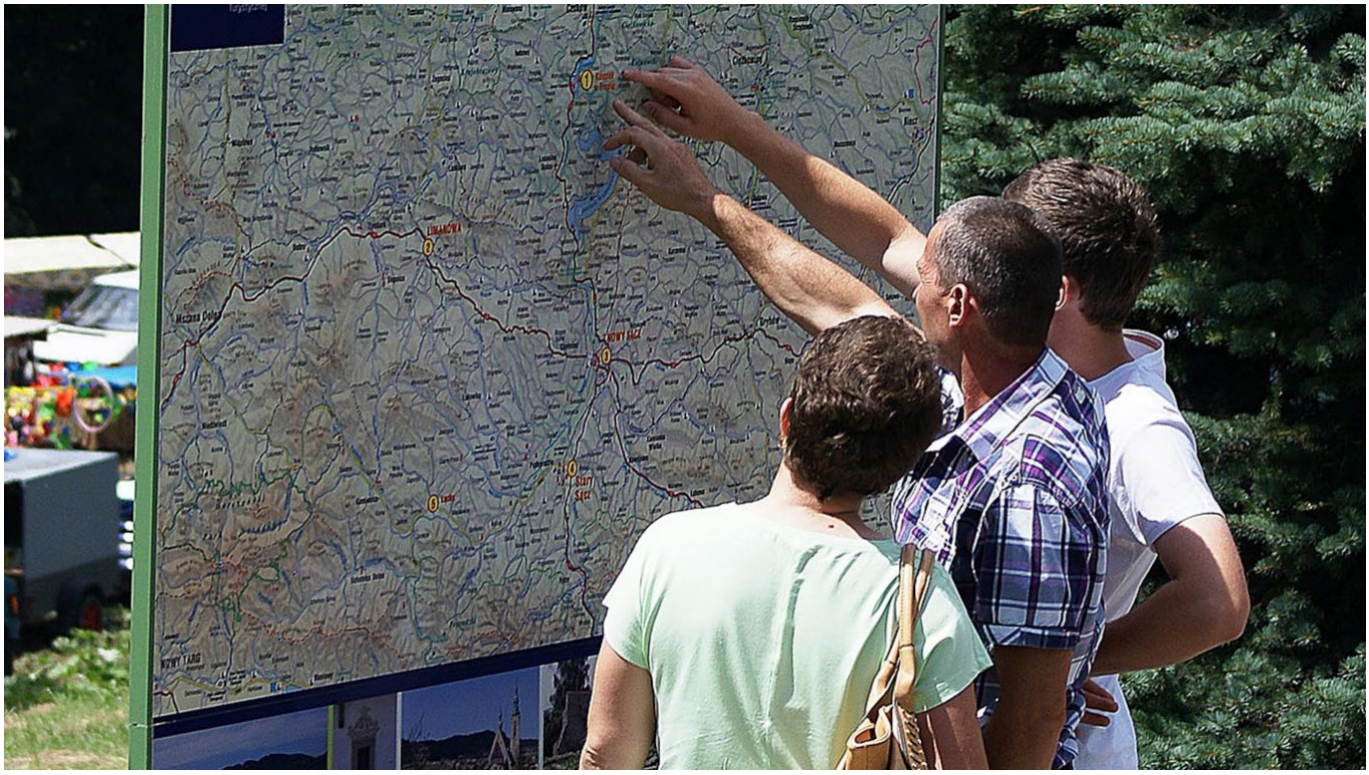
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When Time and Place Meet in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Тут: Here and now

Textbooks lie.

Okay, they don't exactly lie, but they do avoid telling you the whole story about the language you're studying, in this case — Russian. The reason might be noble: the writers don't want to scare you off, or confuse you, or muddy the waters, or make you dump Russian for something easier, like Esperanto or Pig Latin. But however good the intentions, the result is that learning Russian is a process of constantly revising what you think you already know.

