

Singin' in the Rain the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

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

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Под: under, by, to, near

Russian prepositions. They seem so easy when you first start learning them. Then time goes on, and you discover that one preposition can be used with several different cases, and each preposition has a handful of seemingly unrelated meanings, and we use completely different prepositions to express the same concepts in English, and don't even get me started on stress and preposition usage, and how it jumps all over the word and sometimes out of it altogether.

Nevertheless, I persist. Let me introduce our preposition of the week: под.

Под means under, sometimes physically, but most of the time metaphorically or abstractly. It uses two cases, instrumental and accusative. And that's the tricky bit – understanding which case to use.

The basic explanation in grammar books is that you use the instrumental case when the object, person or condition is in stasis, and you use the accusative case when the object, person, or condition is moved or moved into. They then give you the easy-peasy example:

Here is the cat, unmoving, and the instrumental case: Кот сидит под столом. (The cat is sitting under the table). Here is the cat moving under an object and the accusative case: Кот зашёл под стол (The cat went under the table). And just for giggles, here is the cat getting out from under an object, which uses из-под (out from under) and the genitive case: Кот вышел из-под стола (The cat came out from under the table).

That example is so crystal clear, what could be the problem?

Oh, everything.

Here's another example about rain. If something or someone is located in ("under") the rain, you use the instrumental case: Сутки пролежали в канаве под дождём (They lay in the rain for a whole day in the ditch.) But if something or someone is moving into the rain (from a dry place), you use the accusative case. Вдвоём они выбежали под дождь (Together the two of them ran out into the rain).

How about if you're standing in the rain — стою под дождём — and then decide to sing or dance or move around however the spirit moves you? You still use the instrumental case since you not moving into the rain but staying under it. Here's the best way to remember this: Just think of Gene Kelly singing Пою под дождём! (I'm singing in the rain...)

Под is also used with some conditions, like having something under your control in some way. You can either take it under control (accusative case) or have it under control (instrumental). Я предлагаю взять процесс под контроль (I propose taking charge of the process [taking it under control]). And here's a situation where everything's fine, A-OK: Всё находится у меня под контролем. Радиоактивный фон в пределах нормы (I've got everything under control. The background radiation is within normal parameters). Famous last words, right?

Another way под is used is to describe something right next to, by, around or near something — "in the environs of." That's a complicated way of saying something that you know already. You do! You talk about Подмосковье (the area outside or around Москва), and you all sang Подмосковные вечера in your Russian class, even though "nights near Moscow" have been translated as Moscow Nights or Midnight in Moscow.

Knowing all this, you can move to that area and use под with the accusative case: Мы решили переехать под Москву (We decided to move to the suburbs outside Moscow). And then you live there (instrumental case): Мы живём под Москвой (We live just outside Moscow).

Two other standard phrases in this category are под носом (under your nose) and под рукой (at hand). Here someone is being taken by the hand (accusative case). Note where the stress goes: Она подхватила Клару под руку (She grabbed Clara by the hand). And here something is in a state of being at hand: У вас наверняка найдётся под рукой всё необходимое (You probably have everything you need at hand).

Then there are what I think of as the “unique под + accusative usages” and the “unique под + instrumental usages.” I have read some grammar books that try to combine them as moving and unmoving versions of the same concept, but I get lost in their logic.

The “only accusative” под phrases include describing a time that is just before a date, holiday or other event, like под праздник (just before the holiday) and под осень (by autumn). Под праздник Русской Православной Церкви была передана новая резиденция (For the holiday, a new residence was transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church). Под осень молодые уезжали на курорт, а бабушка начинала собирать ребят в школу (Toward autumn the young people would go off to a resort while grandma would get the kids ready for school).

Similarly, под + accusative can be used to mean “just under a certain age.” Её муж — приятный мужчина лет под сорок (Her husband is a nice guy in his late thirties).

Less logically to my non-native ear is под + accusative to describe sounds, doing something “under the sound of...” Мы пели под гитару (We sang to the accompaniment of a guitar). Я люблю засыпать под дождь (I love to fall asleep to the sound of rain).

Equally counterintuitive to me is the под + accusative usage for imitation: Он пел под Шаляпина (He sang like Chaliapin). Они делают шкатулки под Палех (They make imitation Palekh boxes).

There are also a few под + only instrumental expressions. One is when you are discussing the meaning of a word or phrase. Что понимают под наукой? (What do they understand the word ‘science’ to mean?)

Another is describing some kind of condition under which an action is taken. Он сообщил мне информацию, находящуюся под секретом (He revealed classified information to me). Операцию сделали под наркозом (They operated on him under anesthesia). Я пишу под псевдонимом (I write under a pen name).

Well, enough of this. I leave you with another под expression, this one from the French, and a lovely way to spend the evening: Вечером я люблю сидеть подшофе в театре и почти засыпать под музыку...(In the evening I like to sit in a theater, a bit tipsy, and almost fall asleep to the sound of the music...)

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