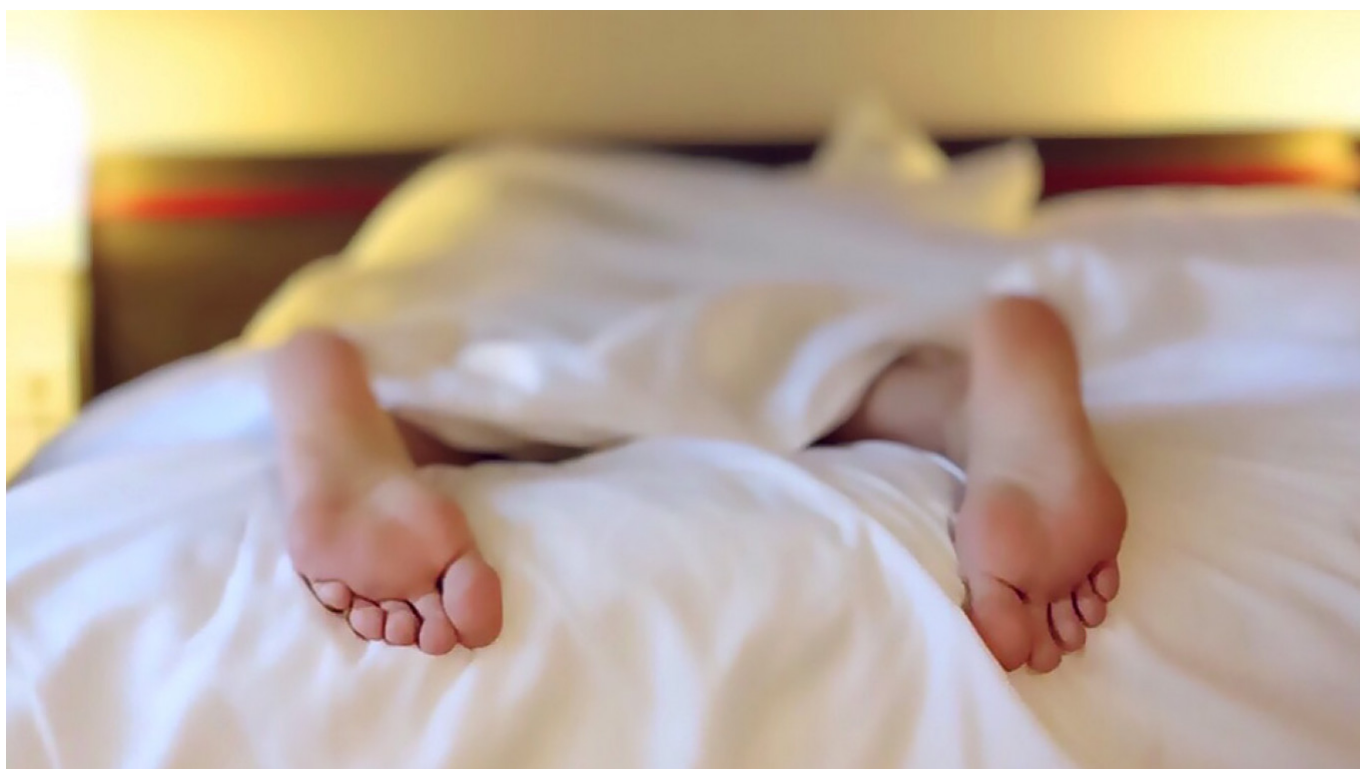


On Your Russian Feet

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

July 03, 2019



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Стопа: foot, step, meter

Somewhere in ancient Russia, circa 863. A large extended family sits by the fire weaving лапти (bast shoes). One of the children asks what you put them on. Нога (your leg) the father, Мирослав, replies. The kids all laugh as one tries to put the shoe on his knee. Нет, нога! (No, your leg!) Мирослав points to his foot.

And this is when someone invented a few more words for feet.

Well, maybe it didn't really happen that way. But sometimes it seems like there are too many

words for legs and feet in Russian, and at other times it's seems like there aren't enough.

Hora is the word that describes the whole lower-body limb, from hip to toe. Most of the time, context indicates what part of the limb is under discussion. And if you need clarification, you've got бедро (thigh); голень (crus, or lower leg); стопа and ступня (foot).

Ступня comes from the verb ступать (to step, walk) and describes both the foot and, in some cases, the sole. You should know this when you join a health club and the doctor demands Покажите ступни! (Show me the soles of your feet!) to make sure you don't have a fungal infection before letting you jump in the pool.

