

Fancy That

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In my ongoing effort to get a handle on all those little Russian words — you know, like так (so), как (how), что (what) and да (yes, and) — and their confusing combinations, this week I'm stuck on **вот**.

I like to say **вот**. On "в" you inhale a rich dollop of "о" and then end with a gratifying click of the teeth on "т." What a tasty little word.

Вот can mean "here" or "look" or "listen up." It can be used as an intensifier, like in the phrase **вот что я скажу** (here's what I've got to say about that).

And then, because this is Russian we're talking about, it can be combined with other little words to produce a wide variety of meanings, like **вот как** (so that's the way it is!) or **вот это да** (that's really something).

Or it can be uttered all by its lonesome to mean "and that's all I've got to say about that." **Вот**.

In the course of my *вот* research, I've gotten rather wistful about English. A hundred years ago, we might have translated *вот* expressions with interesting phrases and regionalisms like "that's a fine kettle of fish," "my stars and garters" or "I declare."

Or we might have even used the word "lo," which is pretty close to *вот*. It's derived from a word that meant "look" and was used to express wonder and amazement.

But these days, we can't render "*вот!*" as "lo and behold." And wonder or amazement generally gets expressed with "wow!" or an expletive in English today. *Вот и всё* (That's the way it is).

Take *вот тебе раз* (also *вот те раз*, *вот так раз*). This is a phrase you exclaim when you are unpleasantly surprised by something — what used to be expressed in English by such phrases as "of all the things!" and "my heavens."

Today it's probably just a bleeped-out expletive. "Наш самолёт вынужден совершить посадку в Москве," — объявила стюардесса. "Вот те раз!" — возмутился сосед. ("Our plane must make a landing in Moscow," the stewardess announced. "What the hell!" my outraged neighbor said.)

Or *вот тебе на* (also *вот те на*), which also expresses amazement, often about some bad or unpleasant news or event. In 1920, this was "Well, I never!" Today, it's probably "No way!" "Прокурор велел соседу арестовать." "Вот те на! За что?" ("The prosecutor ordered your neighbor's arrest." "You're kidding! What on earth for?")

And if it were 1856 — or if you were channeling Scarlet O'Hara — *вот тебе крест* (also *вот те крест*) would be "as God is my witness." Now it's likely to be the mundane "I swear!" *Вот те крест, он работает на ментов* (I swear to you, he's working for the cops!)

True, not all is lost. *Вот где сидит/сидят* is what you say when you are sick of some thing(s). "Мне этот киоск уже вот где сидит," — Анна проводит пальцем по шее. ("I'm fed right up to here with that stand!" Anna said, running her finger across her neck.)

And *вот поди ж ты* (also *иди ты*), used to express disbelief and amazement on hearing some news, has a pretty close English equivalent.

"Она вышла замуж за Борю." "Вот поди ж ты! За Борю?" ("She married Borya." "Get outta here! Borya?")

Reply: *Вот те крест!* (Honest to God!)

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