The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Procrastinating the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

March 12, 2021



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На потом: for later

Judging by their language, Russians are connoisseurs of procrastination. In Russian not only are there many verbs and expressions for procrastination, there are three main ways to procrastinate. Not for them the simple delay. There is putting off. There is also dawdling, dilly-dallying, stalling and dragging things out so that you don't have to ever actually do or finish a task. And there is the tactic of making something such a mess — especially a bureaucratic mess — that nothing can move forward or be untangled.

In the interests of linguistic scholarship, I must note that Russian now has the abominations прокрастинация (proscrastination); прокрастинатор (proscrastinator); and прокрастинировать (to procrastinate) but no one should use these words, ever.

Now then, in the putting-it-off category, the main verb pair is откладывать / отложить (to put off, to put aside). You can use the verb alone: Старайтесь не откладывать дела на завтра. (Try not to put things off until tomorrow). And you can keep doing it: Я откладывал встречу со дня на день (I put off the meeting day after day). Or you can specify that you are only putting off this task until a delightfully undefined later date: Ввод системы в строй был запланирован на 2002 год, но ввиду задержки с выделением финансовых средств он был перенесен на более позднее время (The plan was to put the system online in 2002, but due to delays in financing it was put off until a later date). Or something can be put off until...later. Just some time in the future. О каком бы деле ни заходила у него речь, всё он старался отложить на потом (No matter what the task was, he tried to put it off indefinitely).

The most amusing putting-it-off expression is откладывать в долгий ящик (literally to put it aside in a long-term box). You can find lots of charming explanations for this expression, most commonly that Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich had a long box that petitions went into, and since he never got around to reading them or replying to them, the длинный (long) became the долгий (long-term) box. This is very charming indeed but apparently utterly fictitious.

According to some sources, it appears to be a calque from a German phrase that means to put something in a long chest. Since the sources say that the long chest in question was a casket, this was truly championship procrastination: putting something aside to be dealt with in the afterlife. Он просил не откладывать заявление в долгий ящик, дать ему ход сегодня же (He asked me not to put off dealing with the petition but to get it in process that very day).

Another verb is тянуть (to pull, to put off), which can be used alone: Не тяни! (Don't put it off!) Когда тебе в следующий раз кто-то понравится, не тяни с признанием слишком долго. (The next time you find somebody you like, don't wait so long to tell her.)

It can also be used in the not-so-charming expression не тянуть кота за хвост (literally to not pull a cat by its tail). This expression also has a rather convoluted history and seems to have been used as the name of a make-believe opera without the negation in an early 20th century children's book. But it quickly entered the language in its negated form. The idea seems to be that to actually grab a cat by the tail you need to do it quickly, so not doing it quickly meant that you'd never do it.

I'm not buying that explanation, but that's all I got. Не тяни кота за хвост и приступай к делу. (Stop futzing around and get to work).

Or you can just move really slowly — медлить — because you've been watching sloths and know that the best way not to write that email is to take four days to make your way to your computer. This can have bad repercussions on the romance front: Твой друг медлит с предложением руки и сердца? (Is your boyfriend taking his sweet time proposing?)

Оттягивать has two meanings: It can mean putting off something or dragging something out. Novikov is clearly putting something off here: Новиков, сам не зная почему, оттягивал свой отъезд (Novikov didn't even know why, but he was putting off his departure). But here the bosses might be putting this task off, or they might have begun it and are dragging it out: Дирекция и отдел кадров всё оттягивали оформление (The administration and HR department kept putting a hold on that documentation process).

But оттягивать время (literally to stretch time) is usually a good way to put something off: Наталья оттягивала время, не вскрывала конверт, ходила вокруг него (Natalia kept stalling and didn't open the envelope; she kept walking around it).

In any case, if you're waiting for the document from HR or an answer from Natalia, put up your feet and make yourself comfortable, because it's going to take a while.

Тянуть резину (literally to pull rubber, elastic) means to drag something out, presumably because of the image of pulling on sticky substances — you can pull forever before they snap. Хватит тянуть резину! (Quit stalling!) Времени у меня мало, так что я не собираюсь тянуть резину. (I don't have much time so I'm not going to drag this out.)

Another nice way to dilly-dally is ходить вокруг да около (literally to walk around and near, i.e., to beat around the bush). Мы всё ходим вокруг да около и никак не договоримся до настоящей сути. (We keep dancing around the subject and won't get down to brass tacks).

Another lovely way of dawdling is долго раскачиваться (literally to rock for a long time). This is, as every good procrastinator knows, an excellent way of putting off doing something. Before you write that email, you have to clean off your desk, empty your inbox, fix that letter on your keyboard that seems a bit wobbly, download a program update, and reboot your computer. And, after making tea and reading a chapter or two of "War and Peace," it might almost be time to get down to it. Except it is the end of the day and this sort of email is better written in the morning, when you're fresh. Он долго раскачивается, прежде чем действовать (It takes him a long time to settle down to do anything).

I also like the verb мешкать, which has the sense of messing around with one thing to put off doing another. Опухоль операбельная, доброкачественная. Так что мешкать не будем. (The tumor is operable and benign, so we're not going to fool around — we'll get down to it) Мешкать is severely frowned upon in many professions: Не мешкай, стреляй! (Don't just stand there, shoot!)

And finally, the best way to avoid action is our third category: creating a mess, preferably involving red tape and other bureaucratic obstacles. A key word here is проволочка (red tape). If you are the procrastinating villain, Можно прибегнуть к тактике проволочек (You can resort to delaying tactics). Or you can create the red tape yourself (устраивать проволочку) although it's very bad to do so: Москвичам устраивают проволочки с оплатой электронных проездных (They made a bureaucratic nightmare out of Muscovites' system to pay for electronic tickets).

Last but certainly not least in work avoidance is having such an impenetrable thicket of problems and requirements and restrictions that nothing can ever be done. In Russian this kind of roadblock is expressed by a French import, канитель (cannetile). Канитель is a gold or silver thread used for embroidery, which sounds rather sleek but is also in Russian a lot of fuss and bother, a dreadfully boring conversation, or your basic snafu. Канитель с выдачей билетов продолжалась целых три часа (The rigmarole to get the tickets took three whole hours). Here's an example of a verbal канитель: Началась какая-то канитель: кто умер, когда да отчего, не пил ли, не болел ли венерическими болезнями, и всё в таком же роде (One of those excruciatingly boring conversations began: who died, when and from what, did he drink, did he have a venereal disease, and all that sort of thing).

Actually, that sounds kind of interesting — and definitely a good way to waste time, drag your heels, fiddle around, and generally do nothing until it's too late to write that email.

Не сегодня, так завтра! (There's always tomorrow!)

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2021/03/12/procrastinating-the-russian-way-a73224