The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Falling For Cheburashka

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

August 20, 2018

Alexander Scherbak / TASS

Чебурашка: Cheburashka

Last week when we heard that the writer Eduard Uspensky had passed away, we all began to reminisce about our favorite books and cartoons that he wrote, and our favorite Uspensky creatures. I'm rather partial to Крокодил Гена (Crocodile Gena), but everyone loves Чебурашка (Cheburashka), the odd little creature with big ears, big eyes, and no parents or siblings. And then someone wondered where the name came from.

Luckily for us, Uspensky wrote something of a Cheburashka origin myth for us. Once upon a time, a furry little creature lived happily in a tropical forest. One day this creature went for a stroll and happened upon an orange grove, and in the grove — a crate full of freshly-picked oranges. The creature loved oranges, so it climbed in, ate a couple and fell asleep. Sound asleep, it didn't notice when the workers nailed up the crate and loaded it on a ship. When the ship landed and the customer got the crate he ordered, he opened it to find no oranges but a very rotund little creature. He put it on the table, but it was so round and fat that it couldn't stand up: Он сидел, сидел, смотрел по сторонам, а потом взял да и чебурахнулся со стола на стул. Но и на стуле он долго не усидел — чебурахнулся снова. На пол. (It sat and sat, looked all around, and then toppled over from the table onto the chair. But it didn't sit long on the chair and toppled over again. Onto the floor.)

So the customer uses the verb pair чебурахаться/чебурахнуться (to fall down) to make up the name Чебурашка. The wonders of Russian word formation in action!

Чебурахаться is a rather slangy way of falling. The standard verb is упасть (to fall), which covers anything and anyone that/who is in one place one second and flat on the floor or ground the next. Он упал и сломал ногу (He fell and broke his leg.) It is the word used in all those dreadful school math and science questions: Рассчитайте, с какой высоты должна упасть капля воды, чтобы при ударе полностью испариться (Calculate the height that a drop of water must fall from in order to completely vaporize when it hits the ground.)

Of course, things can fall figuratively, too: Если цены на нефть упадут, придётся либо перекраивать бюджет, либо мириться с его дефицитом (If oil prices fall, we'll either have to cut the budget or make peace with a budget deficit.)

If you plop down, say, the way a 3-year-old does in a puddle — or a 45-year-old does after dinner — you can use the word плюхаться. Муж целует её в щеку, проходит в столовую и плюхается на диван (Her husband kisses her on the cheek, goes into the dining room and flops down on the couch.) Dogs do this, too, quite well: Моя собачка плюхается на пузо и лежит, отдыхает от прыжков (My dog plops down on her belly and lies there, taking a rest from her jumps.)

If you crash down loudly, that's грохаться. Актриса делает отчаянное лицо, закатывает глаза и грохается на пол (An expression of desperation appears on the face of the actress, who rolls her eyes back and crashes down to the floor.) For some reason, you can also use this word for falling into a faint, although that's usually a quiet process: Чего я, как слабонервная девица, все время грохаюсь в обморок? (How come I keep falling into a dead faint like some maiden with bad nerves?)

For a bit of onomatopoeia, you might use the wonderfully expressive бабахаться, also for crashing down loudly. Here is the perfective part of the verb pair бабахнуться, used for what is clearly a one-time-only event: Он с такой силой бабахнулся в реку, что брызги долетели до обоих берегов (He crashed into the river so hard that the spray hit both shores.)

If you fall heavily, but not necessarily loudly — I tell you, these verbs are for every possible descent — you might use the verb pair сваливаться/свалиться. Пришёл домой с работы и свалился в кресло (He came home from work and plunked himself down in an armchair.) Or it might be used to describe a circus act: С клоунов сваливались штаны (The clowns' pants were falling down.) And it can also be used figuratively: После последнего звонка на тебя сваливается свобода, и многие просто не могут понять, что с ней делать (After you graduate from school, freedom crashes down on you, and a lot of kids just don't know what to do with it.)

In this case, I can only go back to where we started, and suggest that recent graduates follow the example of Чебурашка: чебурахаться, наесться апельсинами и заснуть (plunk yourself down, eat too many oranges and fall asleep).

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/08/20/falling-for-cheburashka-a62586