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# Take That, You Confusing Preposition!

## The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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**pixels**

*Купить билет: to buy a ticket*

It's a hot Friday in August, which is the perfect time for a pop quiz. What's a small Russian word that means on, in, for, take, at and with? A) да B) м-да C) не D) на E) и F) бля.

If you chose (F) you're a native Russian speaker and that's not fair.

If you chose (D), Садись! Пятёрка! (Sit down, you get an A!)

На is certainly a multi-purpose preposition, and lots of linguists far smarter than me have tried to differentiate the meanings and group them in lists of four to a dozen categories. I get what they are doing because I'm trying to do it, too, but it's not very satisfying. In the end, I think you just remember some на phrases and forget about the underlying concept that some

poor language expert made up at 4 a.m. just to finish an article.

You'll see what I mean.

But let's start with the easy stuff you already know.

На is used to describe something being on a surface, broadly defined. Она сидела на скамейке (She sat on a bench). У неё на руке браслет (She's wearing a bracelet, literally, "she has a bracelet on her arm"). Кораблик для ванны держится на воде (The bath boat floats on the water).

На is also used when describing a place or action outdoors. Они играли на улице (They were playing on the street). Они были на стадионе, на рынке, на горе, на острове (They were in a stadium, at the market, on the mountain, on an island).

There are a few trick ones in this category. You say на кухне (in the kitchen) and на почте (at the post office) because once kitchens and postal services were in the open air — as летние кухни (summer kitchens) still are at the dacha.

And then you use на when you are at some kind of event or activity: Мы познакомились на работе (We met at work). Они встретились на концерте (They met at a concert). Вечером мои родители были на спектакле (This evening my parents went to a show).

We go big picture with на, too. It's used for compass points: На севере живут много малых народов (A lot of small ethnic groups live in the North). На западе плохо относятся к нам (They don't like us in the West).

And we go small and sometimes intimate with на. It's what you use to describe where some emotion, condition or quality is located. This is sometimes just like English — and just as redundant as it is in English: У него всегда улыбка на лице (He's always got a smile on his face). But sometimes it's not at all like English: Я стал тяжёлый на подъём (It's hard to get me going these days, literally "I've become hard to raise").

Next up: several categories that involve movement. This is any kind of movement, virtual or real, on to something. Он сел на стул (He sat on the chair). Ребята легли на диван (The kids lay down on the couch). Мне нравится песня «Двигаться на свет» (I like the song "Move into the Light"). Опять тратишь деньги на глупости! (You spent your money on idiotic stuff again!) Он произвёл большое впечатление на публику (He made a huge impression on the public). Наш начальник кричит на подчинённых (Our boss screams at his underlings). Он не придёт, сослался на усталость (He isn't coming, citing fatigue).

Sometimes in these kinds of sentences, the stress shifts to на. Она сломала жизнь человеку, разрушила семью, сама пострадала и грех на душу взяла (She ruined a man's life, destroyed his family, suffered herself doesn't have a clean conscience — literally she "took a sin upon her soul"). I want to believe the stress shifts as a way of emphasizing the motion, but I'm just making that up.

See?! На makes you crazy. You do all kinds of weird things.

The next group, a bit difficult to conceptualize, consists of conditions or states that someone

or something is in or moving into. Here's an example of being in a state, which is lovely because it is just like English and uses the word "on": На пустой желудок не спится (You can't sleep on an empty stomach).

This might also be a form of responsibility weighing on someone: Весь дом на ней (All the responsibility of the house is on her — or "she's got the whole house to take care of").

And here are examples of "movement" to a new state or activity: Я перешёл на другую работу (I switched jobs, literally "moved to a new job"). Моя мама вышла на пенсию (My mother retired, literally "went on pension"). Ждём его с минуты на минуту (We're expecting him any minute now, literally, "from minute to minute.")

And then the preposition grab-bag opens. I'm just going to pull a few out for your edification. These are examples of usage that various specialists group together in various ways, but... the categories are so obscure as to be useless.

You use на for purpose, "for what" you are doing something: Я купил билет на самолёт (I bought a plane ticket, literally "ticket for an airplane"). Мой муж учится на инженера (My husband is studying to be an engineer — "for the purpose of becoming an engineer").

На is used in comparisons: Дом на пять метров выше соседского дома (The house is five meters higher than the neighbors'). And for time periods: Приезжай домой на праздники (Come home for the holidays). Встреча назначена на пятое сентября (The meeting is set for Sept. 5). Or for numbers: Строили новый театр на тысячу мест (They built a new 1000-seat theater).

And here's one for the I-have-no-idea-what-category: Ребёнок меняется на глазах (The child is changing before your very eyes).

But don't be sad. There is a happy ending to the otherwise convoluted, need-to-memorize, where does the stress go story of на. It's the particle на, which I think comes from the notion of movement. "На!" is what you say when you hand money to your teenager or a treat to your dog — a little pop of sound that usually makes people happy. На!

Finally, there is на тебе which could mean "here, take it": На тебе конфетку, детка (Here, take a candy, little one). But it's also is an exclamation for anything that is unexpected. The surprise can be good: Вдруг на тебе: согласился (And then just like that, he agreed!) Or bad: До сих пор всё шло хорошо, они добрались до цели, и на тебе ◙ новая болезненная проблема (Things had been going well, they reached their goal and then wham! Out of nowhere, a new and very difficult problem).

This is sometimes вот тебе на! (Damn, can you believe it?)

But the bad surprises are truly dreadful: Живёшь-живёшь, а потом на тебе (You're just going along, minding your own business, when Wham! Everything gets turned upside down)

All I can say is this: May your на тебе always be a pleasant surprise.

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