

Words to Make You Laugh

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Айда: let's go

Like bears waking from their long winter hibernation, native and temporary Muscovites are sleepily crawling out of parkas and fur hats into the light of spring — just in time for National Funny Russian Word Day.

OK, there isn't really a holiday like that, but there should be. And it should be held in what passes for spring in the capital, when you sure need a good laugh to get through the post-winter mud, lake-sized puddles and general filth. So I'm declaring today National Funny Russian Word Day.

My criteria for nominations? The word should sound funny, which is admittedly terribly subjective, but since I made the holiday up, I get to make the rules. And it should be used in expressive and unexpected ways.

My first nomination is the verb pair квакать/квакнуть, which has the primary meaning of croak, as in what frogs do: ква-ква-ква (ribbet). That's good for a smile. Сонная лягушка квакнула на болоте (A sleepy frog croaked in the swamp). But it is also used to describe any croaking or squawking noise, human or otherwise. Недовольно квакнул клаксон автомобиля (The automobile klaxon croaked with displeasure).

And then it's slang for tossing back a drink, which fits my second criterion, since the connection between croaking like a frog and drinking is tenuous, to say the least. Он налил себе и мне по полному стакану водки. Квакнули. (He poured a full glass of vodka for himself and me. We tossed them down.)

And it can also mean to break down — to croak, as it were. One of my friends uses this slang all the time. In an e-mail about a bad weekend at the dacha, she wrote: У нас дважды квакало электричество (the electricity croaked twice). ... и затем стиральная машина квакнула из-за проблемы с электричеством (and then the washing machine croaked from the electrical problems).

To which I say: Пора квакнуть! (Time for a drink.)

My second nomination is the verb pair ухайдокивать/ухайдокать (also ухайдакивать/ухайдакать). Certainly passes the funny sound test. Today the verb has three meanings, all of them slangy or folksy. The first is to kill someone. Не съесть, не выпить, не поцеловать. И никого не ухайдокать (Don't eat, don't drink, don't kiss anyone. And don't knock anyone off.)

Sometimes things can be killed, in a way: Бутылку он самостоятельно ухайдокал (He finished off the bottle by himself). Немыслимые деньги ухайдокали на инвест-программы (They dropped a huge bundle of money on investment programs).

The second meaning is to wear someone down to the bones, literally or figuratively. Природа Белого моря нас ухайдокала (The pitching of the White Sea did us in).

And the third meaning is to wreck something. Он вчера напился и ухайдокал свою машину (Last night he got drunk and wrecked his car).

Versions about the origins of this funny-sounding word are as hilarious as the word itself and include everything from Yiddish slang for a thief and a Ukrainian word for a servant. But the most likely explanation is that some version of ухайдокать entered Russian in the Volga region from a Turkic language, where ajda is purportedly a cry used in a chase that means something like "onward."

Today in Russian айда — another funny word nomination — means "let's get going" or "we're out of here." Айда домой! (Let's hit the road home.) Айда гулять! (Come on — let's take a walk!)

Айда гулять — today? In this mud? Now that's a laugh.

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