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My Sweet Little Buggie-Wuggie

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Пупсик: poppet, kewpie doll, sweetheart

I think there is one thing we can all agree on: Russian affectionate diminutives (уменьшительно-ласкательные слова) are fabulous. Take any word, pack it with as many soft, sibilant, sweetie-pie syllables as your heart desires, and you get a mouthful of the most expressive, loving adorableness in the world. The little wriggling fur thing with a wet nose is not собака (dog), it's собачоночка. Your neighbor's daughter isn't Наталья (Natalia), she's Натусик. And you don't have дитя (child), you have детка or деточка.

The most saccharine of the consonant clusters form endings like -очка, -ечка; -ушка-, -юшка-; -ец-, -иц- -онька, -енька; -уль; -уля; and -ка. Солнце (sun) becomes солнышко; дочь (daughter) becomes доченька; лапа (paw or any small sweet creature) becomes лапуля, лапусик, лапуленька.

Children are the recipients of the greatest outpouring of adorable diminution, to the point where I wonder how they ever learn their names. One of the first sounds a baby used to hear — and sometimes still hears — is агу, defined charmingly as a sound meant to make a baby smile. Cooing агу even has its own verb — of course it does — although it appears rather obscure these days: гунить/агунить. Now it seems a bit old-fashioned, judging by one person's comments to a newborn: Итак, сыночек, агу, агу, как почему-то говорили в старину мамы и бабушки (So, my son, goo-goo, as mamas and grammas used to say in the old days for some unknown reason). But it hasn't disappeared entirely: Мой муж склонился над сыном и сказал: «Агу-агу!» (My husband leaned over our son and said: Goo-goo-goo).

Another classic what-to-call-the-baby is пупсик. Dictionaries inform me that it's either from the German Puppe or the French poupée, both meaning a baby doll. Sometimes пупсик is just a child's doll in Russian: В коробке из-под торта лежали пупсики ◙ и советские, и редкие немецкие, и привезенные не так давно из Франции (An old cake box held kewpie dolls: Soviet ones, rare German dolls, and dolls brought from France not long ago). A doll is still fastened to the front grill of Just Married cars as a kind of modern-day fertility idol: У нас всё было: и фата, и машина с пупсиком, и загс (We went the whole nine yards: veil, car with a kewpie doll tied to it, and the Registry Hall). But mostly пупсик is your adorable child, or someone who longs to be your adorable significant other: Привет, это я, твой пупсик, ◙ входя, сказал Саша ("Hi, it's me — your babycakes," Sasha said as he walked in).

An interesting term of affection is бусинка (bead) — something small, bright, shiny, and pretty. In English we might use another small item used in clothing: Ты моя бусинка (You are as cute as a button!) In Russian, having bright bead-like eyes is a good thing; you look like a sweet little hamster or bright-eyed bird. Её глаза-бусинки весело вскинулись мне навстречу (Her cheery bright black eyes raised to meet me). But in English, having beady eyes is a bad thing; they are eyes that glitter with malice, avarice or lechery: The gambler gave the newcomer a beady-eyed look.

Beauty is, as ever, in the (beady) eye of the beholder.

Beauty is, indeed, a mystery. Two other terms of affection are, well, insects. Yes, what English-speakers call creepy crawly things, Russians call their beloved children. Букашка is a little bug or an adorable child. Спи, спи букашечка моя (Go to sleep now, little bug). Букашка is also the folk name for the beloved trolleybus B (Tram A was called Аннушка (Annushka), which you all remember from Mikhail Bulgakov's novel "Master and Margarita.") Of course, context and tone are everything, so sometimes a bug is just a bug: Знаешь что, она растопчет его как букашку (You know what? She'll squash him like a bug).

The other sweet insect is козявка (beetle), which like its brother букашка derives its meaning and connotation from the context. Очень тяжело быть гением среди козявок (It's really hard to be a genius among insects). Моя козявочка была одета в красивом красном платьице (My little babykins was dressed in a pretty little red dress.)

That's just the warm-up. Now you can fling open the floodgates of names to call your child. Baby birds, fish, and other animals and their cute body parts are a good start: рыбка (little fishy); зайка (bunnykins); лапуля (little paw); котик (kitty cat); медвежонок (bear cub); ласточка (swallow).

If little Borya has chubby cheeks, call him хомячок (baby hamster from хомяк, hamster) or щёчка (cheeky, from щёки, cheeks). Plump little kids are карапузик (actually another beetle — the black beetle — but also a tubby little one); пухлик (puffy, from пух, down); or пончик (donut). So cute you could just eat 'em up, right?

If your child is small and cute, call him or her малыш or малышка (little one); милаш or милашка (sweetie); сладусик (sweetheart, from сладкий sweet); любимка (beloved); золотой/золотая (golden boy/girl); солнечный/солнечная (sunny); малявка (small fry); крошка or крошечка (teeny tiny, from крошка, crumb); or гугушка (goo-goo) when the little пупсик starts making sounds.

Now let's say that adorable little child of yours has some less than adorable habits. No problem! You can turn their behavioral problems into sweet-sounding nicknames: вреднюлечка (bad news, a handful, from вредный, troublesome); капризулечка (little fuss-budget, from капризный, fussy, cranky); свинюшка (piggy, from свинья, pig); грязнуля (mucky-wuck, from грязный, dirty); or замарашка (pigpen, from замараться, to get dirty). One of my friends called her neighbor's son мешалкин (Mr. Pesky, from мешать, to bother) because he was always underfoot and in the way.

And now, if you'll excuse me, I have to go practice 12-syllable endearments.

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