

Usage 3—Translating the Word “For”

The English word “for” is a preposition. The word which comes after a preposition is called its object. Together they form a prepositional phrase. A preposition phrase tells us something about the location, direction, or time of an action.

The word “for” is a very vague preposition. It suggests that the action was somehow related to the preposition's object, but does not tell us exactly how. That we must guess from the context. Russian does not have a single preposition which covers all of the ways “for” can be used. You the speaker must learn to analyze the situation and chose an appropriate Russian expression. Here are some expressions which cover common uses of “for”:

За что, За кого

These expressions are metaphors. Understand the metaphor and you will know when it makes sense to use it. The combination of “за” and a noun in the accusative case indicates motion to a position behind the thing the noun names. For example:

Он зашёл за дом.

He went behind the house. (He is there now.)

This idea of bypassing something or going around it is used as a metaphor for trading or exchanging. For example:

Я платил \$10 за поросёнка.

I paid \$10 for a piglet.

To understand the metaphor, picture the transaction. You are standing with the seller in the marketplace. He holds out the piglet for you to examine. Satisfied, you hand him \$10 across the piglet and take the piglet from him. Now look at another example:

Я выступил с речью за тебя.

I gave the talk for thee.

Here the speaker is suggesting that he stepped around the listener (who was expected to give the talk), went on stage, and gave it himself.

Для чего, Для кого

The preposition “для” suggests motion in a different direction. Here the action involves bringing something and laying at the feet of the preposition's object. This action can be literal or it can be figurative.

Я запёк торт для вас.

I baked a cake for you.

Я делаю для него всё.

I do everything for him.

Sometimes a gift is brought only in a very loose sense. The meaning may be that two things are (frequently incongruously) combined:

очень тепло для зимы

very warm for Winter

Для мужчины он не очень высокий.

For a male he is not very tall.

Кому

Some of the senses of “for” are better expressed using the dative case, like so:

Я включил тебе свет.

I turned the light on for thee.

Я принёс вам куртку.

I have brought your coat for you.

In these case we *could* have used “для”, but it would sound like we thought we were performing a great service.

На что

На plus the name of an event or occasion means “in preparation for or to bring to” that event. For example:

расписание на школу 2014-ого года

school schedule for 2014

на следующий раз

for next time

Usage 3—Translating the Word “For”

Из-за

This preposition literally means “out from behind” its object. It is used metaphorically to indicate that its object is “in the way”, that it is interfering. For example:

Я не могу видеть лес из-за множества деревьев. I cannot see the forest for the trees.
Всё из-за нехватки одного подковынного гвоздя! All for the want of a horseshoe nail.

Не было бы

The phrase “but for” is a speculation on how things would be if something or someone had not been present. For this we use the speculative particle бы:

Без вас я скучал бы. Were it not for you I would be lonely.

В случае чего

This two-word preposition means “in case of”. It can be used like this:

В случае пожара дернуть ручку. For fire pull handle.

От чего

Use this expression to talk about a treatment for disease. For example:

лечение от гриппа treatment for flu

Ради чего

Use this expression to convey the idea of “for the sake of”:

ради нашего духовного развития for the sake of our spiritual development

Motion is Key

If you learn the motions described by these expressions, you will be able to use them correctly. You will also be able to recognize incorrect use by its absurdity. Consider the following very common errors.

Иисус умер для нас.

This is incorrect because it says that his death was a gift which he brought and gave to us. This does not fit the facts. The correct phrase describes motion in a completely different direction:

Иисус умер за нас. Jesus died instead of us.

Here Jesus steps around us, leaving us behind, and goes to pay the ransom himself.

Of course Jesus did give us gifts and in those cases we can use “для”:

Иисус делал много для нас. Jesus did much for us.

Consider another common error:

Я платил \$4 для хлеба.

This is incorrect because it suggests that the payment of \$4 was given to the bread. What was meant was:

Я платил \$4 за хлеб. I paid \$4 in exchange for the bread.

Here the bread gets nothing. The buyer passes \$4 to someone who is standing on the other side of the loaf of bread. Of course there are cases where the expression “для хлеба” makes perfect sense:

Это место для хлеба. This is the place for the bread.

And finally:

Спасибо для хлеба.

The loaf of bread is to receive thanks. What was meant was:

Спасибо за хлеб.

This makes much more sense. The thanks pass from the recipient of the gift, over the loaf, to the giver.