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Hello, Goodbye and Other Expressions De Jour

By Michele A. Berdy

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Дежурство: on call, on stand-by, duty

In my post-Russian life, I'm trying to learn a new language. I can sometimes conjugate a few essential verbs and occasionally even get case endings right, but I can't really talk to people. I realized that I don't have that basic set of 50 or 100 standard phrases that you use to order a cup of coffee, or to discuss the weather, or to apologize for stepping on someone's foot in a crowded bus. You know, the "excuse me, I'm fine how are you, could I see that, lovely weather but looks like it might rain" sort of chatter.

In Russian you call these everyday/useful/standard/typical phrases дежурные фразы. Where does the word дежурный come from? It's from the French de jour ("of the day"). Duh. Why had I never figured that out before?

But now that I know it, it's easy to understand how the word is used. Its most common use is to describe someone whose turn it is to fulfill some kind of work duty. Дежурный врач is the doctor "of the day," that is, the doctor on call. Дежурная аптека is the pharmacy that is open when all the other pharmacies in town are closed. Дежурное блюдо is the dish of the day — often sold as the "daily special" — in a restaurant, and дежурное меню is their short menu, offered during off times when the chefs and wait staff are trying to catch a bite to eat themselves before the dinner rush.

Дежурный can also be used to mean a person, like ночной дежурный (in a hotel, the night clerk; in a hospital, the night nurse or doctor).

Over time people figured out that the person doing the night shift is not the top manager at a hotel, and the dish of the day is not the restaurant's specialty that takes an hour to cook but a less interesting dish that can be made in advance and quickly served up. And so, as is the wont of Russian words, дежурный acquired a second meaning of "typical, nothing special, ordinary, run-of-the-mill, stand-by."

And that's what дежурные фразы are: unoriginal, standard, nothing-special everyday sentences and phrases. But they are actually very important. They let you fit in, to say or write what is expected and appropriate.

But the thing is: They change over time. What was the standard just 20 years ago is in some cases out of date or even improper today. So it's back to basics, at least on saying hello and good-bye.

Once upon a time we were taught that the polite way to greet someone was Здравствуйте! Как вы поживаете? (Hello! How are you?). Forget it. Some linguists and etiquette experts don't like здравствуйте because it often comes out as the slangy and almost impertinent здрасте. It's better to go a bit more formal according to the time of day: Доброе утро! (Good morning!) until 11 a.m.; Добрый день! (Good day!) until 6 p.m.; and Добрый вечер! (Good evening!) until 11 p.m.

Unless you want to be subjected to a long and irate lecture, don't ever say or write Доброе время суток (Good time-of-day-or-night; Good whatever-time-it-is). This phrase appeared when people began writing emails and messages to people in different parts of the world. They didn't want to write "доброе утро" because the person might be receiving it at night or the next day. For some reason they eschewed здравствуйте or приветствую! (Greetings! Literally "I greet you"), which could be very formal on stage with a delegation or cheeky among teenagers. Instead they decided on "time-of-day-or-night," which seems to irritate everyone.

If someone greets you "Добрый день!" do not reply, "Добрый!" And never start the conversation with that bald "Добрый!" This drives many native Russian speakers mad.

What do you say when you run into someone after 11 p.m.? This is a rare kind of bothersome language issues. These days a lot of people say Доброй ночи, using the genitive case, but in Russian that case is used only on parting, when you send someone off with a wish: (желаю) доброго утро, доброго дня (I wish you a good morning, a good day).

When you are greeting someone, you use the nominative case — добрый день.

So why don't people say Добрая ночь? According to linguist Maxim Krongaus, it bothers people —режет ухо (sounds bad, literally cuts the ear). Native speakers aren't sure if it should be "добрая ночь" or "добрую ночь," and so they avoid it altogether. And we should, too.

Polite partings are not as fraught as greetings. In general, you simply wish people well: Всего хорошего! (All the best!) Хорошего дня! (Have a nice day!) Доброго вам дня! (A very good day to you!) If you really want to wish someone well, you could even say Желаю вам прекрасного дня! (I wish you a wonderful day!) Or: Всего вам самого наилучшего (Wishing you all the very best).

But you can go simple, too: До свидания! (Good-bye, literally, until we meet again) or До встречи! (See you, literally, until our [next] meeting).

If you are with friends, it's all much easier: Привет! Пока! (Hi! Bye!) Как дела? (How are things?) Что нового? (What's up?) But don't use these words in formal or business contexts, with people in positions of authority (professors, officials, police) or older people you aren't related to. One thing that hasn't changed over the years: you can never be too polite.

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