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Two Minuses Make a Plus in Russian

The Word's Word

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Karolina Grabowska / pexels

Не могу не сказать: I have to tell you

One of my favorites things about Russian are double negatives. This is a nation that does not want to just come out with it and say, "I have to tell you something!" They could if they wanted to. Я хочу тебе что-то сказать! (I want to tell you something!) Мне надо тебе что-то сказать! (I have something to tell you!)

But that's too straight-forward and boring. Instead, they say: Я не могу не поделиться! (literally, I cannot not share). In most cases, a Russian double negative is stronger than a single Russian positive. It has the sense of "I can't help but..." — as if the desire and need were so strong that the speaker just has to succumb. When you hear that, you know that whatever is coming is going to be fabulous. Я не могу не поделиться! Меня повысили в должности! (I just can't wait to tell you! I got a promotion!) Не мог не поделиться своей

удачей (I just couldn’t resist sharing my good fortune).

So У тебя не может не получиться means: There’s no way you won’t succeed! When you’re hoping to make an impression, it’s good to hear Мужчина не может не заметить вас (You’re sure to be noticed by someone!) Or when you haven’t found the right dance partner, you’ll be comforted by: Твоя напарница не может не найти тебя (The right partner is bound to come along). And any collector would be happy to hear: Я не мог не заметить вашу потрясающую коллекцию (Of course I noticed your amazing collection).

But sometimes this не-не construction seems to be used when the speaker should be happy — and is, sort of — but there is a “but” or a “however.” This is the rather dense knot of emotions behind не может не радовать, но… (literally, it can’t not delight you, but…) This might be used by cautious bosses — or bosses who don’t want their employees to start asking for raises. Imagine a board room, the chairman at the podium: Такое развитие событий не может не радовать, однако многое ещё предстоит сделать (These developments are encouraging, but much remains to be done). Относительное улучшение не может не радовать, однако общее финансовое положение фирмы остается опасным (This relative improvement is certainly welcome, but the overall financial situation of the company is still dire).

I found many examples of this construction in official correspondence and negotiations, where I guess assertions are cautious and big explosions of joy and optimism are Not Done. Таджикистан не может не волновать ситуация в соседнем Афганистане (Tajikistan can’t help but be concerned by the situation in neighboring Afghanistan). Конфликт не может не сопровождаться ростом вооружений в этих странах (The conflict is certain to be accompanied by an increase in arms in those countries). Всё это не может не вызывать возмущения (All of this is bound to be upsetting).

Не мог не знать (he couldn’t not know) can be a way of asserting that a certain party had to know what he or she was doing. Ваша компания не может не знать, что в связи с резким дефицитом сырья цены поднимутся! (Your company had to be aware that due to the sharp decrease in raw materials the prices would rise). Here it is in a legal document: Пункт 3 освобождает продавца от ответственности в случае несоответствия товара на основании пункта 2 в том смысле, что покупатель "знал или не мог не знать" о таком несоответствии в момент заключения договора (Article Three relieves the seller of responsibility for the sub-standard product under Article Two since the buyer "knew or could not have been unaware" that the product did not meet the standard at the time the contract was signed).

Got that? I might put it a bit differently: You knew what you were buying when you bought it, man. Tough luck.

In other cases, these expressions make you stop and think: Say again? What does that mean? And it’s not just foreigners who can get confused. Lots of native Russian speakers write to grammar sites and the all-purpose otvet.mail.ru https://otvet.mail.ru/ with questions about these constructions. Someone asked: ‘Не могу не согласиться’. Как это понять? (“I can’t not agree.” What does that mean?) One person said it simply means: Полностью согласен (I completely agree). Someone else agreed with that answer, but added: Вычурная фраза,

обозначающая согласие (It's a pretentious phrase signifying agreement).

Не могу не согласиться с ним (I couldn't agree with him more). One does tend to gush a bit in translation: Говоря о чтении, я не могу не сказать о моем любимом писателе (Since we're talking about reading, I simply must mention my favorite writer.)

I personally was thrown off by this phrase: С одной стороны, нельзя не признаться, с другой стороны, нельзя не сознаться. After staring into the middle distance for much longer than I'd care to admit, I realized it means: On the one hand, you have to admit it, but on the other hand, you can't deny it. That is: the speaker is holding the same thing in both hands.

Still puzzled, I poked around and discovered that it was a phrase used by the satirist Saltikov-Shchedrin to describe "общественно-политическая беспринципность, двойственность" (a lack socio-political principles, doublespeak). Another way of putting it is постирать шубу, не намочив шерсти (wash a fur coat without getting the fur wet) — having it both ways. It's a Bad Thing when "having it both ways" means not supporting one side in a conflict. For example, Kornei Chukovsky used it to criticize press reports about an incident when an Ottoman soldier shot and killed the Russian consul general in Macedonia in 1903. Newspapers around the world were unwilling to condemn the act, he said: "...формула: «с одной стороны, нельзя не признаться, а с другой — нельзя не сознаться» — здесь, как и всюду в таких случаях, играет доминирующую роль (...whenever and wherever this happens, the main formulation is "on the one hand, on the other hand").

Не могу не огорчаться (Makes me furious!)

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