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The Short History of a Nasty Word

The Word's Worth

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Evgeny Nelmin / unsplash

Жлоб: a crude, rude cheapskate

This week I stumbled upon one of those language questions that send me down the rabbit hole for days: How do you translate the word жлоб into English?

Now, жлоб is a mighty fine word. It has more or less two definitions: большой, сильный, толстый, туповатый человек (a big, strong, fat, dim-witted person) and жадина, скряга (a greedy person, a cheapskate). "More or less" because the more people I asked, the more variations I got, although they all involved unpleasant, coarse and usually cheap people. Basically, you don't want to be called a жлоб.

To come up with the best translation, I thought I ought to find out where the word came from. Ha! Like this was going to be easy. I first discovered that it was claimed by Odessans as derived

from the English word “job.” In this version, it appeared when the Odessa port was being built and managed by English speakers, and somehow “job” meaning “work” morphed into “жлоб” meaning a “worker,” which then morphed into a worker from the village, a boor, a rube.

This seemed like a big stretch to me, especially because I can’t think why the hard “j” sound turned into zh and where that “l” came from.

Commentators on a language forum agreed. One person indignantly claimed it was a Ukrainian word that had appeared from Polish in the 15th century. Others supported this version. The problem is that none of these commentators apparently spoke Ukrainian or Polish. I have a bit of Ukrainian and about 15 words of Polish, most of them names of food. Not useful. But I did find the Polish word żłób, which means a crib, a manger, a trough for horses and cattle. The Russian cognate жёлоб is a gutter, channel or furrow. Not feeling the cretin vibe here.

Another source gives the slang meaning of żłób as a blockhead, clod, or dimwit. I suppose a wooden trough could be a metaphor for a thick dimwit. But I can’t find confirmation.

But any word of undetermined origin in Polish, Ukrainian, “Odessan” and Russian always makes me think of Yiddish. So, I checked in my Yiddish-English dictionary... and found it: Zhlob or zhlub: an oaf, yokel, bumpkin; an ill-mannered person; a clumsy, graceless person. Great, right? Wrong. It came to Yiddish from the Slavic languages, not the other way around.

Yet another armchair etymologist maintained that жлоб, like the word жадина (greedy person) and another handful of words such as жмот (a cheapskate), all come from the verb жмать, a dialectical form of жать (to squeeze, hold tightly, wring, reap) and жаться (to be stingy). Now this sounds possible, if only because English words for being cheap are also connected to this image: penny-pincher, tight, tight-fisted.

But I still could not find anything more than speculation. So, I did what I always do when all else fails: Get out the Gorodin Dictionary of prison and camp language and slang.

And there it was.

In prison, Gorodin writes, жлоб was a prisoner who was not a member of a band and did not understand camp life. In other prisons and other times, it meant a villager, peasant worker; a cheap person; and a tall and strong man. It turns out that жмот is also camp slang.

So, all these various definitions of жлоб in various camps left the camps when the men were released. These former prisoners brought their various understandings of жлоб with them — and they now make up the modern definition of жлоб: a big, strong, cheap man who is not the sharpest knife in the drawer.

Next question: what’s the best translation? In my idiolect, I’d call this kind of person a cretin, especially because being cheap or shortchanging someone is definitely cretinous behavior. But that’s just me, and it's not always the best translation.

When the emphasis is on being cheap and greedy, there are lots of possibilities: Не будь жлобом - купи жене шубу (Don’t be a cheapskate — buy your wife a fur coat). Пусть я

жлоб, зато долгов у меня нет (I might be a tightwad, but I don't owe anyone money). Не платит алименты – нечего было замуж выходить за такого жлоба (He doesn't pay alimony — she shouldn't have married that skinflint).

When the emphasis is more on coarseness, you can use lout, boor, pushy son-of-a-bitch, a rude jerk, etc.: Жлоб же почитает пупом земли одного только себя - и делает это не только открыто, но и нагло (This kind of low-life thinks that he alone is the center of the universe, and he's not just open about it, he's in-your-face open about it). Какой-то жлоб оставил машину на трамвайных путях, превратив кольцо конечной остановки в тупик (Some a-hole parked his car on the tram tracks, which turned the end stop circle into a dead end).

And when the emphasis is more on stupidity, there is a long list of options to choose from: dimwit, numbskull, chowderhead, blockhead, etc.: Высшее образование может получить любой жлоб (Any bonehead can get a higher education).

With жлобы, the possibilities are endless.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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