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The Ears Have It

Russian ears are more athletic than English ears.

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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За ухо: (to put something) behind your ear

A couple decades ago I wrote a short column about some of the odd and entertaining Russian expressions involving ухо (ear) and уши (ears). I was taken with the athletic prowess of Russian ears. For example, in Russian you flap your ears — хлопать ушами — when you are doing nothing. In English when we do nothing we are also energetic, but with our hands: Разговаривали они по-эстонски, и нам оставалось лишь хлопать ушами и ждать перевода (They were speaking to each other in Estonian, so all we could do was twiddle our thumbs and wait for the translation).

Russians can raise their ears to the top of their heads (макушка) — держать ушки на макушке — where they pay attention to everything that is going on. In English to express being on alert we use different body parts in very different places: As someone wisely said,

Лучше держать ушки на макушке, а не хлопать ушами (It's better to keep your nose to the ground than sit on your hands doing nothing). Or you can стоять на ушах (to stand on your ears), which is what you do when you go all out. In English we also contort ourselves: Сегодня у меня день рождения, и все в офисе просто на ушах стоят (Today is my birthday, and in the office everyone is just bending over backwards to celebrate).

All those years ago I wanted to delve into other oddities of the Russian ear. But at the time — pre-podcast and with no way to insert accent marks in the printed text — I had to ignore the first and perhaps main problem with Russian ears: подвижное ударение (mobile stress). Sometimes the stress slips away from the mother ship of the word and settles snugly on the prepositions preceding it.

I have not found a complete and comprehensive answer to my main question: Why? Why do we whisper something нА ухо (in someone's ear) instead of на Ухо? In some cases it seems to be because the phrase has become a kind of an adverb (or behaves like one), or because the phrase is now a fixed expression.

But let's be honest here: It's just the way that Russian rolls.

So if you want to whisper sweet nothings into your beloved's ear or quietly let your boss know his next client is here, it's На ухо: К нему подошёл помощник, сказал что-то на ухо, он воскликнул: "Ой, простите, пожалуйста!" ◙ и ушёл (His aide came up to him, whispered something in his ear, he exclaimed, "Oh, please forgive me," and left). And if you want to learn some of the niceties of fashion, you might ask: Как правильно надеть клипсы нА уши? (What's the right way to put clip-ons on your ears?)

The preposition по also takes on the burden of stress when used to describe striking a poor little ear. This is, apparently, a Thing some people do, and the poor ear takes it in the dative case: На этот случай у меня был заготовлен простой выход ◙ дать ему пО уху (In this situation I had a simple response ready — whack him in the ear).

Or you might want to grab someone by the ear. Я хотел схватить ее зА ухо, но мне помешал это сделать старший брат (I wanted to grab her by the ear, but my older brother stopped me).

Or you might faint when you see someone grabbing an ear: Он увидел, что огромная собака стоит возле люльки, а ребёнок крепко держит ее зА ухо (He saw a huge dog standing by the bassinette and the baby was tightly holding on to his ear).

Along the way, amidst all the whispering and whacking and grabbing, you might fall head over heels in love. That rather ridiculous expression and image in English is "up to the ears" in Russian: Я была в него пО уши влюблена и не могла этого скрыть (I was madly in love with him and couldn't hide it).

You can be up to your ears in other things that are not so pleasant, like пО уши в долгу (deeply in debt); пО уши в работе (up to your neck in work – or up to your ears in work).

Back in the land of normal stress, you might smile or laugh or blush до ушей (intensely, literally "to your ears"): Дедушка держит внучку на руках, и они оба улыбаются до ушей

(Grandpa holds his granddaughter in his arms and they both smile from ear to ear).

If you are seriously rich, money might be coming out of your ears. This is sometimes even true of the powers that be: У правительства деньги лезут из ушей (The government is rolling in money!)

But of course, you might also use your ears for the purpose they were intended for: hearing and listening — or rather listening, half-listening and not listening. Here English and Russian are quite similar, except when they are not.

Он слушал во все уши (He was all ears, that is, he listened very intently). А его братик слушал одним ухом (But his little brother was only listening with half an ear).

Another sibling practiced a different form of listening: Да, я слушала... в одно ухо вошло, в другое вышло (Yes, I listened, but it went it one ear and out the other!) Her sister didn't even bother to tune in: Я пропустила его слова мимо ушей (I turned a deaf hear to his words).

Only one child listened to everyone else and exclaimed: Я не могу верить своим ушам! (I can't believe my ears!)

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