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The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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The problem of spending evenings with The Great Authors, as I do, or with a lot of dogs and dog walkers of every age, as I also do, is that your language begins to settle at two ends of the style spectrum: either very literary or very silly. On the silly side, I have to admit that I have on many occasions used the word хоросий, which is the super saccharine version of хороший (good) used for anything small and cute.

Given this situation, I like to expand my Russian linguistic horizons now and then by investigating the new words entering the language.

Of course, most of those words are from English and all I have to do is learn how to say them with a Russian accent and sometimes in slightly different contexts. Be that as it may, here is a collection of just some of the words that you hear around town, even if you can't find them in the dictionaries yet.

First up, anglicisms. What is interesting about these borrowings is how they reflect primarily local American obsessions. I blame movies and music.

Take хайп (hype), which replaces the perfectly good Russian words шумиха (aa big deal, a lot of noise over something) and ажиотаж (commotion). This also has the verb хайпить (to hype smthg). Весь этот хайп вокруг кино сошёл на нет за неделю. (All that hype over the film was over in a week.)

Or хейтер (hater), хейтерство (hatred), and even хейтерс гонна хейт (haters gonna hate). In Russian this is mostly used in the internet or rap context — rapper Oxxxymiron has a song called Я хейтер (I'm a Hater). But it is very close in meaning to ненавистник (hater), although the Russian word might be a bit more general and the borrowed English word a bit more narrow in subject matter.

On the other end of the emotional spectrum is чилить (to chill) which in Russian has more of the sense of relaxing, doing nothing, hanging out than "take it easy." Сегодня давай просто почилим. Ничего не хочу делать. (Let's just chill today. I don't feel like doing anything.)

But don't get upset — не кипятись! (literally don't blow your top, i.e., boil over!) — if you want someone to take it easy, you just say: изи (easy). Really. Often you hear it as Изи-изи, рил ток, синк эбаут ит (easy-easy, real talk, think about it) from another famous Russian rap баттл (battle) between Oxxxymiron and Gnoiny (Гнойный — putrid).

Apparently, body image stuff has wended its way to Russia's shores with бодишейминг (body shaming) and the opposite, бодипозитив (body positivity). This is, to my mind, totally redundant, since two seconds in a Russian bathhouse is all you need to see that Russians celebrate the body — any size or shape — joyfully and wholeheartedly. But maybe these are just convenient, albeit unwieldly, names for what folks already know: Новую рекламу ресторана "Тануки" раскритиковали из-за бодишейминга (The new Tanuki restaurant ad was criticized for body shaming.) Всякое тело прекрасно — основная мысль, которую хотят донести адепты движения бодипозитив. (Every body is lovely — that's the main idea behind the body positive movement.)

There are two shortened or short borrowings that are used quite widely these days. Сорян — English "sorry" meets an Armenian last name — is just a slightly fey way of saying извини (sorry). I have no idea why it appeared, but there you are.

And then there's ноуп (nope) which I suppose is like the borrowing вау (wow). I think this just comes from watching too many movies.

But Russian teens and some of their older compatriots do invent or remake Russian words, too. There are some short forms that I thought were passing fads but seem to be sticking around.

Оч is short for очень (much, a lot). English speakers say real for really; Russians say оч for очень. На автобус пришлось вставать оч рано - часов в пять утра (I had to get up real early to catch the bus, like five a.m.) Лан (from ладно — fine) means sure, okay, I agree. Лан, пойду с тобой (Yeah, okay, I'll go with you.)

And then there is my favorite шмот, which is a short version of the slang шмотка (piece of clothing, rag), a word that has been around forever since it is the Russian version of the Yiddish shmatte, a word known by every soul who ever lived or put their foot in New York City. "Did you see that shmatte she was wearing?"

In Russian the slightly older generation says, "Мы ходили на вещевой рынок, купили всякие шмотки" (We went to the bazaar and bought all kinds of stuff to wear). The younger generation says "Я купила топовый шмот" (I bought a real great outfit.")

Finally, there is the short form пасибо (спасибо — thank you), which is a bit cute, but not a cute as хоросий.

Russian criminal slang continues to infiltrate Russian — from cop shows? — with, for example, зашквар (something disgraceful, weird, incredibly unfashionable). The noun apparently comes from camp slang зашквариться (to disgrace oneself). Older folks say Ужас! (Awful!) Teens say Зашквар! (Sick!) Видел её новый фильм? Зашквар! (You see her new film? Piece of crap!)

Finally, there are two words that you shouldn't mix up. Жусть is a mash-up of the slang word жесть (awful, terrible, tough) and the non-slang word жуть (awful), and seems to mean really, really bad. На улице просто жусть: ветер и снег с дождём (The weather was, like, unbelievably crappy — wind, snow and rain).

The other is жиза, a short version of жизнь (life), and mostly used in the sense of "that's life." Мы не успели на концерт. Эх, жиза! (We didn't make it to the concert. That's life, I guess.) One of my older Russian friends combines the Russian такова жизнь with the French c'est la vie to produce: такова се ля ви.

Which is what I think about новояз (newspeak). Can't fight it: такова се ля ви.

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