

Don't Call Me That!

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Дамочка: lady, old crow, broad

It was late and cold. I was carrying a heavy bag and tired. I wanted to go home. When the taxi pulled up, I shoved my bag on the floor, got in, said Добрый вечер! (Good evening!) and shut the door. The cabbie growled: “Зачем так сильно хлопать дверью?” (Why did you slam the door so hard?)

I sat in the back seat, silent, wondering if I did slam the door hard. In general, I’m not a door slammer.

The cabbie didn't wait for my response. "Ну вот. Капризная дамочка. Этого еще не хватало" (Great. A picky old crow. Just what I need.)

I should have just gotten out of the cab, but I desperately wanted to get home. So, I spent the trip thinking of all the names I don't like to be called.

Дамочка is right up there. It is a vulgar and dismissive word, what you might call someone from the lower classes putting on airs. Она считала тетю Лиду слишком вызывающей, "дамочкой с гонором" (She thought Aunt Lida was too brash — "a broad with attitude.")

I wouldn't like to be дама (lady) either. Today it has the connotation of an older imposing woman, someone a little scary and intimidating — you know, an old lady in a hat and good wool coat, clutching a handbag. That's not me. There is often a snarky "who do you think you are?" undertone to the use of the word: Через пару дней наткнулась на даму, которая подправляла макияж прямо в поезде (A few days later I bumped into that old crow who had been fixing her make-up right there in the train.)

Then there is the trinity of тётя, тётка and тётенька — all forms of "aunt" or "auntie." Of them, тётя is fine. That's the word used most often for someone's either actual aunt or family friend who has auntie rights. I am Тётя Мики (Aunt Mickey) to lots of small children. Тётя is also okay when said by an unknown small person, like the friend of the kids at the dacha who can't remember my name: Тётя, дайте, пожалуйста, йогурт. In English, a child probably would not use any kind of name: Excuse me, can I have a yogurt please?

Тётка is another matter entirely. Тётка is an old gal, a broad, a dame, an old biddy. Formidable, bossy, and ill-tempered. As one magazine has it: Худшее, что может случиться с женщиной, — это превращение в тётку (The worst thing that can happen to a woman is to turn into an old biddy.) Or so they say.

Тётенька is on a case-by-case basis. Sometimes it's sweet, like when a small child calls to you: Тётенька! Вы уронили платок! (Lady! You dropped your handkerchief!) But most of the time тётенька is just an anonymous older woman, unremarkable and unmemorable. They are the museum ladies — properly called смотрительницы — тётеньки, кричащие "руками не трогать" и "не фотографировать" (the old biddies screaming "don't touch!" and "no photography!") Or any woman не первой молодости (not in her first youth).

Actually, that's always puzzled me. If there is a first youth, is there also a second and third?

In general, I'm not crazy about being called an animal or bird. Тёлка (calf) and корова (cow) should be reserved for the four-legged beasts. Once in a bar I heard some guys say something like this: "Ну мы долго сидели, не знали, как подкатить к тёлкам..." (We sat there for a long time, trying to figure out how to approach the cows.) Cows should definitely look for greener pastures.

Корова (cow) is a fat or slovenly or low-class or boorish woman — or any combination thereof. Sometimes it's just a hardy and healthy woman. Curiously, in English, this is another beast: Екатерина вообще никогда не болеет, она корова железная (Yekaterina never gets sick — she's healthy as a horse.)

Курица or курочка (hen) is a bit confusing. Some people say a hen is домохозяйка, которая ни о чем не думает, а только о борще для мужа и пирожках для детей (a homemaker who doesn't think of anything but making borsch for her husband and little pies for her children). But others say that курочка ты моя (my little chicken) is what a husband says when his wife says or does something he considers stupid or silly.

And finally, of course I loathe all of the б words — all the forms of баба (woman) like бабёнка, бабец, бабища — although they are usually not used to address someone but rather used to describe them — and the other very obscene б word. There is a myth that you don't hear this in the city unless you are slumming it, but I've been called that on my doorstep.

In the taxi, by the time I got home, I had not only gone through my repertory of nasty names for women, I'd come up with a few I wanted to call the cabbie — especially when he held out his hand for the fare and said: Без сдачи! (Exact fare!)

I didn't want to say: Я дам без сдачи (I'll give you the exact fare, literally “without change”). I wanted to say: Я щас дам сдачи (I'll give it you!)

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