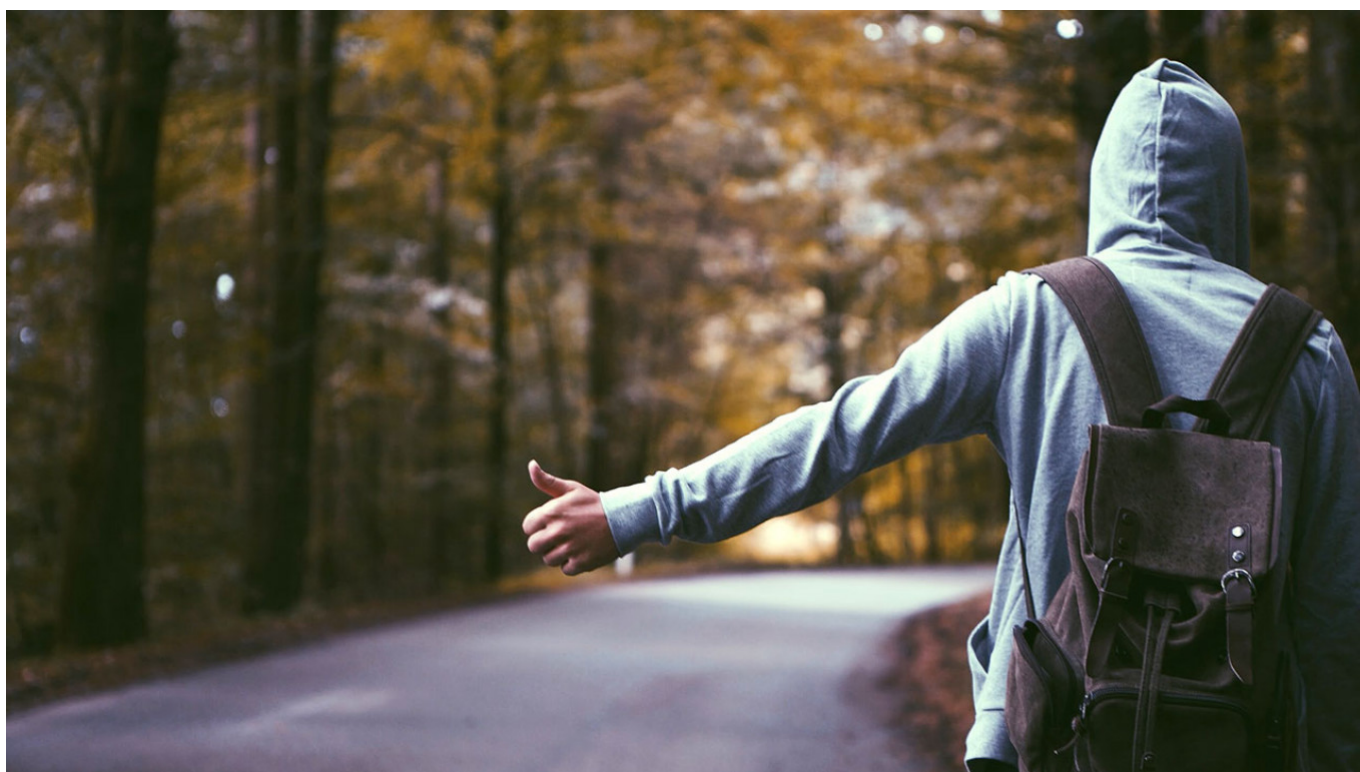


When Your Heart Speaks in Russian

The Word's Worth

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

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Atlas Green / unsplash

Подслушать: to eavesdrop, overhear, listen in

The other day I was wandering around a suburban big box store — yes, we have suburban big box stores outside Moscow — trying to figure out the logic of the aisles and guess where shoelaces might be. When I spotted an employee, I asked in that lovely polite negative construction in Russian: Вы не подскажете, где можно найти шнурки? (Could you tell me where to find the shoelaces?) And then as I tried to follow her instructions, I began to wonder why it's подсказать instead of plain old сказать. In fact, what's под- doing there as prefix? As a preposition its common meaning is “under.” I’m not under someone, asking them to speak down to me, am I?

Actually, according to the great lexicographer, Vladimir Dal, I am.

According to another great lexicographer and linguist, Vladimir Kolesov, I'm also not speaking grammatical Russian. He writes that some of the под-prefixed verbs appeared around the time of the 1917 Revolution, when people migrated to the big cities with their local dialects and "ungrammatical" constructions. A quick check of the google N-gram seemed to confirm this. The word подсказать appeared in about 1810 but was rarely used. It peaked in 1914 and then again in 1981.

Now I'm wondering if под-prefixed verbs presage revolution, too.

In any case, today the не подскажете? construction is a polite way of asking someone you don't know for information. Since you are asking someone of superior knowledge for information, I suppose you could say you are "under" the person, who would then be talking down to you.

Kolesov notes that a number of the под-prefixed verbs in Russian have a few attributes in common. First, they are often colloquial — in fact, some were once considered ungrammatical. They often convey, literally or figuratively, movement down (подсказать) or movement up (подобрать — to pick up, choose); and they imply some secrecy (подслушать — to eavesdrop) and usually indicate action taken with some goal or intent.

