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The Russian Approach to Coming Closer

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Подход: approach, literal and figurative

A few weeks ago I went a bit nuts over verbs that began with the prefix под- and that had little or nothing to do with the meaning of the preposition под (under). I had two more sets of verbs, but decided to put them aside because, really now, how many complicated verbs with a half dozen meanings can you consider in an afternoon?

But the time has come to wrestle them to the floor. Say hello to two под-prefixed verbs of motion: подъезжать/подъехать (sometimes: to drive up) and подходить/подойти (sometimes: to walk up).

The first thing you notice in the verb pair подъезжать/подъехать is the hard sign, which looks like a soft sign in a festive little hat: ъ. Why is it there? Well, because there is a rule that

if the prefix of a verb ends in a consonant and the verb it is attached to begins with the vowels Е, Ё, Ю or Я, you pop it in. Those four vowels all begin with the "ye" sound and are called iotized vowels. Why exactly do you need that hard sign, which has no phonetic value? It keeps the consonants before it hard. Without it, the iotized vowels would "soften" them.

And if we let iotized vowels dance around and soften consonants, the consonants would drink too much and start slurring, the vowels would stretch out and take over, and before you know it there would be total phonetic, morphological and semantic chaos! Down with drunk consonants! Do not let softening vowels take over! Be vigilant!

Sorry. I get overexcited sometimes.

Now that we've got that straight, the verb pair подъезжать/подъехать is fairly straightforward. It means to drive or ride up to some place either for a short period of time or for a particular reason. That is, this isn't the verb you use for arriving at your new forever house. It's the verb you use when the taxi driver is dropping you off (his purpose is driving there): Через пять минут мы подъехали на такси к жилому пятиэтажному дому (After five minutes the cab drove us up to a 5-story apartment house). And it's the verb to use when you just need to meet for a few minutes: Спускайтесь во двор, а я сейчас подъеду и передам тебе письмо (Come down to the courtyard and I'll drive right over and give you the letter).

Its other meaning is, in my admittedly limited experience, used less frequently these days: to get on someone's good side. After that quick meeting in the courtyard, you realize that person can really help you in your career. Всю обратную дорогу я размышлял, как бы мне к нему подъехать (The entire way home I thought about how to worm my way into his good graces).

These verbs have produced a noun, подъезд, which has several meanings. First of all, it can mean a driveway, or the road leading up to something, like a house or station: При подъезде к Белорусскому вокзалу меня ждала пробка (On the access road to Belorussian Station I hit a big traffic jam). Or it's the entrance to a building: Шёл снег, а мы перебежали на тонких-тонких каблуках из машины в парадный подъезд (It was snowing and we dashed from the car to the main entrance on teeny-tiny high heels).

And then there is a meaning of подъезд that can be hard to translate: it's the section of an apartment building accessed by a particular entrance. In New York, you can call it your stairwell: Оказалось, что он жил в моём подъезде (It turned out that he lived in my stairwell). Outside of New York, you struggle. Он живёт в последнем подъезде (His apartment is in the last entrance to the building.)

So much for driving. When we get out of our cars and start walking up to places on foot, we use the verb pair подходить/подойти. There are no soft signs or hard signs to trip you up, but there is one oddity: in Russian, buses walk.

When you, a human being, are traveling on a bus, you can say: Ехал в автобусе и подслушал спор двух людей о том как правильно говорить (I was on a bus and eavesdropping on two people arguing about correct language usage). But those buses — vehicles with wheels and motors and drivers — ходят по расписанию (follow a route, literally "walk a route"). And they "walk up" to a bus stop, but when they walk away, people ride them: Подошли

автобусы, половина народа уехала (The buses pulled up and half the people got on and drove off).

That's just to keep you from getting complacent about your Russian language ability.

Otherwise, подходить/подойти means walking up to a place, getting closer physically: Он подошёл к двери (He walked up to the door). Or coming up to something: Железная дорога подходила прямо к их участку (The railroad tracks came right up to their land). It can mean getting close to something figuratively, too: Мы подошли к рубежу, когда у некоторых руководителей личные интересы превысили идеологическую целесообразность (We had gotten to the point when the personal interests of some managers trumped ideological considerations).

The verb pair has the larger figurative sense of taking some kind of emotional or intellectual approach, attitude, or angle. In English we use verbs like look, take, or approach for this: К выступлению на Кубке мира они подошли очень серьёзно (They took playing in the World Cup very seriously). Я подхожу объективно (I'm approaching this objectively). Может, мы не с той стороны к проблеме подходим? (Maybe we're not looking at this problem from the right angle?)

And then this verb pair can mean to suit, to be appropriate, to look good, to work out well: Для мелких цветов подойдёт широкая ваза (A wide vase is best for small flowers). Это название очень подошло бы нашей фирме (That name would have been perfect for our company).

Подходит can be a one-word answer when you ask for something to write with and someone hands you a pen: Подходит! (That'll do it). Or it can be reassurance when you're trying to buy shoes to wear with a dress: Подойдут! (They'll match!)

Подход is the noun derived from all this fitting together, approaching, and coming up to. Similar to подъезд, подход can be a pedestrian entrance way to something: Мы купили участок, где подход к реке очень удобный (We bought a plot of land with convenient access to the river).

На подходе describes an action or change that is almost there or on its way: Судя по крокусам, весна уже была где-то совсем близко, на подходе (Judging by the crocuses, spring was really close, just about to arrive). Гости на подходе, в доме разгром, на плите что-то выкипает (The guests are about to arrive, the house is a wreck and something is boiling over on the stove).

This is when you hope they'll confuse подъезды and give you five more minutes...

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