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When Pigs Fly in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Tamba Budiarsana / pexels

Не дождётесь: Don't hold your breath

After almost twenty years of writing The Word's Worth, this is a first: a crowd-sourced column. Or rather, it's a column crowd-sourced on social media instead of by my usual crowd of friends, neighbors, dog-walkers and toddlers who are the main sources for my columns most weeks. What's the topic? Snarky ways to say no while seeming to say yes in Russian.

Of course, sometimes the yes-no is not so much snarky as infuriating. Everywhere in the world, in every country and every language, children who are constantly in the kitchen scrounging snacks will disappear five minutes before dinner is ready and, when called to the table, will sing out: Иду! (Coming!) Or sometimes: Сейчас! (In a second!)

But let me translate what this really means: "I'm doing something else now, I've totally

forgotten about food, and I'll come to the table within the hour, when the food is cold, the souffle has fallen, and the gravy has congealed into a lumpy mess."

But a lot of the time when people in Russia don't want to do whatever you have asked them to do, they respond with sarcasm. This might be hard to catch, since it sounds like one thing but means another. Sometimes they use a mix of little Russian words. – Сделаешь домашнее задание перед ужином? –А как же? ("Will you do your homework before dinner?" "You bet.") – Ты убрался в комнате? – Ага, уже. ("Did you clean your room?" "Of course! Three days ago!") Or you might just hear sounds: – Ты пишешь сочинение? – Ага. ("Are you writing your essay?" "Uh-huh.")

Of course, all of the above means: Nope, didn't even start, forget it, no plans to do it, get off my back.

Or you can use one of a series of Russian phrases that all mean "I'm on it... not." First up is the classic как только, так сразу (literally, "as soon as, then right away"), which really means: Don't count on it any time soon. – Ты скоро домой собираешься? ⊠ Как только, так сразу, ⊠ сказал Игорь. ("Are you planning to come home any time soon?" "Oh yeah, like any minute now," Igor said.) Купим тебе новое пальто, как только, так сразу (Buying you a new coat is at the very top of my to-do list, for sure.)

In Russian, you get snarky by saying "I've already done it," while in English the snark is often in saying "never in your wildest dreams." For example, разбежался/разбежалась, which has a literal meaning of running flat out, doing a wind-up run, means "I have no intention of doing it ever." – Поможешь мне красить комнату? – Прям разбежался. ("Will you help me paint the room?" "In your dreams.")

An even snarkier version of this is спешу и падаю (literally "I'm rushing and falling." This came up in the world of politics not long ago. Alexei Navalny wrote: Суд обязал меня удалить расследование "Он вам не Димон". Да, конечно. Спешу и падаю. (The court required me to remove my investigation "Don't Call Me Dimon." Right. Not gonna happen.)

My favorite versions of the Russian "I'm on it" involve shoelaces: только шнурки завяжу (I'll just tie my shoes) or, to up the sarcasm level: сейчас шнурки поглажу (let me just iron my shoelaces). ⊠ Кому говорят, езжай, ⊠ сказала Женя. ⊠ Ага сейчас шнурки поглажу. ⊠ съехидничала Маша ("I'm talking to you! Go!" Zhenya said. "I hear ya. Let me just do my nails and I'll be off," Masha sniped).

And then there are two all-purpose phrases. One is не дождётесь (literally, you can't wait for it), which means: When hell freezes over. When pigs fly. There's a snowball's chance in hell. Помощи от меня? Не дождётесь. (Me? Help you? Don't bet on it.) – Дрожишь, парень? – Не дождёшься. ("You scared, kid?" "You wish.") Повышение зарплаты? Не дождёшься. (A raise? I wouldn't bet on it.)

The other universal word is сейчас (right away), although the snarky version of it is pronounced and usually written щас or even щаааааз. Remember the kids who say иду! (I'm coming!) when a parent calls them to the dinner table? Well, that "I'll be right there" – сейчас! — turned into щас, which actually means "never in a million years."

– Ты за него выйдешь замуж? – Щас (“Are you going to marry him?” “As if.”) – Ты поможешь отцу в огороде? – Ага прям щас (“Will you help your father in the garden?” “Sure! On a cold day in hell!”)

And finally, Russian has several longer expressions for something that will never happen. The most unusual of them is когда рак на горе свистнет (literally, when the crab whistles on the mountain). No one seems to know how or why this expression came about, but it means: Never in a million years. Я сделаю это, когда рак на горе свистнет (I'll do it when pigs fly).

Or you can say you’ll do something после дождика в четверг (literally, “on Thursday after the rain”). Обсудим вопрос после дождичка в четверг (We’ll discuss that issue at a later date to be determined). Or после третьего пришествия (literally “after the third coming”). Коля сообщил кому-то, что да, Вася дома, но к телефону сможет подойти только после третьего пришествия (Kolya told someone that Vasya was home but that he would come to the phone only after the third coming).

And last but not least, there is one expression that might actually mean that something will happen: когда жареный петух в одно место клюнет (literally “when a roasted rooster bites you on the butt”). This is another linguistic mystery. No one knows when and why the phrase appeared, or even why the rooster is roasted. The idea, though, is that when things are hot, and when someone is being pecked and pinched into action, he might actually do something. In English this might be “when his back is up against the wall.” Русский человек не берется за дело со всей душой, пока в слабое место жареный петух не укусит (A Russian doesn’t really get down to work until someone holds a gun to his head).

Same thing for teenagers the world over.

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