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# The Russian Dos of Don'ts

## The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Что значит нельзя погулять? **Pixabay**

*Никак нельзя: absolutely impossible*

Spring in Moscow is, in general, puppy time. Training a dog to go outside when it's -25C and the snow is knee-high to a human and four times the height of a small canine is impossible both for the dog and its human. But once the weather gets warmer, the courtyard is full of little creatures being told they are Молодец! (Good boy!) every time they manage to pee on a bit of grass.

This year the puppy population is larger, since coronavirus lock-down is also a great time to raise a dog. In the morning the sounds of training drift up to my window: Молодец! (good boy/girl!) (Нет-нет-нет! (No no no!) Нельзя! (Don't!) Брось! (Drop it!)

This got me thinking about one of those essential commands: нельзя. I think of it as the "it is

forbidden" word.

But after a bit of research, I realized that нельзя is far less one-dimensional than I had originally thought. It's actually the "it's impossible-forbidden-not recommended-really ought not to-can't live without it" command.

For dogs, of course, as well as some children, cats, boyfriends, girlfriends, and nosy neighbors, нельзя can mean: you are forbidden from doing whatever you are doing or about to do. In English-language dog training, this is the simple but firm: No! Нельзя красть сыр со стола! (Don't steal the cheese from the table!) Нельзя писать в мои ботинки! (Don't pee in my boots!)

For humans, you sometimes need to go into a bit more detail. That's why нельзя is the word of rules, signs, and codes of behavior. This is the command you see in capital letters on signs outside hospital wards: Посторонним нельзя! (No admittance, literally outsiders are forbidden). Or it might be used in the rules for behavior at a school: Расскажите ему главные правила в университете — что нельзя делать и что можно (Tell him the main rules for university life — what's allowed and what is forbidden).

The second meaning of нельзя is "it's impossible," which can be literal, as in: Новый образец паспорта имеет несколько степеней защиты, и подделать его нельзя (The new version of the passport has several layers of protection and it's impossible to forge). It can also be figurative: В одну реку нельзя войти дважды (You can't step into the same river twice). And sometimes it's not quite clear if the meaning is literal or figurative: Нельзя быть такой глупой! Мне очень нужно сказать тебе, что я тебя люблю, понимаешь? (How can anyone be so stupid, literally, no one can be so stupid! I really want to tell you that I love you, get it?)

The third meaning of нельзя is much less adamant, and is, in fact, hardly a command at all. This нельзя is more like "you shouldn't," "you really ought not to." Её слова нельзя воспринимать серьёзно (You shouldn't take her words seriously). Стоять на полу нельзя, потому что холодный сквозняк дует из-под двери (You shouldn't stand on the floor because cold air blows in under the door.)

If you want, you can intensify the нельзя: Ни в коем случае нельзя забывать, что надо закончить работу до пяти часов (You must not under any circumstances forget that you have to finish work by 5 o'clock.) Его никак нельзя назвать успешным бизнесменом! (You certainly can't call him a successful businessman!)

The fourth meaning is a kind of mix of "it's impossible" and "you shouldn't." It's in phrases that use verbs like жить (to live) or обойтись (to get by) and the preposition без (without). Без друзей жить нельзя. (You can't survive without friends.) Без помощи не обойтись. (We can't manage without some help.)

And then because Russian adores double negatives, there is another usage: нельзя не делать (literally you can't not do something). In English we often ditch the negatives and turn it into a positive assertion. So этой женщиной нельзя не восхищаться (you can't not admire that woman) is more likely to be: You have to admire that woman! Or how about this: Простит тебя обязательно, но только тогда, когда не простить нельзя, ни секундой раньше.

(He’s certain to forgive you, but only when he has no choice but to forgive you and not a second earlier, literally when he can’t not forgive you). Sounds like a real sweetheart, eh?

Finally, нельзя is also used in very polite requests, which is something like the interrogatory version of a double negative. You don’t say Сделайте музыку потише! (Turn the music down!). You say: Нельзя ли сделать музыку потише? (Do you mind turning the music down, literally couldn’t you turn the music down?) Он был там или нет? Нельзя ли, по крайней мере, хоть это выяснить? (Was he there or not? Can’t we at least find that out?)

And considering the frigid weather and our stone-cold radiators, maybe instead of screaming at our apartment management companies, we should try this: А ночью нельзя ли подтапливать? (Do you think we might turn on the heat at night?)

Won’t work, of course, but it sounds very genteel.

There are also a couple of idiomatic uses of нельзя that threw me off the first time I heard them. They start with как нельзя — so you begin to mentally translate “as it is forbidden/impossible” — but then end with лучше (better), хуже (worse) or кстати (handy), or any comparative adjective or adjectival phrase such as более радостно (more joyfully). They all mean that something is as X as possible, or something couldn’t be more X. For example, Это романтическое название подходит городу как нельзя лучше (That romantic name is just perfect for the city.) Это обстоятельство пришлось как нельзя кстати Лужкову через год (That situation came in really handy for Luzhkov a year later). Он был как нельзя более далек от моего идеала (He couldn’t have been farther my ideal). Сначала обстоятельства складывались как нельзя хуже (At first the circumstances were as bad as they could possibly be).

You get the idea, right? Русская грамматика оказывается как нельзя более сложной (Russian grammar couldn’t be more complicated.)

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