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It's Time to Take a Stand in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Стоять на месте: to be at a standstill

Since last week I wrote about the verb стоить (to cost, to be of value), it seemed only natural to write about the verb стоять (to stand) this week. Not because they are similar in meaning, because they are not; and not because it's easy to confuse them, because the context virtually always makes clear if a person is talking about prices or poses. But the two verbs have one curious thing in common: they are conjugated the exact same way: я стою, ты стоишь, он/она стоит, мы стоим, вы стоите, они стоят.

The difference is stress. With the verb стоить the stress is on the first syllable, and with стоять, it's on the second. This is, for us non-native speakers, a bit of a struggle at first. The problem isn't that you could put the stress on the wrong syllable and people would think you were talking about the value of something when you meant where something was located. It's

really hard to come up with a sentence that could lead to that kind of misunderstanding, since our friend Context makes it virtually impossible.

The problem is just that you sound like a bit of an idiot.

It's like having a sign on your forehead: Я –иностранец! (I'm a foreigner!)

The only mnemonic device I can think of to help you avoid sounding like a rube is this: VALue – стОить. And if you remember that, you'll automatically know that with стоять the stress is on the second syllable.

The other slight complication with стоять is that it is the verb used to describe what we here at our family newspaper might call male excitement. Once again, it's not easy to be misunderstood. I've spent a week trying to imagine a sentence where the context would be so ambiguous that you'd shock your elderly neighbor, and I can't do it. Of course, I may have a poor imagination, but still – don't worry about it.

Now then, what can be expressed with this lovely verb стоять? First of all, it's the verb that describes someone or something in the vertical position. Easy peasy. It can be people: Мы стояли долго на холоде перед тем, как открыли нам дверь (We stood for a long time in the cold before they opened the door for us.) Or it can be hair standing up, out of fear — or with a lot of hair gel: Лицо его было бледно, волосы стояли дыбом, руки и ноги дрожали (His face was pale, his hair stood on end, and his hands and legs were shaking).

Стоять can mean where something is located, like дом стоял на берегу моря (the house stood on the seashore) and в гостиной стоял тяжёлый деревянный буфет (there was a heavy wooden buffet in the living room).

Other things that always stand in Russian are containers, objects like statues or statuettes, time, mood, atmosphere and weather. Тарелки стоят на столе (The plates are on the table). Утром стояла тишина (The morning was quiet). В заброшенном доме стоял беспорядок (The abandoned house was a mess inside). Стоял тёплый сентябрь (September was warm).

Стоять can mean something that should move is not moving. If you are a driver, you use стоять in this sense a lot in Moscow. –Едешь? —Стою. ("Are you on your way?" "I'm stuck in traffic.") And let's pause for a moment to appreciate how brilliantly laconic discussions of traffic are in Russian. If you feel garrulous, you can say: Стою в пробке. (I'm stuck in a traffic jam.) This can also be a bit more figurative: Пока мы ждём стройматериал, ремонтная работа стоит (Repair work has been halted while we wait for construction materials).

And стоять can mean to be broken. You might not be stuck in a traffic jam; your car might be broken down: Машина стоит. (My car won't start.) О! Я проспала! Часы стоят! (Oh, I overslept. The clock stopped.)

And finally, like in English, in Russian you can stand up for something or someone. During the Soviet period, this usage was bashed into our heads from billboards and banners: Мы стоим за мир! (We stand for peace!). The state even stood "like a mountain": Только у нас, в советской стране, существует правительство, которое стоит горой за рабочих и крестьян-колхозников (Only here in the land of Soviets is there a government that stands

firmly behind all the workers and collective farmers!) If you really want to be adamant about your support, you can say стоять грудью (literally to stand with your chest), as in this pre-Revolutionary exhortation: Стой грудью за императрицу! (Protect the Empress with your life!) Or if you want to express absolute devotion to a cause, you can declare (hand raised, head held high): На том стоим, на том стояли, стоим и стоять будем! (Here we stood and here we stand, and here we will stand forever!)

You can stand on various things and even body parts in Russian to express a variety of meanings. Of course, you all know how to stand in line: Я стояла в очереди за билетами (I stood in line for tickets). Here's a nice trick: if you are на очереди, it means you're on a waiting list or you are next in line for something.

If you are standing in place, it means you're not doing what you should: Мы стоим на месте! (We not getting anywhere!). If you stand on your ears — anatomically quite difficult — it means you're going nuts, energetically doing something. В воскресенье ЦИК стоял на ушах, пытаясь дозвониться до главы краевой комиссии и получить от него объяснения происходящего (On Sunday the Central Election Commission was moving heaven and earth, trying to reach the head of the district commission and get some explanation for what was going on). On the other hand, стоять (твёрдо) на ногах (to stand [firmly] on your feet) is what you aspire to: Наконец-то он устроился на хорошую работу и стоит на ногах (He finally got a good job and got on his feet).

That is much more pleasant than when someone стоит над душой (literally, stands over your soul). This is the boss looking over your shoulder while you finish writing a presentation for the board. The only way you can stop this is with a healthy sense of self and an impressive dose of snark: ☒ Марина, ☒ сказала она в телефон, испачканный губной помадой, ☒ я тебе потом перезвоню. Тут над душой стоят. ("Marina," she said into the phone, which was smeared with her lipstick. "I'll call you back. They're breathing down my neck.")

For someone like that, in some cases, price might be no object. With this expression, it's a bit more common to hear the perfective verb form, постоять: Когда она покупала новую машину, она говорила продавцам, что за ценой не постоит (When she was buying a new car she told the salesmen that she'd pay any price).

And when the salesmen were talking about her later, one might have said: Она действительно не смотрела на цену. Хоть стой, хоть падай! (She really didn't look at the price. Unbelievable! – literally "you could stand or you could fall").

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