

Who is Gulya and Why Do We Care About Her Nose?

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

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Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency

C: With, from, approximately the size of

It's probably not fair to say that Russian prepositions are the bane of non-native speakers' existence. There are other contenders for the bane claim — aspect, shifting stress, a few weird verb conjugations — but prepositions present all kinds of problems. They almost all have several, often totally unrelated meanings. They use different cases depending on which meaning is being used. And they add and subtract letters.

Take the preposition *c*, also known as *co*. So when do you add the “o”? This is actually pretty easy. Whenever it precedes a word that begins with two consonants in a row, put the “o” in. *Иди со мной* (Come with me). *Она говорила со слезами на глазах* (She spoke with tears in her eyes). *Ты со всеми дружишь* (You're friends with everyone). The reason for the “o” is simple. It's added for ease of pronunciation and clarity — try saying *с всеми*.

When we're learning Russian cases, the preposition *с* with the instrumental case is banged into our heads. It means "with," and we can remember it because it is probably a distant relative of the Latin *cum*. This might refer to possessing a physical thing, which might be good for the person possessing it or for someone else: Такая реклама привлечёт туристов с деньгами (This ad will attract tourists with money). Or it can refer to possessing a quality: Он человек с характером (He's got a mind of his own). Or it can be one thing possessing another thing: Стоит на столе бутылка с молоком (There's a bottle of milk on the table).

When you do something with someone, there are two ways of expressing it. If you have something important to tell someone, you might say: После урока я поговорила с преподавателем (After class I spoke with the teacher). When you do something jointly with someone, you describe it as "we and him/her/them": Мы с ним пошли в кино (He and I went to the movies). Какая у нас с вами проблема? (What's the problem between the two of us?)

С and the instrumental case is used to describe the thoughts, actions, manner or emotions you experience while doing something. This isn't as obscure as it may sound – in English we say "with great pleasure" or "it is with sadness that I announce" and so on. Я с удовольствием приду! (I'd be delighted to come!) Собаки с лаем встречали нас (The dogs greeted us with barking). С этой мыслью я побежал к дедушке (With that thought in mind I ran to my grandfather).

And, like in English, you can fight with someone as well as you can fight against them: Мы боролись с врагами (We fought with our enemies).

There are lots of standard phrases, some easy to understand like *вместе с тем* (along with, at the same time): В доме царит необычная и вместе с тем жизнерадостная атмосфера (In her house the mood is unusual but at the same time cheerful). Some are not so easy to understand, like *кровь с молоком* (literally blood with milk). This actually means someone with fair skin (not sallow) and rosy cheeks, that is, someone in good health: Я была девушка "кровь с молоком" (I was a rosy cheeked little girl).

The second meaning of the preposition *с* is "from," which uses the genitive case. I can't find a good explanation for why this is — the mumbling about Greek via Latin is hard to understand. Luckily we hear it and use it a lot in various set expressions, which makes it easier to remember. Я перевела книгу с русского на английский (I translated the book from Russian to English). Мы взяли наши куртки с вешалки и побежали (We grabbed our jackets from the coat rack and dashed off). С консервированной кукурузы слить жидкость (Drain off the liquid from the canned corn).

It's the "from" in time expressions: Я работаю с утра до вечера (I work from morning til night). Sometimes we express this a bit differently in English: Уроки начинаются с сентября (The classes begin in September).

There is one usage that is very easy to get wrong: С вашего разрешения я пойду (With your permission I'll leave). С Вашего позволения воспользуюсь вашим сообщением (I'd like to quote your commentary, with your permission).

Finally, *с* has a third meaning: with the accusative case it indicates the approximate size of

something. It means “as big as” or “the size of” — with the caveat that for some reason it’s almost always an exaggeration. And for us non-native speakers, at first glance looks like a typo: Вчера выпал град с куриное яйцо (Yesterday there was a storm with hail the size of a chicken egg). Дом с гору (The house is as big as a mountain). Орехи громадные – с кулак (The nuts are huge — the size of my fist).

One of most common — that is, totally incomprehensible — phrases using this expression is с гулькин нос, which means “very, very small.” Пользы ему от этого будет с гулькин нос (The benefit he’ll get out of it is miniscule).

So who was Гулька and why do we remember her nose?

Actually, it’s a bird: гулька is a diminutive of гуля which is a diminutive of голубь (pigeon), and нос is really клюв (beak). Of course, you’d figure that out, right?

How small is it? The size of a pigeon’s beak. Sometimes this is fine: Место для этого надо с гулькин нос (You just need a tiny bit of space for it). Sometimes it isn’t fine: Денег заработала с гулькин нос (I earned a miniscule amount of money).

One wishes: Денег заработала с гору (I earned a mountain of money).

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