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The Nos Have It in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Никак нет: Sir, no sir; no way

Just say no. Very sensible advice — and at first glance, very easy to do in Russian. You just say one of the first Russian words you learned: нет (no).

Нет is the negative answer to a question. –Ты была на работе сегодня? –Нет, я ездила по делам. ("Did you go to work today?" "No, I ran errands.") Or нет means the absence of something. У нас нет времени! (We don't have time!) Нет can be used to contradict a previous statement. Она живёт на даче лет десять уже — нет, вру, уже 15 лет. (She's been living at her dacha for about 10 years — no, I'm wrong — she's already been there 15 years). And finally, нет can be used in slogans with a noun in the dative case to express protest or the desire to see the end of something: Нет войне! (No more war!) Нет наркотикам! (Say no to drugs!)

And that's it.

Oh, but that's not it at all. Russians are connoisseurs of "no." They barely change the word, rarely add anything to those three little letters, and yet they can express a "no" that ranges from the mild "huh-uh" through the snarky "no way man" to the fake adamant "oh no I couldn't possibly" to the real deal "of-course-not-are-you-out-of-your-freaking-mind?" You never knew "no" had so many nuances until you speak Russian.

To start with, there is the slangy не-а (huh-uh), teenagers' favorite lazy pops of sound. –Сделала домашнее задание? –Не-а. –Будешь? – Не-а. ("Did you do your homework?" "Huh-uh." "Are you going to?" "Huh-uh.") This "no" is so "it goes without saying" that saying anything is too much trouble.

Another very widespread colloquial word you hear all the time is нету (there is no...). –Есть ещё молоко для кофе? –Нету. ("Is there milk left for coffee?" "Nope, we're out.")

And then there is my favorite, the two little words that made me think I'd chosen the wrong language to study: да нет, which naturally doesn't mean "yes-no" — that would be too easy. Here да is an intensifier, so it is a more adamant form of no. –Бери с собой бутерброды и фрукты на поезд. –Да нет! В Сапсане хорошее кафе. ("Take some sandwiches and fruit on the train." "Absolutely not! There's a good café on the Sapsan.")

Then there is не-не-не (no no no). This can be nice but adamant, what you say when your significant other wants to pour the whole bottle of vodka into the punch bowl. To make sure the message gets through, tear at your hair while exclaiming не at least a dozen times in a row.

Не не не can also be a coy statement of willpower that you know is going to crumble, like when a comic does a routine that begins: "Не, не, не, я пить не буду! Я на антибиотиках, ни за что!" (No no, oh my, no! I'm can't have anything to drink. I'm on antibiotics so I can't drink at all!) You all know how this ends.

Another form of "no" is нетушки, which is quite a firm "no" most of the time but can include a bit of snark. It's the "no" of a door slamming on your dream of happiness — or a good time. Жизнь умеет напомнить о том, что беспросветное невезение случается, а вот чтобы радости без неприятностей ⊠ нетушки (Life has a way of reminding you that while there are periods of relentlessly bad luck, having joy without any trouble at all — don't even think about it.)

Ан нет is another way of expressing resigned acceptance that things aren't going to work out for the better. You use it as a counterbalance to something positive: Вы думаете, что можно всю жизнь просидеть между двух стульев? Ан нет! (You think that you can spend your whole life sitting on the fence? Think again!) Казалось бы, наш начальник должен был оскорбиться. Ан нет. Письмо произвело приятное впечатление в душе его (You'd think our boss would have been offended. But no! The letter warmed his heart).

If you want to declare a very strong "no," you could try никак нет (no, no way), which in the old days was how fresh-faced recruits in the military replied in the negative to anyone above them in rank. This response of "Sir, no sir!" was balanced by the military version of "Sir, yes

sir": так точно! (literally "exactly right"). But никак нет can be used today as "absolutely not," "in no way": Никак нет, я этого не говорил и не мог этого говорить (Absolutely out of the question. I didn't say that and couldn't have said it).

Beware the similar нет как нет (no sign of something; not here) and нет так нет (no is no). The first means that something or someone is missing, can't be found or doesn't exist: Даже в самой подробной книге посвященной архитектуре Старой Руссы, информации о замке нет как нет (Even in the most detailed book about the architecture of Staraya Russa there isn't a trace of information about the castle). Позавчера лежали часы, и вчера лежали, и сегодня весь день вроде лежали. А сейчас нет как нет (My watch was lying there the day before yesterday, and yesterday, and even today I thought it was lying there all day. But now it's nowhere to be found).

Нет так нет is another expression of resignation, something like: Hey, if there isn't any, there isn't any. Пойдет бизнес — так пойдет, а нет — так нет (If business takes off, that's great. If it doesn't, it doesn't).

Here's a lovely (read: confusing) expression: нет-нет (да) и, which is literally "no-no (yes) and." Got that? It means "from time to time" or "sometimes" — "there isn't something, there isn't something and then suddenly there is": Дедушка нет-нет да и вспоминал о своей спокойной жизни до войны (From time to time my grandfather would recall his peaceful life before the war).

Getting tired? Here's an expression that is probably more familiar: чего только нет. Again, it's hard to makes sense of the words' literal meaning: "of what only not." But it means there was or is a great abundance of something: a positive expressed with negatives as is Russian's wont. In English we flip it into a strong positive: Чего только нет у неё на столе: тут и факс с принтером, и компьютер со сканером, и два телефона, и куча лотков и бумаг (Her desk was covered with everything you could imagine: a fax and printer, a computer with a scanner, two telephones and a bunch of trays and piles of paper.)

And let's end on a happy "no" note: here's another typical negative Russian нет expression that for once can be constructed almost in the same way in English: Нет у вас случайно нового детектива Джоан Роулинг? (You don't by any chance have the new murder mystery by J. K. Rowling, do you?)

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