Case in point: тут. Everyone knows what it means: here, right here. It is the antonym of там (there). You think back to those early sentences you mastered. Ваня стоит там у реки. Соня сидит тут около дома. (Vanya is standing there by the river. Sonya is sitting here near the

house.)

But in Russian, time and place sometimes blend together. Тут can also mean “right now,” as if here and now have the same kind of immediacy that makes them the same. И тут она запела. (Just then she began to sing.) Тут я вспомнил её имя (Suddenly — at just that moment — I remembered her name.) Мы говорили про мою тётю, и она тут же появилась! Надо же! (We were talking about my aunt and then she showed up right then. Isn’t that wild?)

In fact, тут же often means right after, just then, in the next instant. Он сказал, что он купит часы, и тут же достал кредитку (He said he’d buy the watch and immediately got out his credit card.) Он обещал больше не пить и тут же налил себе полный стакан водки (He promised not to drink anymore and right then and there poured himself a tumbler of vodka.)

Actually, тут can be used as an all-purpose intensifier that adds immediacy, color, and emphasis to all kinds of phrases. Sometimes, тут negates a question or assertion. So какой is “what kind of” but какой тут means that there is “no kind of anything.” Какой тут сон, когда ребёнок плачет всю ночь! (What do you mean sleep? Who can sleep with the baby crying all night?) Какие тут выборы? Всё уже решено! (What elections? Everything has already been decided!).

But, of course, it’s not always straightforward. For example, when a guy walks up to you in a park, points to the entrance tickets to an open-air concert you’re holding, and asks: Где тут продаются билеты? — he is just asking “Where do they sell those tickets around here?”

But in other cases, где (where) combined with тут can suggest “nowhere.” Немцы пытались его убить, и он вынужден был спасаться. Только где тут было спасение? (The Germans were trying to kill him and he had to save himself. Only where could he be saved? Nowhere!)

Or it can just be a general intensifier. В чём тут дело? (So what’s the problem here?) Дело тут вовсе не в деньгах, а в его квалификации (It’s not at all a question of money. The thing is – is he qualified?) Радоваться тут нечему (There’s certainly nothing to be happy about.) Я живу тут рядом! (I live really close by!) Что тут такого? (What’s the big deal?) Что уж тут говорить? (What can you say, huh?)

You get the idea? Whenever you want to add emotional emphasis, pop in тут.

It’s also useful to know some of the main тут expressions. The most important one for every discussion with your spouse or boss is: При чём тут я? (What have I got to do with it?) You know the drill: Где мои ключи? (Where are my keys?) Ты зачем меня спрашиваешь? При чём тут я? (Why are you asking me? How should I know?)

Another nice phrase to have in your pocket is и всё тут. You pop it at the end of a sentence to mean: and that’s that. End of discussion. Period. Не хотим мы рожать в городе, и всё тут (We don’t want to have our babies in the city. End of discussion.) Нет демократии, и всё тут (There is no democracy, period.)

Тут как тут is what you say about something or someone who shows up just at the right time or is always there, whether you need them or not. Pet owners will find this particularly handy: Наши коты тут как тут (Our cats are always underfoot). But also anyone who is bothered by someone: Что плохо лежит— она тут как тут (If something could be taken, she was there in an instant.)

Finally, in our round-up of тут expressions, there is the lovely не тут-то было which to the native English ear is about as comprehensible as mud. Don't worry, it is an idiom that means something can't happen, forget about it, no such luck. Я плюнул и решил ехать на своей тачке. Не тут-то было! Она не завелась. (I gave up and decided to take my old car. Fat chance. It wouldn't start.) Сегодня мне позарез нужен был целый кусок времени. Не тут-то было. (Today I really needed a block of time. Nothing doing.) Я потянулся обнять её, но не тут-то было. (I went to embrace her, but it was not to be.)

Русский язык всегда удивляет, и всё тут. (Russian never fails to amaze. That's for sure.)

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