

I Said, "Do You Speaka My Language?"

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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"... and he just smiled, and gave me a vegemite sandwich."*

Sometimes that's how I feel here in Russia; totally clueless when it comes to the language. Unlike my polyglot husband who annoyingly speaks a number of languages — including Russian — I'm not gifted in this area, but I am at least making the effort and trying with the Russian. At least, I'm trying very hard during my weekly lessons, but for the life of me, I just can't seem to find the time in between to do my homework.

It's shocking really. Here I am, in my 40s, and still not getting round to learning my vocabulary.

I know that I *have* improved, based on the fact that I'm capable of a recent conversation with a purely Russian-speaking nanny where I made the sort of "la plume de ma tante" statement you read in a text book and assume is nonsense and never relevant in real life. That is, until you actually find yourself *needing* to say, "The dog is watching television through the window." (Don't ask). But while being able to do that is nice, it's hardly going to help if I

have to explain to the traffic police why I crossed the white line in the middle of the road, or to ask the security guards on the gate to let a particular car in to deliver my British-style sausages. (Watch this space for how that goes. The possibilities for confusion are endless.)

So I am — technically speaking — "a bit crap" at Russian, to be honest. This is of course not helped by the fact that I am fast discovering, as I move further into the study of the language, that my secondary school education was sorely lacking in the basics. Either that, or I've forgotten everything I ever knew on how to parse a sentence. (I prefer to blame my O-level English teacher for failing to give me the knowledge in the first place than to admit the latter.) And when my teacher starts to explain how to use Russian words correctly based on genitive, accusative and dative cases, well, I'm afraid that my brain starts — ever so quietly — to steam. "Can-not-compute," it tells me. "Too-much-information. Need-sparkling-caffeinated-beverage-*now*."

This leaves me in an interesting position. Do I admit to her that not only does she need to teach me the fundamentals of Russian, but that she needs to give me a refresher course in English language, too? Or do I just quietly go online, order myself a textbook and add to the list of things that I never get round to doing the reading of "Basic English Grammar for Idiots"? Because if I'm honest, I know it will simply sit next to my Russian notes and lists of vocabulary to learn, gathering dust reproachfully until I take it back to England with me and give it away to the church bazaar, still in its wrapper.

Vegemite sandwich, anyone?

*A Men at Work reference, in case you were wondering.

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