

Dealing With the Tough Stuff

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Так себе: so-so

A couple of weeks ago I saw a query on a translators' forum, and it has been buzzing around my head ever since. It pops into my head in the shower, or when I'm sitting in traffic, or when I'm trying to go to sleep. And here's the weird part: I understand the phrase and even use it, but I can't come up with a truly satisfactory way of saying it in English.

Like so many hard-to-translate phrases, it is very simple — just the repetition of a verb: картина висит и висит (literally, the painting is hanging and hanging). But somehow that nothing-special construction conveys two things: The painting has been hanging on the wall for some time and it's innocuous; the speaker hasn't paid much attention to it.

In Russian you might hear it used like this: Картина висит и висит, а потом я пригляделась и поняла, что моя бабушка её рисовала. The closest I can come to translation is: The painting was just hanging there forever, but when I looked at it closely I

realized that my grandmother had painted it.

A similar construction — and similarly hard to translate — is with the participle себе. This is not the dative себе (to oneself), as in a sentence like this: Он не отказывал себе в обычных удовольствиях молодости. (He didn't deny himself the usual pleasures of youth.)

This is a different себе. You pop it in with a verb and it conveys the sense of doing something for enjoyment, or contrary to expectations, or in a carefree way. Sometimes it conveys a little bit of all those things. Not bad for a little bitty word.

Take that incredibly annoying picture hanging on the wall: Висит себе и висит. If I were to say this in English, I'd probably say something like: It's just hanging there — I never really thought about it.

Or you might hear in Russian: Висит картина, ну пусть себе висит. In English this might be: The painting's been hanging on the wall, not bothering anyone. Might as well leave it there.

Russians use this себе a lot, and every time you come across it, you need to think of a way of expressing it in English. For example: Сидит себе он на диванчике и вспоминает добрые старые времена. (He's kicking back on the couch thinking about the good ol' days.) Вы себе сидите! (You just sit there and relax.) Живи себе спокойно, о нас не думай, у нас всё хорошо, всё есть, ни в чём не нуждаемся. (Relax and don't think about us — we're fine, we've got everything we need.) Ты живёшь у подружки — ну и живи себе там! (You're living at your girlfriend's place — so live it up!)

There are a couple of себе idioms that are also good to know. Так себе is a fabulous Russian shoulder-shrug of a phrase that means "so-so." Как кино? Так себе. Ожидал лучшего. (How was the film? Not bad. I expected better.)

Another is ничего себе, which in that wonderful way of Russian expressions ranges in meaning from pretty good to pretty bad with a detour into shocked amazement. Pretty good: Если парень ничего себе, то Анечка не пропадёт. (If the guy is OK, Anya will do fine.) Pretty bad: Ничего себе сбой! (Jeez, talk about a setback!)

And then, shocked amazement: Сколько значений в одной фразе?! Ничего себе! (How many meanings in one phrase?! Incredible!)

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