

Russian Patience is a Virtue

The Word's Worth

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

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Дело терпит: no rush

What Russian verb changes its meaning depending on where the negative “не” is placed? What noun can be modified by the adjectives hellish and angelic – and not change meaning at all? What verb can mean to wait, not to wait, to endure, to hate, to deal with, to accept or not to rush or worry?

Patience, my friends, patience.

Er, I mean – that’s the word! Терпение — and the verb терпеть. They are very interesting words by themselves, and even more interesting when in expressions that ought to be in everyone’s linguistic pocket.

I have, of course, been thinking about patience because these days we need a great deal of it: to stay in self-isolation, to fill out forms every time you want to drive to the store to buy dog biscuits, to stand in line to enter a store at a distance of 1.5 meters from the person ahead and behind you, and to wash your hands while singing the alphabet song — preferably in two languages, slowly. Терплю. (I'm being patient.) Sort of. Mostly.

Let's start with терпеть. Sometimes — oh, joy! — it means to be patient. Китаец, конечно, в таких условиях не мог купить иномарку. Но ему сказали ☒ терпи (In these circumstances a Chinese person couldn't buy a foreign car, of course. But they told him: be patient.)

More often терпеть means having to endure, put up with, resign yourself to some kind of unpleasant physical or emotional conditions. Как-то он терпел весь этот страшный шум урагана (Somehow he withstood all the terrible clamor of the hurricane). Приходится терпеть хамство соседей (I've got to put up with my neighbor's obnoxious behavior.)

When followed by the preposition от (from) and someone or something, it means having to endure some dreadful behavior or conditions because you have no choice. Депутаты говорят, что надоело вот это полубезвластие-полухамство, которое приходится терпеть от местного начальства (The deputies say that they are sick of the half-anarchy and half-crudeness that they have to put up with from the local bosses).

There is a tricky bit with the negative form of this verb. When the verb itself is negated, it means that someone dislikes something or someone. Мои родители, с одной стороны, не терпят фальши, а с другой ☒ очень доверчивы, поэтому зачастую их очень легко купить (On the one hand my parents can't abide dishonesty, but on the other hand they are very gullible, so sometimes it's easy to pull one over on them.) But when you negate the verb мочь (to be able) and add that to терпеть, it means that you can't stand something or someone. Терпеть не могу тупых людей! (I can't stand idiots!)

In fact, any time you negate the verb combined with терпеть, patience gets turned upside down. Нет больше сил терпеть безнадегу (I just can't take this hopelessness anymore.)

The next interesting bit is that inanimate objects can be patient or impatient. For example, дело терпит or simply терпит is what you want to hear from your boss at 5:15 p.m. on a hot Friday in August. It means: the matter can wait, or simply: no rush.

On the other hand, when time isn't patient, it means the opposite: Время не терпит! (There's no time! We've got to hurry!)

People are sometimes impatient, too: Ребёнку не терпится! Так хочет лето! (My child can't wait! He wants it to be summer so badly!)

When you spot some fake news, you might say, sagely: Бумара всё терпит (literally, paper endures anything) — that is, you can write anything you want (and the paper accepts whatever you write.) And you might still come across this phrase, although it's not so common now: Как земля терпит! (How does the earth stand it?) Он ужасный, злой, нечестный человек! Как земля его терпит? (He is a terrible, mean, dishonest man. It's a wonder that people like him can live on this earth.)

There are also some set phrases with терпеть that all mean to endure something bad, but in English they are expressed differently. Терпеть неудачу (to have a setback); терпеть нужду (to have a rough time of it, to live on a shoestring); терпеть обиду (to be treated poorly, insulted); and терпеть убытки (to suffer losses).

There are also two slightly old-fashioned expressions that you might come across. One is: Ему часто приходилось терпеть и холод и голод (He often had to endure cold and hungry times.) And the other is more upbeat — in a roundabout sort of way — На всякое хотенье есть терпение (All things come to him who waits.) Потерпи немного. (Hold on for a little while.)

Терпение (patience) is a bit easier: it doesn't have as many nuances. When you have a houseful of bored kids, dying to go outside and sick of you, each other, and everything in the apartment, you are told: Придётся набраться терпения (You need bear it, literally to gather up patience.) And then you hope it will last: Моего терпения хватит ещё на пару-тройку недель, но никак не больше (My patience may last for two or three more weeks, but no longer.) And then, finally, it boils over: Пустяковые разногласия и мелкие стычки переполняют чашу терпения (Silly disagreements and little spats have exhausted my patience, literally “make my cup of patience overflow”). Дети испытывают моё терпение! (My kids are really trying my patience.)

And in the end, you lose it: Потеряв терпение, я орала на детей (I lost my patience and yelled at the kids.)

Now if you don't lose your temper, your patience might be described with any one of a dozen or so adjectives. Your терпение might be endless: безграничное (boundless); бесконечное (endless); беспредельное (limitless). It might be huge: колоссальное (colossal); огромное (huge); величайшее (great). It might be extraordinary: необыкновенное (extraordinary); нечеловеческое (inhuman); сверхчеловеческое (superhuman); поразительное (amazing); исключительное (exceptional).

In fact, it can be ангельское (angelic): Какой это был замечательный человек! С каким ангельским терпением он выслушивал бред своего брата. (What a marvelous person he was! He used to listen to his brother's nonsense with the patience of angels!)

And weirdly, patience can be адское (hellish), which is actually just about the same thing as heavenly: Такого результата молодые люди того времени добивались непосильным трудом и адским терпением (People at the time achieved those results with backbreaking work and the patience of the devil.)

I have no explanation for this, except that clearly you need the power of heaven and hell to remain patient during the Great Pandemic Lock-Down of 2020.

Чего я вам всем желаю!