

Sitting Around

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January 12, 2012

The  Moscow Times

Сидеть: to sit, more or less

Whew. The annual winter 10-day Russian eat-and-drinkathon is finally over. Isn't it amazing how tight a pair of jeans can get in just a little over a week?

Along with contemplating my girth, I've been considering — in a languid, hung over sort of way — stance verbs in Russian. Stance verbs are *стоять* (to stand), *лежать* (to lie), and *сидеть* (to sit). *Стоять* is a vertical position, *лежать* is a horizontal position, and *сидеть* is a kind of in-between position. People do it. Dogs and cats do it. What's the problem?

The problem is when you are talking about creatures other than humans and pets or inanimate objects. In English, we generally just use a form of "to be" to describe location and position: The plate is on the table. The boots were in the hall. But in Russian, you need to choose one of those three stance verbs. If you use the vertical/horizontal/in-between paradigm, you might say: *Тарелка лежит на столе* (The plate is lying on the table), since a plate is flat and in a horizontal position. Or you might say: *Птица стоит на ветке* (The bird

is standing on the branch), since it's vertically positioned.

But you'd be wrong. In Russian, plates "stand" and birds "sit." Huh?

“Huh” is right. Grammar and textbooks are little help. Native speakers all agree on what verb must be used, but they cannot explain why. Linguists have only recently begun to plumb the mystery. While they more or less agree that there are some conceptual or perceptual underpinnings to the use of Russian stance verbs, they disagree on what they might be. And they admit that so far they can't formulate rules to explain all of the usage.☒

So what's a poor foreigner to do? Until linguists come up with some rules, I think it's easier to think of this as a set of linguistic conventions in which animate and inanimate objects are associated with certain verbs.

For example, when small scurrying creatures like ежи (hedgehogs), белки (squirrels) and мышки (mice) as well as all insects and anything that flies — мухи (flies), бабочки (butterflies) and птицы (birds) — are immobile, they "sit." Паук сидит на подоконнике. (The spider is on the windowsill). This is even true when the insect is splayed out horizontally: Гусеница сидит на листе (The caterpillar is on the leaf).

You can use the verb лежать with any of these creatures, but it conveys the notion of fatal immobility. Мышь лежала на столе might be translated as "a dead mouse was lying on the table." ☒

Other things that sit: roofs on houses, mushrooms on the ground, clothes on people, pies in the oven and corks in bottles. Крыша сидит криво на избе (The roof on the house is crooked); гриб сидит под берёзой (there's a mushroom under the birch); платье хорошо сидит на ней (the dress fits her well); пирог сидит в печке (the pie is in the oven); пробка крепко сидит в бутылке (the cork is really stuck tight in the bottle).

Сидеть is also used with people to describe being stuck in some way: он сидит в тюрьме (he's in prison); он сидит дома с детьми (he's at home with the kids); я сижу в пробке (I'm stuck in traffic).

Or, more to the point this week: Я сижу на диете (I'm on a diet).

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2012/01/12/sitting-around-a11838>