There are other meanings among под- prefixed verbs, but a little grammar goes a long way, don't you think?

Other than the colloquial form of inquiry, подсказать falls into the secrecy category – or the almost-secrecy category. It can mean to direct, prompt someone, to give them a hint or clue. Sometimes it's pretty straight-forward: Будем голосовать так, как подскажут нынешние спонсоры (We're going to vote the way our current sponsors instruct us to). Sometimes it's what a friend does: Имени её вспомнить не я могла, а Таня подсказала: Анну её звали (I couldn't remember the girl's name, but Tanya told me: Her name was Anna).

It's also used to describe what the heart or imagination tells you to do — something like secret instructions. But sometimes the heart is silent: Она не знала, и сердце ничего не подсказало ей (She didn't know, and her heart didn't prompt her).

If подсказать sometimes implies information passed down from a higher source, подобрать is all about movement upwards. The primary meaning of подобрать (imperfective подбирать) is to pick something up, amusingly illustrated with this quote: Объявление при входе в студенческую столовую: "Пожалуйста, не подбирайте крошки со столов ☒ не бесите тараканов!" (Notice at the entrance to the student cafeteria: "Please don't pick up crumbs from the tables — don't annoy the cockroaches!")

Often the "picking up" is figurative rather than literal: Чиновник подбирает экспертный совет для одобрения желательного политического решения (A bureaucrat chooses an advisory board to okay an advantageous political decision). It's also what you do when you speak thoughtfully: Он говорил медленно и задумчиво, подбирая слова (He spoke slowly and thoughtfully, choosing his words).

Secrecy is an essential aspect of two other под- verbs: подслушать (to eavesdrop, wiretap) and подослать (to send on a secret mission). Sometimes a person is listening in on a

conversation intentionally: Полицейские подслушали наши телефонные разговоры (The police were tapping our phone). Sometimes it isn't: Всё это он случайно подслушал в разговорах родителей (He caught all that when he happened to overhear his parents talking).

You might use this word when you are paying attention to what your heart or soul is telling you. In Russian it suggests subconscious wishes or advice: Я подслушала голос сердца и решила стать учительницей (I listened to my heart and decided to become a schoolteacher).

Подослать is an interesting word. It can mean to send someone on a secret mission: to send in a spy or a mole. This is always awful: Он подослал к ней своего помощника с заданием вступить с ней в интимные отношения, что тому довольно быстро удалось (He sent his aide to sleep with her, which he achieved rather quickly). But sometimes someone might be sent with a specific task that is useful and good: Подъехать сам не могу, подошлю заместителя. Он вам поможет (I can't make it, but I'll send my aide. He'll assist you.) And sometimes it is very good indeed: Спасибо судьбе, что подослала умную подругу (I thank my good fortune that I was sent a smart friend).

And then there are two под- verbs for dropping off and dropping in. Подбросить has a very rich range of meanings. It can mean to toss something up in the air: Все солдаты подбросили в воздух шапки (All the soldiers tossed their caps up in the air). Or it can mean to toss something under: Он подбросил окурок под диван (He threw his cigarette butt under the couch). Or it can mean to toss something more or less straight ahead: Закрыв дверь, он оставил у порога валенки, подбросил в печку дрова, снова влез на подоконник и прижался носом к стеклу (After closing the door, he left his felt boots by the entry, threw some wood on the fire, and once again climbed up on the windowsill and pressed his nose against the window).

Cops can toss something compromising into a person's car, apartment or belongings: В мае полицейские подбросили пакет с наркотиками в квартиру моего друга (In May cops planted a bag of drugs in my friend's apartment).

But sometimes the tossing is friendly and kind. Подбросить is the word you use for dropping someone off in a car, usually along the way. When you wave down a car, you use the same polite negative construction as with подсказать: Вы не подбросите меня до станции? (Can you give me a lift to the station?) The answer might be: Я вас к метро подброшу (I'll drop you off at the metro).

Подскочить is to jump up, usually suddenly and very fast. This can happen inside you in a mysterious way: Моя душа подскочила от радости (My soul jumped with joy). But usually people or temperatures and prices jump: Его температура подскочила до 40 и продолжает расти (His temperature spiked to 40 and is still rising). Цена акций компании подскочила вчера (Yesterday the company's stock price jumped).

It can also mean to dash, to run very quickly. Like the other под- verbs here, it suggests running with a specific goal, not running a race or jogging. Sometimes the goal isn't clear, but nervous-making: Машина остановилась на красный свет и в этот момент к ней подскочили трое подростков (The car stopped at a red light, and at that moment three

teens raced up).

Подскочить is also a bit like a non-vehicular version of подбросить. It is similar to заскочить (to drop in, stop by) but has the sense of dashing over or in with some task in mind. It might not be with entirely good intentions: После летучки начальник подскочил ко мне (After our meeting my boss beat a path right to me). Or it might be helpful: Она обещала подскочить за мной через час (She promised to stop by in an hour to get me).

Where are we going to go? We're going to go look for shoelaces. I never did find them.

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