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Everything Has a Price in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Не стоит: It's nothing

When I was studying Russian, we were told that it was dreadfully ungrammatical and very country-bumpkin to ask the price of something with the word Почём? (at what price?). It marked you as a rube. At the time, the idea of being mistaken for a Russian rube was something I rather aspired to, but still, I tried to speak properly. And so, I learned the proper way to ask the price of something: Сколько стоит? (How much does it cost?)

Years later, I think grammar teachers have lost that battle, at least at the farmers market. There you generally only hear сколько стоит when it's a packaged product: Сколько стоит банка хрена? (How much does a jar of horseradish cost?) In most cases, when you want to find the cost of something per kilogram, people virtually always ask: Почём у вас помидоры? (How much are your tomatoes?) The answer is going to be either Триста (three

hundred) or the more exact триста рублей за кило (three hundred a kilo).

This market back-and-forth got me thinking about the verb стоить (to cost, to be worth). It has a fair number of (thankfully) related meanings and produces a several very useful idioms.

In addition to being the verb about the cost of something, стоить can also mean something's non-monetary worth. Я весь вечер читала её новую книгу, но не жалею времени – она того стоит! (I spent the whole evening reading her new book, but I don't regret the time I spent on it – it's worth it!)

Стоить can mean the cost of doing something measured not in money, but in time, effort, or nerves. Если бы вы знали, каких трудов мне стоило уговорить его! (If you only knew how much effort it took to talk him into it!) Хозяйка квартиры, которую я снимаю, очень сложный человек, и каждая встреча с ней стоит больших нервов (The woman I rent my apartment from is very difficult, and every meeting with her is nerve-wracking, literally "costs a lot in nerves").

In general, стоит – не стоит can be used as should – should not. Стоит ли заводить с ним этот разговор? (Should I broach the subject with him?) Стоит сходить на предприятие и спросить о вакансии. (You should go to the company and ask about openings.) But there are some things you should not do, such as this somewhat mysterious admonition: Дети ⊠ это дети, а женщина ⊠ это женщина, и не стоит путать эти понятия (Children are children, and a woman is a woman, and you shouldn't confuse the two.) Or this more understandable admission: Я часто смеюсь ⊠ даже когда этого не стоит делать (I laugh a lot, even when I shouldn't).

There are also a lot of set phrases and idioms with стоить that are very good to know. Не стоит is a way of saying "it's nothing" when you are thanked for something. –Спасибо за помощь! –Не стоит. ("Thanks for your help!" "It was nothing.")

Чего и стоило ожидать (just what could be expected) is a very good expression to have in your pocket for when your Significant Other or teenage children do something you told them not to do and got the result you warned them about. Always a gratifying moment. Ты разобрал мотор и теперь не можешь его собрать, чего и стоило ожидать (You took apart the motor and now you can't put it back together. What else did you expect?)

A similar expression can be used in the negative, for the most part with less snark: Вряд ли стоит ожидать преодоления этого кризиса в обозримом будущем (Chances are we can't expect this crisis to be overcome in the near future.)

And then you can construct a sentence like this: use the phrase стоит только with a verb, and then add the consequences: "All one has to do is X and Y happens." Стоит мне только выйти на улицу, как тут же начинается ливень. (All I have to do is step outside and it starts to pour.) Стоит тебе только сказать слово, и я приеду. (All you have to do is say the word, and I'll come.)

Ничего не стоит (literally "it doesn't cost a thing") is used whenever something is effortless. Хочешь, я спрошу его? Мне это ничего не стоит. (Want me to ask him? It's no problem at all.) Он всегда готов помогать, когда это ему ничего не стоит (He's always

willing to help when it doesn't require anything of him).

And then there is one of my favorite expressions: чего стоит, often used with один. You use this to describe something of great value — a bit like the English expression "worth the price of admission." A friend recently showed me a photo of her dog, who had the biggest ears I'd ever seen. О! Какая милая собака! Одни уши чего стоят! (Oh, what a sweet dog! Those ears alone make her a star!)

Finally, it's good to know the phrase чего бы это ни стоило (whatever it takes): Он твёрдо решил стать миллионером, чего бы это ему ни стоило (He decided to become a millionaire, no matter what it took).

And then you can respond using an old card player's expression from French: Не советую. Игра не стоит свеч (I don't recommend it – the game isn't worth the candle.)

Grammar Note: Почём is written as one word only in the case above, when it means how much something costs. When it is the preposition по (about, by) and the pronoun что in the prepositional case (чём), the words are written separately. По чём она скучает? (What is she pining for?)

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