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Maybe I May Be But Probably I'm Not

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Может быть: maybe

Now that we've explored most of the nuances, forms, complications and mysteries of "yes" and "no" in Russian, how about the third general category of reply: maybe?

Because I never learn, I thought that "maybe" would be easy in Russian. And so I began, confidently, with the most obvious "maybe" words and phrases.

And then I fell down two large rabbit holes.

But let's start on more or less firm ground. We all know the basic way to say "maybe" in Russian, and we are all joyful that it is almost just like it is in English: may be — может быть. – Ты придёшь ко мне сегодня вечером? –Может быть. Если отпустят меня с работы

вовремя. (“Are you coming over to my place tonight?” “Maybe. If they let me out of work on time.”) After looking at a few hundred examples, I can say with confidence that in about 50.95% of the cases, может быть is leaning to positive that whatever might happen will happen.

To make your maybe even more positive, say очень может быть (very maybe). Very maybe is used to indicate higher likelihood and sometimes to indicate a higher level of snark: ⊠ Может быть, таксистом будешь работать? ⊠ Очень может быть. ⊠ Отличная профессия для дочери дипломата (“Maybe you’ll get a job driving cabs?” “Very possible.” “Great profession for a diplomat’s daughter.”)

There is even a higher form of likelihood which still, all the same, remains in the “maybe” category: очень даже может быть (literally “very even maybe”). Даже puts more emphasis on the already strong очень (very), so this sounds like a good bet, if not a sure thing. Here’s someone consoling a friend with an undemonstrative husband: Очень даже может быть, что он просто не задумывается об этом: возможно, он просто не понимает ее необходимости в маленьких знаках внимания (It’s very possible indeed that he simply doesn’t think about it; it’s possible he simply doesn’t see that she needs small signs of attention).

But pay attention: sometimes может быть isn’t maybe, but may be: По ходу фильма думаешь, а эта история может быть правдой? (As you watch the film you think: this story may be true.)

And then watch your feet, because there is a “maybe” rabbit hole: the difference between может быть and быть может. When you ask people and read about this, you begin to wonder if Russians are speaking — and speaking about — the same language. One person writes: “Может быть" это почти утверждение и вера. "Быть может" это мечта о несбыточном, маловероятном (Может быть is almost an assertion and belief. Быть может is a dream of something that is unrealizable, unlikely.) Another person writes: Может быть — это или может или нет, а быть может, — утвердительное понятие, почти наверняка (Может быть means “it might be or it might not be”; быть может is an assertion of fact, almost a certainty.) A third person simply says: Быть может — поэзия (Быть может is poetic.)

When I looked at examples, I found a slight – может быть — tendency for быть может to be less likely. Like here, where the likelihood is about a million to one: Купите билетик лотереи, быть может, вам тоже повезёт! (Buy a lottery ticket and maybe you’ll be lucky!)

Or maybe the lottery ticket seller is trying to make it seem that it’s really likely you’ll win?

Beats me. Grammar books don’t write about this, which makes me think there’s nothing to write about. I think, despite the thoughtful explanations, it’s just individual usage.

Moving along… we’re in the light again with возможно (it’s possible), which is pretty much always positive, albeit uncertain: Возможно, он просто радостью поделиться пришёл, что его по телевизору показали (It’s possible he just came to share his pleasure at being on TV).

And we're also smiling in the sunshine with думается, one of those lovely reflexive impersonal constructions that posits a person sitting passively while thoughts happen to him. It just means "I think" or "it seems to me," and suggests that maybe something might occur: Можно было бы продолжать и дальше, но, думается, это тот случай, когда и так всё ясно (We could have continued on, but perhaps this is one of those cases when everything is already crystal clear.) That is, we might ask the student more questions but since it's more than clear that he hasn't done any of the reading, why torture the kid?

And, like может быть, думается has a more literal meaning that you keep an eye out for: В горах и дышится, и думается, и чувствуется совсем иначе (In the mountains breathing, thinking and feeling are all entirely different).

And then we're on the edge of the second rabbit hole with наверно (probably). Or is it наверное? Are they the same? Most grammarians say yes, there is no difference between the two words these days, although наверно might be a tad more colloquial than наверное. You remember this lovely phrase: да нет, наверно (probably not, literally yes no probably).

There is, however, one very interesting aspect to this: a century ago наверно meant "for sure, certainly" — на верно (to be sure). And one dictionary still cites this definition, which is almost the opposite of the current meaning of "probably." This is the meaning when наверно is used as an adverb and not a parenthetical phrase.

So to understand if something is absolutely going to happen or just maybe might happen, you need to recognize the difference between a parenthetical phrase and adverb. Easy peasy, right?

Actually, it is. A parenthetical phrase or word (вводная фраза, вводное слово) is a word or phrase describing the speaker's attitude to what he or she is saying. It is set off in commas and can be removed without changing the meaning of the rest of the sentence. Она, наверно, по-прежнему пьёт утром кофе с печеньем (She probably has coffee with a biscuit for breakfast). You can pop out "наверно" — which expresses the speaker's assumption that this information is true — and not change the meaning of the rest of sentence.

But take a look at this: Теперь я это наверно знаю (Now I know this for sure). Here наверно is an adverb and it can't be removed from the sentence without changing the meaning — that the speaker is certain about this.

Don't worry — the adverbial наверно is not very common. In most cases, you'll see by the context (and commas) that we are speaking about probability. Но вы, наверно, уже поняли (But you probably already got that).

And how cool is it that you just took in some grammar without even noticing. Ну вы, наверное, очень сильные студенты! Ставлю вам пять! (You're probably very strong students. I'll give you all A's!)

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