручку (He sat down at the desk and picked up the pen.) Когда она вошла в комнату, он вышел за дверь (When she came into the room, he slipped behind the door.)

If the case endings are hard to remember, try this for a mnemonic device: Она вышла за него замуж. (She married him.) Она была замужем за ним 15 лет (She was married to him for 15 years). See? Moving into a state of matrimony (accusative case), being stuck, er, being in a state of matrimony (instrumental case).

Annoying exception: The one time you use the instrumental case with action is when talking about following behind or chasing after something or someone. Мы следовали за гидом. (We followed the guide.) Старушка шла за коровой (The old woman walked behind the cow.) За двумя зайцами погонишься — ни одного не поймаешь (If you chase after two hares, you'll catch none.)

Weird usage: over, above. Use за + accusative case to express "beyond" in time or age. Ему далеко за сорок лет (He's way older than 40.) Он приехал за полночь (He showed up after midnight.)

More weird usage: at a distance. This uses the accusative: Его простонародный выговор за километр было слышно (You could hear his folksy way of speaking a kilometer away.)

And even more weird usage: for the duration of, in a period of time. This also uses the accusative: За три дня они написали новый план работы (They wrote a new work plan in three days.) Такого не видел за всю свою жизнь (I've never seen anything like that in my whole life.)

Weird usage continues: before. This is very specific usage: X amount of time before some event. За три дня до смерти он закончил свой роман. (He finished his novel three days before he died.)

Special case weird usage: grab, bite, haul away by. This doesn't come up a lot unless you work on a farm or know some very rude people. You use за and the accusative when you grab someone by the arm or something bites you in the butt. Помню, как тебя моя собака за задницу покусала (I remember how my dog bit you in the ass). Хвать его за руку! (Grab him by the arm!)

For. Ah, breathe out again. За is often "for" in English.

Я — за! (I'm for it!) Use за + accusative case when you want to express worrying, caring, voting, fighting, paying, speaking up, etc. for someone or something. Мы голосовали за кандидата от Партии Зелёных (We voted for the candidate from the Green Party.) Ребята борются за справедливость (The guys are fighting for justice.) Мы расплатились за ужин и вышли из ресторана (We paid for dinner and left the restaurant.) Мы тоже платили за него (We also paid for him.) Мы волновались за моих родителей (We worried about my parents.) Адвокат хорошо выступил за обвиняемого (The lawyer spoke well for the defendant.)

For in the sense of an exchange: Око за око (An eye for an eye.) Это не глубокое чувство! Это просто любовь за деньги! (They don't have deep feelings. It's love for money.)

Third-to-last weird usage: while, during. За + instrumental can mean "while" with words that denote or describe a time period. Я всегда читаю за ужином (I always read while I'm having dinner.) Валя ничем не интересуется, за уроком она играет в куклы (Valya isn't interesting in anything, and she plays dolls during the lesson.)

Second-to-last weird usage: as. За + accusative can be used when you are describing some quality, characteristic, or example. Они что, считают меня за идиота? (Do they think I'm an idiot or what?) Бери мое платья за образец (Take my dress as a pattern).

Finally! Last weird usage: За + instrumental can be used to describe something that you are after — a goal, purpose, or even a thing. Он пошёл за хлебом (He went to buy bread). Они следят за порядком (They look after things to make sure everything is in order.) Берёмся за работу (Let's get down to work!) — or simply за работу (see above).

Is your head spinning? There's no easy way to learn за. But if you can remember пошёл за хлебом, вышла за него замуж and голосовали за, you'll be on the right path.

А я пойду за пивом. (And I'm going to get a beer.)

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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