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Muttering and Grousing the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Walt Disney Productions

Зануда: a bore, pest, downer

You know this person. It's the old guy who lives on the 4th floor and can be heard grumbling under his breath as he looks through his mail on the way to the lift. Or the coworker who yammers to herself at her computer, before cracking her knuckles and starting to type. Or — heaven forbid — your mother- or father-in-law, the master mutterer who mumbles and grumbles on the way out the kitchen after watching you cook. Mutterers and grumblers — the folks who invented passive-aggressive.

Now I'm not saying that Russia is the homeland of grumbling, but I will say there are some great Russian words to describe it and the grumblers. Here are some of my favorites.

First of all is бормотать (to mumble, mutter), which is a rather neutral verb that describes

anyone's quiet, indistinct muttering. In my experience — and memory of my own youth — teenagers are superb practitioners of this art. Conversation over breakfast: Parental figure: У тебя что ли завтра контрольная по математике? (Is it tomorrow you have a math quiz?) Teenage offspring: Да выучил я, ⊠ бормочет он. ("Yeah, I got it," he mumbles.) The mumbling is a bad sign. Parental figure: А русский сделал? ("Did you do your Russian homework?")

Another kind of muttering is бубнить, which is to yammer, mumble, or drone on, usually quietly and in a monotone. Sometimes things can do this: Радио у нас забрали ⊠ чтоб прислушивались к звукам тишины за окном, а не к тому, что оно бубнило (They took away our radio so that we would listen to the sounds of silence outside and not what it was droning on about.)

But most of the time бубнить is done by people, who are discontented or obsessed or both. Всю дорогу до дома моя бабушка всё бубнила и бубнила обиженно (My grandmother, miffed, grumbled and grumbled all the way home.) The reason people go on and on is that no one is really paying attention to them. После третьего дубля Юлия стала нервничать и приставать к Павлу, бубня о перерасходе плёнки (After the third take Yulia started to get nervous and began to bug Pavel, nattering on and on about going over the quota for film stock.)

Similar to бубнить is бухтеть, which is a bit slangier to my ear but depicts the same kind of monotonous running on at the mouth. It can be neutral or even almost positive: Сидим в своем фойе, бухтим о разных вещах (We're sitting in our foyer, yakking about everything under the sun.) But it's more likely to be on the negative side: За дверью бухтел тихий мужской голос, и время от времени коротко откликалась женщина (Behind the door a quiet male voice droned on and on, while a woman responded from time to time).

Ныть is when something aches or someone bellyaches. It's the word you use when you stub your toe or need to go to the dentist. Зуб ноет. (I have a toothache.) It's also used for heartache: В душе у неё ныло от смутной горечи и недоумения (Her heart ached with dull pain and confusion.)

Sometimes it can describe a whining sound: Ныли в воздухе немецкие самолёты (German planes whined overhead.) But most of the time it describes people who whine and complain. Жена всё время ноет, что она толстая (My wife keeps whining about how fat she is.) В усталости Макс ныл, очень долго и утомительно (Max, exhausted, groused long and tediously).

Нытьё is grousing, complaining, whining. It even sounds a bit like a whine, doesn't it? Начала с ностальгического нытья ⊠ тоскует по бородинскому хлебу (She began to pine nostalgically — how she longed for Borodinsky bread.) But: Отец не терпел нытья (Her father didn't put up with any bellyaching.)

Ворчать is also a kind of mumbling and grumbling, only more insistent, aggressive and annoying. It's more like carping, bitching, or kvetching. You wish it would be over, but sometimes even that doesn't make things pleasant: Перестал ворчать и просто сидел с кислой рожей (He stopped griping and just sat there, the sourpuss.)

Someone who does this kind of griping is ворчун. In many cases, this is associated with curmudgeons. Я чувствую себя старым ворчуном, который всем портит настроение (I feel like one of those grumpy old codgers who spoils everyone's mood.) Of course, for some people there are different associations: Коренные москвичи ворчуны и стукачи (Native Muscovites are killjoys and stoolies.)

And then there is the lovely verb брюзжать, which is even a bit more annoying than ворчать, perhaps one step higher in the droning, complaining, crabby department. For reasons I cannot quite fathom, it seems to have been used a lot to describe those who were unhappy with the state of things after the 1917 Revolution. Были такие, которые брюзжали, критиковали, но ни один не был по существу против власти (There were those who grumbled and criticized, but not a single one of them was actually against the government.) But it also is used to describe people who just aren't happy with life: Тяжелый у нее оказался характер, вечно брюзжит по мелочам (It turned out that she had a miserable personality, always grousing over little things.)

Someone who does a lot of this is called брюзга: Он был тихим, безобидным алкоголиком. Правда, редким брюзгой. Ему всё не нравилось (He was a quiet, inoffensive alcoholic. He was, however, a spectacular curmudgeon. He hated everything.)

Finally, when speaking about annoying behavior, you must know the adjective нудный, which describes someone or something that is boring, tedious, annoying, and irritating. This might be a bit of a disappointment: Работа на кухне оказалась довольно нудной, никаких специализированных знаний там вовсе не требовалось (The work in the kitchen turned out to be terribly dull and didn't require any special knowledge at all.) Or it could be something that drives you mad: Меня пустили на концерт, но только после долгого и нудного разговора (They let me into the concert, but only after a long and mind-numbing conversation.)

A person who is this way — a deadly combination of boring, tedious, and annoying — is зануда. This is a pest, a downer, a pain, a nitpicker, a bore, a sourpuss, and a fussbudget. The зануда is both insufferable and indefatigable. You want to shout: Перестань хныкать. Какая ты зануда! (Stop your bellyaching! You are such a downer!)

If you're wondering: Yes, of course this is the Slavic relative of the Yiddish nudnik (a pest, an annoying nag, a monumental bore.)

May you never meet one or be one.

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