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Russian Shows Its Sweet Side

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Спасибочки: thanky-wanky

Now that Victory Day hysteria has died down, I can get back to other obsessions, like the overuse of diminutives in Russian. Diminutives, you will recall, are words formed by the addition of various suffixes and infixes (syllables added within the word) to indicate affection, intimacy or the smallness and general adorableness of the object or action discussed.

Diminutives are fine when used purposefully. Кот is a tomcat; котик is a very sweet or very small tomcat, an affectionate name for a child or an endearment for a husband or dear friend who is being particularly sweet. When talking to small children, instead of offering them вода (water), you might say водичка (stress on middle syllable), as if anything meant for a child was automatically imbued with affection and sweetness. When feeling warm-hearted around the table, you might pour your friend not водка (vodka), but водочка (stress on first syllable), as if your feelings of good will extend to everything, including the bottle of fire-water.

But lately every other word seems to end in -ка or -ик, or have иш, ич, оч, or ел stuck in the middle of it. I'm not sure if this babyfication of Russian is a new trend, or if it's been around for a while and I just didn't notice it, or if it's not a thing at all but just an affectation of people I know. But it's driving me crazy.

In this language, people aren't люди, they are человечки (a plural made from the word человек — person). Человечек is perfectly fine word to describe a sweet human being, sometimes young, usually physically small: Полковник был маленьким, тщедушным человечком с нечистым лицом. (The colonel was a small, puny little man with a dirty face.) But it stinks of condescension when used in reference to anyone else: Ты такой хорошенький, добренький человечек! (You are such a nice and sweet little thing.)

In this version of Russian, food and drink are put through the baby-talk food mill. Dishes are not блюда, but вкусняшки (goodies, the word most often used to describe dog and cat treats) or нямки (tidbits). The meal is вкусненько (delish, from вкусно) or ням-ням (yummy). On the table is хлебушек (bread, from хлеб) and мяско (meat, from мясо). They pour шампусик (champagne, from шампанское), пивко (beer, from пиво), and винчик (wine, from вино). And they write about it on Twitter: Удачи в новом году! Спасибо за шампусик! Вот вопросик — когда к нам на всякие вкусняшки? (Best wishes for the new year. Thanks for the bubbly! And here's a Q for you — when are you coming over for something yummy-wummy?)

Desire is not желание, but хотелка (from the verb хотеть — to want). In the sanctity of a marriage — and of course only there — хотелка is a specific form of desire: Если муж уедет в командировку на полгода, хотелка умрёт. (If my hubby goes away on business for six months, I'll lose the urge.) In other contexts, хотелки are things you have a hankering for, like expensive watches or jewelry. Or like a new life: Вот мои хотелки: хочу поумнеть, хочу похудеть ... (Here's my wish-list: I wanna get smart, I wanna lose weight ...)

If you get them, the precious way to express gratitude is: спасибочки, спасибки, спасибоньки (a simpering "thanks"). And then you say good-bye: Покедова! (from пока — see you later).

To which I say: Меня тошнит! (I feel sick!)

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