

Title: Don't Get Negative on Me: When 'Ne' Doesn't Mean 'No'

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Some students of Russian have concluded that American and Russian cultures see the world differently. Americans have a positive, optimistic, outer-directed (confident) outlook, while Russians have a sullen, pessimistic, inner-directed (protective, defensive) outlook. This view finds support in the plethora of negatives in the Russian language. Russian culture seems bound by nay-saying.

Such conclusions are short-sighted. In my paper, I will argue that linguistic negation in Russian is not necessarily a manifestation of negative judgment. On the contrary, many Russian expressions that are grammatically and syntactically wrapped in negatives are far removed from negative feeling. I will examine negatives in three common social displays.

1) Official regulations. The command "Po gazonam NE hodit!" translates as "Don't walk on the lawn!". The English equivalent—"Keep off the grass!"—bars intrusion. The Russian prohibition, however, is a plea to keep order in physical space, to make the flow of people comfortable, less oppressive, less intrusive.

2) Formal communication. In the Russian "NE kladite trubku!"—literally, "Don't put down the receiver"—"NE" is an intensifier, affirming, projecting and promising possibilities. It expresses a will to be useful and helpful. In tone, it is more rightly equivalent to the American "Hang on, please!"

3) The personal, even intimate touch. The harsh-sounding "NE propadai!"—literally, "Don't disappear!"—is more aptly the American "Stay in touch!" Expressions of this type in Russian strive to maintain close contact, deepen an existing relationship. They offer to re-organize one's own emotional space for another.

Negatives such as these are survival devices in Russia's collectivistic culture. By building one's emotional and physical space, one avoids being confused by the otherwise overpowering state or social construction. An accurate interpretation of "negative" use in Russian makes for more productive intercultural communication.

REFERENCES

Andersen P., Hecht M., Hoobler G., Smallwood M. 2003. "Nonverbal Communication Across Cultures." In *Cross-Cultural and Intercultural Communication*. pp. 73-90.