Стопа, the other more common word for foot, is a very productive little word. It means that thing with five toes that you put a shoe on. But it also means foot in the sense of a poetic unit of stressed and unstressed syllables, like ионическая стопа (ionic meter); a unit of measure (28.8 cm to be exact, which is just a hair under 12 inches — that foot Americans use to describe length); a pile of paper that was originally 480 sheets — which is exactly the number of pages that were originally in an English ream of paper); and even a wine goblet, although I admit I have never actually heard that usage.

Outside the doctor's office or shoe store, you are most likely to hear стопа in the expression идти по стопам (to walk in someone's footsteps). Двое сыновей пошли по стопам отца: один стал лейтенантом, другой полковником (The two sons followed in their father's footsteps: one became a lieutenant, and the other — a colonel.)

Стопа is fun, but for idiom productivity, nothing beats нога.

First of all, there are plenty of нога expressions for being on your feet, running around, and running yourself ragged. На ногах means to be on your feet, out of bed, on the go. It is often used to describe someone who eschews bedrest and instead comes into the office with the flu. He is proud; everyone else is sick. But in today's world, it's very common: Переносить грипп на ногах нынче в порядке вещей (Now no one blinks if you stay on your feet when you have the flu).

In fact, sometimes someone with the flu runs со всех ног (at full speed). But if you are sick and want someone else to do the running around, try saying: Сбегай на одной ноге в аптеку! (High tail it to the drugstore, literally "run on one leg").

Стоять на своих ногах is to stand on your own two feet. Okay, so everyone older than the age of two does that, but when applied to an adult, especially with the adverb крепко (solidly), it means to be independent. В тридцать лет мужчина должен прочно стоять на ногах и иметь семью (At the age of 30 a man should be on his own and have a family.)

And then, there are нога expressions for exhaustion. My personal favorite is без задних ног (literally "without back legs") which is what it feels like when you are physically exhausted. This is often used to describe sleeping the sleep of the dead: Набегавшись, возвращалась домой, спала без задних ног (She ran around like crazy, came home and slept like a baby.)

Another way of being exhausted is валиться/свалиться с ног (to be so tired you are falling over). Мы работали весь день в огороде и валялись с ног (We were falling-down

exhausted after working in the garden all day). Or you can be so tired, you can barely stand: В конце рабочего дня она бледна, еле держится на ногах (At the end of the working day she's pale and can hardly stand).

But when you limp on both legs, you're not tired, you're floundering mentally. Наша дочка вообще хорошо учится, но в русском языке она хромает на обе ноги (Our daughter does well in school in general, but she is really having a hard time with Russian language classes.)

You should be a bit careful when you want someone to take a load off their feet. Протянуть or вытянуть ноги (literally "to stretch out one's legs") means to die. This is a bit dated, but you might still hear it: Старик долго болел и на прошлой неделе протянул ноги (The old man was sick for a long time, and he gave up the ghost last week.)

Another deathly expression is ногами вперёд (feet first), which is the way a deceased person is carried out of a house. This practice — often found in the West, too — is so that the deceased won't be able to "look back" at his home and call loved ones to join him or stay attached to his earthly life. Now the expression is often used to mean "I'm staying": Это мой дом и уеду отсюда только вперёд ногами (This is my house, and I'll only leave it feet first.)

To get someone to stop running around, there is a lovely old expression you might use — if you wanted to show off your knowledge of Russian: В ногах правды нет. This literally means "there's no truth when you're on your feet." The origins of this expression are not entirely clear, but it probably comes from various medieval punishments for stealing or not repaying debts. According to one version, peasants would be made to stand until someone admitted guilt or pointed to the guilty party, and since no one wanted to stand for hours, someone would lie just to end the misery. Now it just means: Sit down!

Foot expressions can be a bit whimsical, too. Приделать ноги к чему-то (literally "to attach legs to something") means to steal something. Гаражу приделали ноги. Автомобиль тоже прихватили. (Someone walked away with the garage. They grabbed the car, too.)

Or let's say you're annoyed by your boss, who gets an idea in his head and turns the workday upside down. That's either вверх ногами or с ног на голову (upside down). And when you complain about it at lunchtime, you say: Начальник делает, как его левая нога захочет! А нам надо весь годовой план переделать! (The boss does whatever he damn well pleases. And we've got to redo the whole annual plan.)

So, what do you do if you work in an office like that? Бери ноги в руки и беги отсюда! (Literally "you take your feet in your hands and run"). That is, you get the hell out of there.

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