The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Stop In, Go Behind and Lose Your Mind

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

July 08, 2022



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Ум за разум заходит: I don't know if I'm coming or going!

I have been remiss. It has been months since I've tested everyone's patience with verbs that have 12 meanings and prepositions that use different cases. To be honest, I actually love this part of Russian. I like to try to figure out conceptual similarities that make these complicated verbs easier to remember.

That was my plan with the verb pair заходить/зайти. And I've failed. It's hard to come up with one thing that unifies the range of meaning. On the one hand, they describe starting movement, making short trips, or things popping up, and on the other hand, they describe going beyond, behind, or down (figuratively or physically). Weird, right?

But then заходить/зайти are verbs of motion – the prefix за- and the "walking" verb pair

ходить and идти — and we know how difficult verbs of motion are.

One meaning of заходить is to begin to walk or pace: Он заходил из угла в угол (He began to pace from corner to corner). It can also be used with things, and then it means to begin to shake or rise or shudder – some kind of movement. От ударов мраморный пол заходил под ногами (From the blows, the marble floor began to move under our feet). Sea waves can заходить, too: Ветер усилился, волны заходили (The wind stirred and the waves picked up).

Probably the most commonly used meaning is to stop in someplace, either to see someone or to pick something up. Я сказал бабушке, что буду заходить к ней каждый день (I told my grandmother that I'd stop in to see her every day). Usually this has the sense of "stopping in for a just a minute," that is, not for a long visit.

Or it can mean to enter a place: Я зашёл в комнату (I walked into the room). You can also enter water. At the seashore you'll hear this, often in a standard babushka shout: Я кому сказала в воду не заходить?! (Who did I tell not to go into the water?!) Boats and ships can заходить harbors, too, and without being scolded by an outraged babushka: В порты в Греции будут заходить китайские суда (Chinese ships are going to put into the Greek ports).

Let me pause for a moment to mention two strange words in that last sentence. Порт has two meanings in Russian like in English – a marine port or a port on your computer that you stick cables in. In the plural, the computer ports have stress on the last syllable — в портЫ. But marine ports in the plural nominative and accusative cases keep their stress on the first syllable — в пОрты. And then there are two kinds of судно – it's both a ship and a bedpan. When you have bedpans (plural), they keep the letter "н" and stress on the first syllable, so one bedpan is сУдно and a pile of bedpans are сУдна. But for ships, in the plural the "н" disappears into the language ether and stress shifts, so сУдно becomes судА.

Yes, this is deeply unfair.

But now back to our original language problems. Where were we? Oh right. Cases.

When you stop in to pick something up, the thing you're after goes in the instrumental case: Он обещал завтра зайти за постиранным бельём (He promised to stop by tomorrow to pick up the laundered sheets). You can also stop in to pick up a person: У неё был возлюбленный, и сегодня вечером он должен был зайти за ней и увести (She has a young man, and this evening he was supposed to stop by to pick her up and take her away).

That's rather dramatic. Unless you're planning to elope, you're more likely to say something like: Зайди за мной в шесть (Pick me up at six).

These days, this verb pair can also be used for dropping in on someone's website or social media page, like what this guy does on Facebook: Привык заходить на страницы случайных людей, рассматривать их фотографии, слушать их записи, смотреть их видео (I've gotten into the habit of randomly clicking on people's Facebook pages, looking at the photos, listening to their recordings and watching their videos).

And then there is a block of meanings connected with going far or going behind, literally or figuratively. I can't find many good examples of physically going far, but here is one if you happen to be traveling to Antarctica: В те времена об Антарктике не было известно ничего, ни один корабль не заходил дальше мыса Горн (In those days nothing was known about Antarctica, and not a single ship went farther than Cape Horn).

You do hear it a lot in the figurative sense of going too far. Вы, парни, заходите слишком далеко (You guys are out of line). But it can also mean excitedly getting caught up in something: Не стоило тебе так далеко заходить (You shouldn't have gotten so carried away).

With the preposition за (behind, beyond), the verb pair can be used for going behind, around, on the other side of something. Since there is motion, note that the object you go beyond or behind is in the accusative case. This can refer to time: Наша беседа заходила за полночь (Our conversation stretched on past midnight). But it's more commonly used to describe stepping behind something: С ним был знакомый, с которым они зашли за кулисы (He was with a friend, and they both went backstage). Я зашёл за угол (I went around the corner).

Finally, this is the verb for what the sun does at night: it sets. Зашло солнце, стало прохладно (The sun set and it became cool).

And then there's the outlier — there's always an outlier: заходить can describe something that comes up, like a topic of conversation. Когда заходит речь о советской поэзии, всегда говорят о Евтушенко и Вознесенском (When the topic of Soviet poetry comes up, people always mention Yevtushenko and Voznesensky).

And it is part of a vivid expression that appropriately describes what all this grammar does to you: ум за разум заходит (go crazy, be at a loss, the mind boggles). У населения ум за разум заходит (The population is going nuts).

And, last but not least, it can be heard in new "youth slang": заходить / не заходить + dative (мне, ему, нам etc.) This means "I like it/I don't like it." Мне это вино не зашло (That wine didn't do it for me). Мне его новый альбом зашёл (I really liked his new album).

I hope рубрика вам зашла but wouldn't be surprised if ум за разум заходит.

Sound production by Yanina Sorokina and music "Хорошо" by Naadia.

Original url:
https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/07/08/stop-in-go-behind-and-lose-your-mind-a78244