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Watch What You Call That Old Woman

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Vladimir Smirnov / TASS

Старая карга: termagant, old bat

In honor of International Women's Day on March 8, I thought I'd investigate ways to talk about the older women in our lives. If you paid attention to words for older men — there's always a pop quiz when you're not expecting it — the first part will be easy, since the same terminology is used for older women as it is for older men.

So, for example, say your business meeting has just ended and you head for the bus stop: Выхожу, вижу: стоит интересная женщина, правда, в летах (I go out and see an attractive woman standing there, although she is, to be honest, getting on in years). В летах (in years) is a pleasant way of describing the older generation — although if the speaker is 18 years old, his idea of "getting on in years" might be age 32.

Be that as it may, пожилая женщина (an older woman); женщина в преклонном возрасте (a woman in her later years), дама в почтенных летах (a lady in advanced years) are all polite ways to describe an older woman.

A very old woman is старуха, the mate (we hope) of старик (old man). As far as I can tell, many decades ago this word used to be neutral. But now it is rather crude. Much nicer is старушка, but even then, use with care. Гуляют в парке старики и старушки (Old men and women take strolls in the park) is something you might say to your friend, but maybe not in the presence of the person you consider старушка. And never use the word to describe a young woman: Лет ей ещё не было так много, чтобы глядели как на старуху, но набрякшие щёки, хилые губки, морщины ⊠ всё было старушечье (She wasn't yet old enough for people to consider her an old lady, but her puffy cheeks, thin lips and wrinkles were all old-womanish).

The diminutive старушонка (old dear) is also a bit tricky. In some cases, it's rather affectionate: На длинной скамье сидели нарядные бабы и старушонки (Women and old ladies in their finery were sitting on a long bench). But there can be a bit of condescension or pity in the attitude of the speaker with this word, too: Кто-то потрогал меня за плечо ⊠ я посмотрел: какая-то несчастная старушонка глядела на меня, морщась от жалостных слёз (Someone touched my shoulder. I looked and saw a rather pathetic old dear watching me, her face screwed up with pitiful tears).

Another word for a very old woman is старушенция. It has the sense of being truly ancient with a slightly negative connotation most of the time. Старушенция? – дед расхохотался. – Не вздумай в глаза ей сказать «старушенция» ("A relic?" Grandpa hooted with laughter. "Better not call her a 'relic' to her face!")

Then there is бабка and her best friends: бабушка, бабуся, бабуня, бабулька. One of the meanings of бабка is a grandmother, and you can safely use any of these words when addressing or talking about your actual granny. But these days, do not use them to describe an older woman you are not related to. A friend with some gray in her hair was telling me that as she was standing in line waiting for a clerk to wrap some cheese for her, a young woman behind her said, Когда вы закончите обслуживать бабулю, дайте мне кусок чеддера (When you're done serving the old lady, give me a piece of cheddar). My friend spun around and, like the Prophetess of Doom, asked: «Что вы говорили»? (What did you say?) And then she unleashed on her a thorough and loud lecture on grammar and propriety. The young woman learned her lesson.

Having said that, you might hear it said by older folks, or people who live out in the country, in a way that is not offensive. Все бабки собрались, готовили подарки для школьников (All the old gals got together and made gifts for the schoolkids).

And you can use it — or can hear it used — to describe a particular kind of older woman: nasty, perhaps unkempt, perhaps odd in some way. One of my informants says she would only use the word to describe a fat older woman, but other people disagreed. Всегда нас встречали у двери какие-то злобные бабки (Some mean old bats always met us at the door).

Бабка also has the specific meaning of a folk healer or seer. A friend was telling us that she

suspected her husband was seeing another woman. We have all known about the affair for years, so when she asked if she ought to consult a бабка, we said: Ситуация-то прозрачна - к бабке ходить не надо! (The situation is crystal clear. You don't need a fortune teller!)

And finally, you might hear — but probably should not say — бабка used to describe a young woman. But pay close attention to context, since бабки can also be slang for money: Рассказывал, что на пороге своего тридцатилетия, он, как и многие, начал задумываться о смысле жизни: «Бабок куча, а всё равно тоска» (He told us that on the verge of turning 30 he, like many others, began to think about the meaning of life: "I've got lots of cash, but I'm depressed anyway.")

And then there are five colorful words and phrases to describe older women, one for sweet old dears and four for nasty old bats.

Божий одуванчик (literally God's dandelion) is a charming but rather condescending phrase to describe an older woman who is physically and/or psychologically a bit airy-fairy. Imagine a cloud of thinning hair and a distracted manner. Какая-то старушка, божий одуванчик, сидела на скамье и смотрела в пустое пространство перед собой (An old lady, a bit vague and moth-eaten, was sitting on a bench, staring into the middle distance.)

The four nasty old ladies have colorful names. The most obscure but expressive is старая перечница (literally old pepper pot) — an old woman who is sharp-tongued, feisty, and peppery. The neighbor lady who is not shy about putting any of us in our place for minor transgressions, like letting the front door slam shut, is the local старая перечница (grumpy old lady).

There are two somewhat uncommon nasty old dames, both spelled with the letter ы, which some of my language informants thought had generally unpleasant connotations: грымза and хрычовка. I've had a hard time determining how a грымза differs from a хрычовка. Both are defined as women с плохим характером (with miserable personalities). Perhaps хрычовка, which is derived from the word for oinking, is louder and more boisterous, and perhaps грызма, which is derived from the word for chewing or cutting up, is more of a moaner and groaner. But in any case, both are the kind of complaining, whining, nasty and unhappy old women you hope not to become or marry. Дочь называла мать «хрычовкой», старуха парировала удары, применяя слова, для печати не всегда пригодные (The girl called her mother "you old cat," but the old lady would come back with a retort using words that were not always fit to print). Я для неё ⊠ вечный судья, какая-то старая грымза-гувернантка (To her I'm the constant judge, like a carping old biddy governess).

And last but certainly not least is perhaps the most aggressive of the nasty old birds: старая карга. This is probably the most commonly used phrase for a nasty piece of work these days. Sometimes you can see the future карга in a younger woman: Молодость её уже являла черты будущей старухи ⊠ в двадцать пять Маргарита была карга (Youth was already revealing the qualities of the future old lady: at age 25 Margarita was a battle-axe).

I personally aspire to become старая карга, the kind of old lady who scolds teenagers for tossing their empty beer bottles in snowdrifts and calls the cops on drivers whose parked cars block me in.

Wait – я уже старая карга! (I'm already an ill-tempered old shrew!)

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