

Chapter 18

Ten Favorite Russian Expressions

In This Chapter

- ▶ Exploring phrases beyond their dictionary definitions
- ▶ Discovering the most popular Russian quotes and proverbs

Every culture has a way of taking familiar words and turning them into something else. The most diligent student can flip through his dictionary, and based on the literal translation, still have no idea what an expression means or why everybody is laughing. This chapter brings together ten words and expressions that Russians use a lot, and whose meanings aren't always intuitive. Recognizing these expressions in speech and using them with ease can make you sound really Russian!

Oj!

To express surprise, dismay, admiration, gratitude, or even pain — pretty much any strong feeling — Russians say **Oj!** (ohy) Use **Oj!** when in English you would say “oops,” “ouch,” or “wow,” or make a facial expression. You can confidently use **Oj!** in any of the following sentences:

- ✓ **Oj, kak krasivo!** (ohy kahk kruh-see-vuh; Wow, how beautiful!)
- ✓ **Oj, spasibo!** (ohy spuh-see-buh; Thank you so much!)
- ✓ **Oj, kto eto?** (ohy ktoh eh-tuh; Who in the world is this?)
- ✓ **Oj, kak priyatno slyshat' tvoj golos!** (ohy kahk pree-yaht-nah slih-shuht' tvohy goh-luhs; Oh, it's so nice to hear your voice!)



Russians consider **Oj!** a more feminine exclamation; men, on the other hand, are supposed to grind their teeth and keep their emotions to themselves.

Davaj

If you look up **davaj** (duh-vahy) in the dictionary, you find the translation “give.” Russians, however, use the word in all kinds of situations. It’s a popular way to suggest doing something, as in **Davaj pojdyom v kino** (duh-vahy pahy-dyom v kee-noh; let’s go to the movies), and to answer “sure, let’s do it!” (**Davaj!**) Used by itself, **davaj** means “bye, take care.” (See Chapter 7 for more details.)

Pryedstav'tye Syebye

While the verb **pryedstav'tye** can mean “imagine,” “picture,” or even “introduce,” **pryedstav'tye syebye** (preed-stahf'-tee see-bye) means “Can you believe it?” or “Imagine that!” It’s a good way to begin telling a story, or to open a conversation on a subject you feel strongly about.

Poslushajtye!

Although the literal translation of **Poslushajtye!** (pahs-loo-shuhy-tee) is “Listen!,” this translation doesn’t do the expression justice. Saying “Listen!” in English sounds pushy and aggressive; in Russian, **Poslushajtye!** is a good and nice way to attract attention to your arguments. Here are some examples:

- ✓ **Poslushajtye, davajtye pojdyom na progulku!** (pahs-loo-shuhy-tee, duh-vahy-tee pahy-dyom nuh prah-gool-koo; You know what? Let’s go for a walk!, *Literally*: Listen, let’s go for a walk!)
- ✓ **Poslushajtye, no eto pryekrasnyj fil'm!** (pahs-loo-shuhy-tee, noh eh-tuh preek-rah-s-nihy feel'm; But it’s a wonderful movie!, *Literally*: Listen, but it’s a wonderful movie!)



A less formal variant of the same expression is **Poslushaj!** (pahs-loo-shuhy). You can use it with someone you’re on familiar terms with, someone you normally say **Ty** (tih; you; informal) to; see Chapter 2 for details on the informal “you.” And if you want to be even more informal, you can use the conversational variant **Slushaj!** (sloo-shuhy) Just make sure the person you say it to is your good friend, and will take this informality the right way. Otherwise, stick to **Poslushaj!**

Pir Goroj

You may be at a loss to describe the grand abundance of Russian dinner parties and holiday tables. This expression, then, is useful: **pir goroj** (peer gah-rohy; *Literally*: feast with food piled up like a mountain). If you're hungry for more food info, check out Chapter 5.

Ya Tryebuyu Prodolzhyeniya Bankyeta

This phrase is a quote from one of the Russian's most beloved comedies, "**Ivan Vasil'yevich myenyayet profyessiyu**" (ee-vahn vah-seel'-ee-veech meenya-eet prah-fye-see-yu; Ivan Vasil'yevich Changes His Occupation), and is sure to make any Russian smile. Say **Ya tryebuyu prodolzhyeniya bankyeta!** (ya trye-boo-yu pruh-dahl-zheh-nee-ye buhn-kye-tuh; *Literally*: I insist on the continuation of the banquet!) when a party or a trip is going well, when somebody is inviting you to come over again, or when you're suggesting to do some fun activity yet another time.



"**Ivan Vasil'yevich myenyayet profyessiyu**" is an old Russian movie about a bland accountant, Ivan Vasil'yevich, who switches places with Tsar Ivan the Terrible with the help of a time machine invented by his neighbor. Confused, at first, to find himself in the position of Russia's 16th-century tsar (who turns out to be his identical twin), Ivan Vasil'yevich quickly takes to the tsar's lifestyle. Sitting in an ornate banquet hall of the old Kremlin, at the head of a huge table with endless delicacies, and watching a performance of his court dancers, Ivan Vasil'yevich, drunk from the rare wines and the attention of the beautiful tsarina, raises a precious goblet and exclaims, **Ya tryebuyu prodolzhyeniya bankyeta!**

Slovo — Syeryebro, A Molchaniye — Zoloto

Russians love proverbs and use them a lot. **Slovo — syeryebro, a molchaniye — zoloto** (sloh-vuh see-reeb-roh uh mahl-chah-nee-ee zoh-luh-tuh; a word is silver, but silence is gold) can be loosely translated as "Speaking is nice, but silence is supreme." This phrase is nice to say after you make a mistake speaking Russian or when you, or somebody else, says something that would be better off left unsaid.

Odna Golova Khorosho, A Dvye — Luchshye

Odna golova khorosho, a dvye — luchshye (ahd-nah guh-lah-vah khuh-rah-shoh ah dvye looch-shih; One head is good, but two heads are better) doesn't refer to science fiction mutants. Rather, it's a manifestation of the international belief that two heads are better than one. You can say this phrase when you invite somebody to do something together or when you ask for, or offer, help or advice.

Drug Poznayotsya V Byedye

Drug poznayotsya v byedye (dook puhz-nuh-yot-sye v bee-dye; A friend is tested by hardship) is the Russian equivalent of the saying, "A friend in need is a friend indeed."



Russians take friendship seriously. Their definition of a friend is not just a person you know (as in, "This is my new friend . . . what's your name again?"). Such a person would be called **znakomyj** (znuh-koh-mihy; acquaintance). A **drug** (dook; friend), on the other hand, is someone who cares for you. And the best way to find out whether a certain person is a friend or just an acquaintance is to see how they behave when things aren't going so great.

Saryj Drug Luchshye Novykh Dvukh

Saryj drug luchshye novykh dvukh (stah-rihy dook looch-shih noh-vihkh dvookh; An old friend is better than two new ones) is another speculation on the theme of friendship. An old friend (and they aren't referring to age) is better because he or she has already been tested, possibly by hardships mentioned in the previous phrase. New friends, on the other hand, are dark horses; when a bad moment strikes, they may turn out to be just acquaintances.