

Grammar 4—Odd English

Beginning students often remark that Russian expressions are overly complicated and ask why things cannot be said simply like in English. But this is a matter of perspective. Often it is the English expression that is overly complicated or unusual when compared to other languages. English has a number of innovative expressions. It has also been damaged by the loss of useful distinctions which other languages still have. You should learn to recognize these oddities of English since otherwise you will unconsciously duplicate them in Russian and confuse your listeners.

The Disappearance of “Thou”

English is unusual in that the distinction between second person singular and plural has been lost. Originally Thou was the singular and You (or Ye) the plural. But under French influence English speakers began addressing other individuals as You as a mark of reverence. Over the course of almost 1000 years, this use of You crowded Thou out of the language. By the 18th century Thou was hardly used at all in standard English (though it is still sometimes used in conversation in certain dialects of the United Kingdom). But the Russian word for Thou, Ты is alive and well. To learn when you should use it see [Usage 1—Ты versus Вы](#).

Wither Have these Words Gone?

More damage came around the time of World War I when the adverbs of motion disappeared leaving only the adverbs of place. For example, “He sent me thither.” became “He sent me there.”

English Adverb of Motion	Modern Substitute	Russian Adverb of Motion
wither	where	куда
whence	from where	откуда
hither	here	суда
hence	from here	от суда
thither	there	туда
thence	from there	оттуда

In Russian the distinction between motion and place remains important. If you fail to use the Russian adverbs of motion when required, you will confuse your listeners:

You thought	You said	Listener heard	Should have said
I drove there (thither).	Я ездил там.	While there I drove.	Я ездил туда.
He is coming here (hither).	Он идёт здесь.	Here he is walking.	Он идёт сюда.

The Dummy Do

This is an unusual feature which English has inherited from ancient Celtic languages. The word “do” is used as a question word or for emphasis as in this exchange:

English	Most other Languages
John: Do you like apples? David: I do not! Ann: But, I do, really I do!	John: You like apples? David: I not like! Ann: But, I like, really I like!

Do drop the do. Do not translate it “делать”.

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The Obsessive Progressive

From Celtic languages English has also inherited a tendency to use wordy and complicated verb forms when simpler ones would do. If you were to succeed in duplicating them in Russian, your listeners would think you were trying to convey some subtle and mysterious meaning:

English	Unintended Implications	Most Other Languages
I am going to the store.	Observe the beauty of my progress! Watch me place my foot!	I go to the store.
The library will be closing at 4:30.	Come and watch us close the library. It is an involved process.	The library will close at 4:30.

The Obsessive Possessive

Consider this not-too-far-fetched paragraph:

When my alarm clock rang I got out of my bed, put on my clothes, went into my kitchen, ate my breakfast, opened my front door and went out into my yard. I then took my keys, opened my car door and got in. I drove to the end of my street and took my first left. Then I took my third left and arrived at my workplace.

Notice that the paragraph is heavily salted with the word “my”. Now read it again, skipping the word “my”. Does the meaning change much? Do not use Russian possessives such as мой, его, and свой in this way. It would be belaboring the obvious. Use them only when they are needed to make the meaning clear.

Lazy Grammar

You have probably heard statements like those below many times. In these examples the speaker has not taken the trouble to connect his ideas on a way that makes sense:

What Was Said	Why Incorrect	What Was Meant
My Bible study came to the meeting.	A study is an activity, not a person.	My Bible student came to the meeting.
Hospitality this week will be the North Avenue group.	Groups can show hospitality, but they cannot be hospitality.	The North Avenue group is to provide hospitality this week.
My return visit is sick.	A visit is an activity, not a person.	The person to whom I planned to make a return visit is sick.

Do not assume that you can get away with using illogical expressions such as these in Russian. Do it too frequently and your listeners will get tired of guessing what you mean and tune you out.