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Neither Russian Fish nor Russian Fowl

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Dominik Vanyi / unsplash

Ни рыба ни мясо: neither fish or fowl

In a very childish way, I am always happy when well-educated, native Russian speakers have problems with Russian grammar, spelling, stress, and punctuation. If they aren't sure which case управлять (to manage) takes, then I don't feel so bad when I have to squinch up my face, look into the middle distance and think hard before I commit. (It's the instrumental case, by the way – управлять фирмой – to manage a firm, and the only reason I remember is because I memorized it to keep from getting it wrong.)

It turns out that Russian speakers often have problems deciding whether to use **ни** or **не** (forms of negation). This makes me nervous. If they're making mistakes, then I must be making more. Since I spent some time with my favorite double negative constructions — я не могу не помнить (of course I remember, that is, I cannot not remember) — now it's time to

up my **ни** game.

The grammar-book rule that seems to give folks the biggest problem is using "ни для усиления отрицания" (ни for intensifying the negation). They ask, Is it Он не дал мне **ни** рубля or **не** рубля? (He didn't give me a single ruble). Oddly, I find this easy to understand: a double negative construction, like не могу не сказать (literally, I cannot not say) always means something positive (I have to say), while не-ни always means a negative statement (He didn't give me a ruble). So if you are going for a negation, go with ни: Он не дал мне **ни** рубля.

I think of this as an example of the "not a single thing" or "not a one" construction. It's formed with a negated verb, **ни** and a noun in the genitive case. Скоро в этом океане не осталось ни одного необитаемого острова (Soon there wasn't a single uninhabited island left in this ocean). You might see this sort of exhortation at some ancient ruins: Граждане, не трогайте ни одного камня! (Citizens! Don't touch a single stone!) And you might say: Я ни одного слова не поняла! (I didn't understand a single word).

And if you hear this command shouted at you, it is definitely intense and definitely means "Don't move!": Ни с места! (Don't move an inch!)

Another very common phrase with this construction is **ни разу** (not one time). Я ни разу не была в России (I've never been to Russia). But what's with that ending? The genitive case of раз is раза, right? Yep. В России я была два раза (I've been to Russia two times). But there's a second genitive case or partitive that ends in -у for masculine nouns (and looks like the dative case). This special case is used with раз and a few other nouns when combined with ни. Here's one using шаг (a step) you probably know from war year posters: Ни шагу назад! (Never retreat, literally "not a step back!")

And while we're here with раз, you can also say: Я **не раз** была в России. But this means the opposite of Я **ни разу** не была в России. I know, I know... confusing. But the first thing is to notice that it's **не** not **ни**, and раз is in the nominative case, so we know it doesn't mean "never" (ни разу). Keeping that in mind, just read it: Я не раз была в России to get "I haven't been to Russia one time," and since we know it doesn't mean "never," it can only mean "not one time" — that is, "many times."

Another way of looking at it: Consider it a corollary of the rule above – with раз if you see **не+ни** it's a negative. If you see **не** alone, it's a positive.

Я ни разу не видела этого человека в нашем доме (I have never seen that person in our building). Я не раз видела этого человека в нашем доме (I've seen that person several times in our building). Я не раз сидела вечером и слушала шелест листьев (I would often sit in the evenings and listen to the rustling of the leaves).

Another construction to remember is the "opposites attract" **ни** usage: when you use **ни** to put together two different things or ideas, like ни рыба ни мясо (not fish or meat, or "neither fish nor fowl" as said in English) and ни жив ни мертв (neither living nor dead). Работа пастушья нетрудная, да только тем нехороша, что нет ни днём ни ночью покоя (The work of a shepherd isn't difficult but the only bad part is that there is no rest day or night). To remember this, just think of what you say when you wish someone good luck: ни

пуха ни пера! This expression literally means “not a bit of fur, not a bit of feather,” and comes from hunters. Чтобы не сглазить (to keep from jinxing the hunt), they tell one another they hope they won’t hit anything. Go figure.

Finally, there is one more **ни** construction, the “whatever however whenever whoever” aka the “no matter what” construction. Most of these phrases use a pronoun + ни бы and the past tense: Кто бы ни взял верх в этой склоке, на реформах это никак не отразится (No matter who comes out on top in this fight, it will not be reflected in the reforms in any way). Что бы ни происходило в мире ◙ у них всё всегда в порядке (Whatever happens in the world, they’re always just fine).

But you can also omit the бы: Куда ни посмотришь, одни дома! (Wherever you look, all you see are houses!)

Some of these kinds of expressions you already know and use, since they are part of everyday speech — like this phrase parents say when things go wrong: Что ни делается, всё к лучшему (No matter what happens, it’s all for the best). Or this, when you tried but it didn’t work out: Как мы ни старались, мы не смогли с ними договориться (We really tried our best, but we still couldn’t come to an agreement with them).

This construction is good to recall when you’re feeling a bit worried, as we all are these days: Что бы ни случилось, всё будет хорошо (No matter what happens, everything will work out).

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