

When Not Enough is Way Too Much

The Word's Worth

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

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Frank May / DPA / TASS

Пересолить: to use too much salt

Scene: Dacha outside Moscow, a family sits on the terrace eating shashlyk. Your significant other grabs two skewers of shashlek and piles them on top of a massive serving of roasted potatoes. You frown. Не много ли? (Isn't that too much?) you ask. The reply: Много не бывает! (Can't have enough of a good thing!)

Just then the wind drops, and mosquitoes swarm the diners. Noises of dismay, frantic swatting. Your significant other: Только этого не хватало! (That's too much, literally "we just didn't have enough of that").

So, basically, in Russian, you can never have too much of a good thing, but too much of a bad thing is jokingly "not enough." That unnerving revelations got me wondering about "too

much” in Russian and how many ways there are to express it.

The basic “too much” word is *слишком*, which means “too” or “to excess.” You can use it to describe *слишком много* (too much), *слишком мало* (too little) or *too + any adverb or adjective*. For example, there is a television series called «*Слишком красивая жена*» (The Wife Who’s Too Pretty). You might send back *слишком сладкое вино* (wine that’s too sweet). Or you can describe a quality of money: *Денег не бывает слишком много* (You can never have too much money). You might also ruin your child with too much of a good thing: *Родители возлагали слишком большие надежды на сына* (The parents expected too much of their son.)

Чересчур also means over-the-top, and is usually applied to qualities, not quantities. При всём уважении, в жизни он весьма скучен и чересчур правильный (Although I deeply respect him, in real life he’s extremely dull and way too proper.)

Both *слишком* and *чересчур* can be used very effectively as stand-alone phrases when you wish to express your dismay about someone’s over-the-top behavior or words. When your work colleague suggests not just asking for a raise, but a 4-day work week, you can say: *Это уж слишком* (That’s going too far.) Or when your kids want ice cream, cake, cookies and candy for dessert, you can dash their hopes with: *Это уж чересчур!* (Dial it back!)

Etymologists argue about this, but some think *чересчур* is simply *через* (beyond) + *чур* (boundary), that is, more or less “out of bounds.” But there are similar expressions with uncontested etymology, like *через край* (over the top) to describe everything from liquid to emotions. *Вино лилось через край, на стол, со стола на пол* (The wine poured over, onto the table and from the table to the floor). *Она совершенно счастливая — выше меры, через край* (She is completely happy — beyond measure, over the top). Another good word is *чрезмерно* (exceedingly, excessively, from *через* (beyond) + *мера* (measure)). Ставится задача упорядочения труда государственных служащих, в частности, сокращения ставшего нормой чрезмерно длительного рабочего дня (One of the tasks is to regulate the work load of state workers, in particular, to cut back their exceedingly long work day, which has become the norm.)

Another “too much” word is the adverb *излишне* (in excess): Наверное, сильно задевают такие вещи излишне амбициозных и обидчивых людей (These things probably really annoy unduly ambitious people who are easily offended.) Sometimes it just means “you don’t need to”: *Излишне спрашивать, хочет ли он стать военным как отец. Это его мечта с детства.* (There's no need to ask if he wants to join the military like his father. It has been his dream since childhood.)

You can also use the adjectival form *излишний*, often heard in its short form in the standard phrase that begins this sentence: *Комментарии излишни, и после прочтения этих двух абзацев можно закрыть дискуссию и легко ответить на вопрос, необходим ли такой закон* (Commentary is superfluous, and after reading those two paragraphs we can end the discussion and easily answer the question of whether we need this law.)

But there is an even easier and more elegant way to describe doing too much of something: you just add the prefix *пере-* to the verb. In the kitchen, *солить* (to salt) and *перчить* (to pepper) become *пересолить* (put too much salt in) and *переперчить* (put too much pepper

in). There is also, apparently, the word пересахарить (to put too much sugar in), but I've never heard it used and can't find any written examples. But I did find the verb пересластить (to over-sweeten) and this — a nice word and a statement I rather agree with: Я не переношу высоких, напыщенных слов, как пересахаренного варенья (I dislike high-toned, pompous words as much as overly-sweet jam, literally “over-sugared.”)

When you don't do comparative shopping, платить (to pay) becomes переплатить (to pay too much). Она переплатила строителям пять миллионов рублей (She overpaid her builders five million rubles.) Sometimes, it's not a matter of comparative shopping, but preference: Предпочитающим импорт придётся переплатить в полтора-три раза (People who prefer imports will end up paying 1.5-3 times more.)

Unfortunately, you can't just tack пере- on to every verb, and sometimes that prefix has different meanings. One common other meaning is to do over. So переделать means to remake something.

And the really bad news is that sometimes many meanings of пере- can exist with one root verb. Take перекурить — пере- + курить (to smoke). Here are some possibilities:

Пере- as “too much”: Он сидел, писал и перекурил до тошноты (He sat, wrote and smoked so much he was sick to his stomach.) Пере- as “in between”: Мы пошли перекурить (We went for a smoke break.) Пере- as “more than anyone else”: Он всех перекурил — три пачки в день (He out-smoked everyone — three packs a day.) Пере- as “try all varieties”: Он перекурил 10 брэндов перед тем, как нашёл «свой» брэнд (He smoked his way through 10 brands before he found the brand he liked best.)

Okay, that's hard. But if you are feeling put out by the difficulty of remembering when пере- is to repeat and when пере- is to do too much, consider the poor Russians learning English and having to remember the difference between do over and overdo.

Jus' saying.

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