

Chowing Down the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Sander Dalhuisen / unsplash

Хавать хочу: I wanna eat

When you are on a diet — сидеть на диете — it's best not to flip through cookbooks, click on Instagram recipes, or read anything that makes you salivate like one of Pavlov's dogs. You must not, for example, read about много пельмешек, маленьких, ладненьких, кругленьких (many little meat dumplings — small, perfectly formed, round little dumplings) and what a good eater did to them: уплетал, умял, захавал — wait, what? He braided them, kneaded them, drank them? That can't be right!

And of course it isn't. Since we've been talking about dieting, I thought we should also talk about the opposite — eating a lot, with gusto. Russians have so many words for this, slangy and staid, that you'd think they were, I dunno, good eaters or something.

In the list above, хавать/захавать is a bit of an outsider — apparently from the Roma language, it's a verb pair that means eating or drinking. But among the many other informal, slangy, everyday words for chowing down, I was most intrigued by two categories: the y-verbs — уписывать, уминать, уплетать — and the beat verbs — трескать, лопать, наворачивать, рубать.

If you look in a dictionary for meanings of y as a verbal prefix, you will start moaning at #7 and running screaming from the room by # 12. The prefix y indicates departure, as in уберать (to run away); making smaller, as in урезать (to prune); maintaining a status, as in усидеть (to keep sitting); or increasing by a certain amount, as in удвоить (to double). The list goes on and on with meanings that bear no discernible relation to one another.

One of the meanings is to do something to completion, and perhaps that's why three verbs with very different meanings all have the same slang meaning of gobbling down food.

Уписывать has a “standard” meaning of covering something with writing: Целая страница была уписана какими-то знаками, цифрами и буквами нерусской азбуки (The entire page was covered with all sorts of figures, numbers and letters that weren't from the Russian alphabet). But when food is involved, it means to dig in: Разорвали буханки и принялись уписывать хлеб с колбасой (They tore the loaves of bread into pieces and began to scarf down bread and sausage).

Уминать/умять can mean to knead something thoroughly, to pack something down or to put away. You can do this with objects: Лётчик уминал табак в трубке (The pilot tamped down the tabaco in his pipe). Or you can do it with food, sometimes by yourself in a nice restaurant, just because: В полном одиночестве я уминал бутерброды с икрой, пил кофе и шампанское (In total solitude I devoured bread and caviar with coffee and champagne).

Уплетать/уплести can mean to braid together, to walk slowly, plod along; or to gobble up food. These days it seems that the consuming food usage is most prevalent: Приятели уплетали горячие чебуреки с холодным пивом (The friends snarfed down hot fried meat pies and washed them down with cold beer).

We leave behind all this plaiting, plodding, kneading and writing with the next set of verbs. They are mostly about beating, hitting, striking, or cutting, but at the table they mean to eat a lot, quickly, with great appetite.

Рубать is to cut, as in what folks in uniforms did during battles ✘ рубать пашкой (to cut someone down with a sword). But in other circumstances it's not an invitation to a beheading, but a chance to enjoy a meal: Пошли рубать, ✘ сказал он, ✘ время обеда (“Come on and have a bite,” he said, “It's lunchtime.”)

Трескать can mean to whack, strike or crack something. In the kitchen or around the picnic table it has the sense of eating or drinking heartily. In dictionaries it's noted as vulgar usage, but it seems quite common. A parent might say: Умывайся да садись трескать! (Wash up, sit down and tuck in.) With an older child, the parent might say: Этот тип будет жить с ней и трескать её водку (That guy is going to live with her and guzzle down her vodka).

With лопать you might think of лопаться (to burst, pop), which is what you feel like you're

going to do after shoveling down a lot of food quickly. У меня девчонка с утра плотно лопаёт, а в школе ничего не ест ☒ говорит, что там, кроме булки с чаем, ничего съедобного нет (My little girl really gobbles it down in the morning, but she doesn't eat anything in school. She says that other than the tea and bun, the rest is inedible). She might be right. Or maybe she's just overly fussy. Try telling her: Лопай, что дают (Eat what they give you).

Наворачивать can mean to roll or pile up something, which is a bit like what you do at the table when you're really hungry: Людка наполнила две тарелки всеми закусками сразу, поставила перед ребятами, и те сосредоточенно принялись наворачивать (Right away Lyuda filled two plates with all the starters and put them in front of the boys, who methodically applied themselves to wolfing it down).

If these verbs aren't sufficiently colorful for you, you might add one of two very striking expressions. За обе щеки (literally "for both cheeks") describes eating with gusto, digging in, and filling up. Прошу вас, не стесняйтесь, можете уплетать за обе щеки (Don't be shy, just dig in). Уплетая суп за обе щеки, Валентин умудрялся ещё и отвечать на её вопросы (As he gulped down his soup, Valentin somehow managed to answer her questions).

Or someone can munch so hard that his jaw cracks. That doesn't seem fun or even possible, but if you chew very energetically, your jawbone might make a popping sound. Or so they say. In any case, it makes for a vivid expression: за ушами трещит (literally "it cracks behind the ears"). You might say it when your child comes to the dacha after completing the school year: Через неделю ко мне приехал ребенок, спящий по 12 часов подряд и евший так, что за ушами трещало (A week later my son came to visit, sleeping for 12 hours straight and eating like there's no tomorrow).

The thing is, all these verbs and expressions are so vibrant and appetizing, you want to use all them at once:

Население земного шара уже много тысячелетий жуёт, глотает, лопаёт, поглощает, трескает, рубает, уплетает, уписывает, уминает, наворачивает! (For many millennia the population of the earth has been chewing, swallowing, munching, devouring, wolfing down, tucking into, chowing down, putting away, gobbling up and digging in.)

Why stop now?

Sound production by Yanina Sorokina and music "Хорошо" by Naadia.

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