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A Curly Healthy Biting Hello

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Клёво: cool, great, fab, super

When things are good, you exclaim: Хорошо! When things are good and you are too young to legally drink you exclaim: Клёво! If you want, you can exclaim it when you're old enough to drink or even get a pension — but the word does have a young vibe.

So where does the word "клёво" come from?

The first explanation I found is that it is a Russified borrowing from the English word "clever" that appeared via Soviet hippies (хиппи) in the 1970s. In this version клёвый чувак was a smart, talented, clever guy.

The main problem with this version — other than failing to explain how "clever" morphed into "cool, stylish, fun, and special" — is that the word was first noted in a Russian dictionary in 1820 by a certain A.A. Uspensky. He wrote that it was part of офенское арго (bookseller

slang) in the city of Vladimir and meant знатный (distinguished). I suppose traveling book peddlers might have spread slang as they traveled from town to town, but it seems unlikely that "distinguished" became the modern notion of "cool" or "great."

Starting in the mid-1800s клёво was also found in dictionaries of criminal slang; you can find it in Gorodin's Gulag Dictionary, for example, where it means хорошо, красиво, удачно (good, beautiful, lucky).

Etymologists think it comes from the verb клевать (to bite or peck) and клёв (beak or a bite). One suggestion is that it was originally fishing slang — хорошо клюющий, which I take to mean "the fish are biting." I like that suggestion best because I can see how the notion of a great day at the fish pond could be generalized to "great day" to "great." But who knows?

In any case over the decades Ох, как клёво has come to mean, "Man, this is great." Это было бы клёво, спасибо (That would be awesome — thanks!) Тогда рок-музыка перестала быть запретным плодом, и нельзя было уже быть клёвым просто из-за того, что тебя ругают (At that time rock music stopped being forbidden fruit, and you couldn't be cool just because you were criticized for it).

But it can be used by and for older folks, too, at least in jest: Если ты такой клёвый, то отчего не знаменитый? (If you are so cool, why aren't you famous?) Хотя и тут вопрос надо ставить иначе: "Если ты такой знаменитый, отчего же ты не клёвый (But actually the question should be put differently: "If you are so famous, why aren't you cool?")

I was recently introduced to another improbable synonym for хорошо. This time the original meaning is not a beak or mouth but can refer to something a bit higher up on (some) creatures. Кудрявый (adjective) means curly or swirling, as in what hair can be. Пушкин, невысокий кудрявый подросток, воплощает в себе живость (Pushkin, a rather short, curly-haired adolescent, was the embodiment of vibrancy). The adverb кудряво is often used to describe curly clouds or puffs of smoke: Из-за крыш торчали в небо трубы завода и густо, кудряво дымили (From the roof tops the factory smokestacks thrust up into the sky and produced thick swirls of smoke).

In literary Russian, those swirls and curls are pretentious in writing — either as handwriting or as prose. Он написал письмо размашистым, кудрявым почерком (He wrote the letter in scrawling, curly handwriting). Кудряво is not what you want someone to call your novel. Пишите не так кудряво и давайте больше фактическаго материала (Don't write such convoluted prose and provide more factual material). In design or architecture, it generally means something that is overly intricate in an unpleasant way. Видна общность декора со старым Националем, но очень кудряво, и все это какой-то не русский модерн, а какая-то нефтяная роскошь (It had something in common with the décor of the old National Hotel, but it was overly ornate, and it's not any sort of Russian moderne — it's oil-money glitz).

You can also think кудряво, which is when your mind goes in a million directions at once. It's not good for the thinker or the people around him: Лучше бы он не думал так кудряво (It would be better if he his thoughts didn't wander all over the place).

In other contexts кудряво seems to have the sense of living or doing something great,

terrific, super — but perhaps a little too good, a bit too fancy: Кудряво живёшь! (You're living the high life!) Maybe that's great; maybe it's time to cut back on the truffles.

In a translator's chat someone asked about a conversation that concerned a possible solution to a social problem. Here it means "too much of a good thing": –Это немыслимо без сильной государственной воли и решимости. –С этим у нас кудряво. ("That's unthinkable without strong will and determination from the government." "Oh, we've got that in spades.")

Finally, there is another word that can mean "Great!" but it all depends on where you put the stress when you say the word. Здоро́вый (healthy) and здоро́во (healthily) are the first meanings. Мои друзья тоже ведут здоро́вый образ жизни. Жить здоро́во! (Live a healthy life).

Alone it can be what someone says when they see you on the street: Здоро́во! (Hi!).

But when the stress moves to the first syllable, здо́рово can mean "very" or "strongly." Он здо́рово похудел (He lost a huge amount of weight [he really lost weight]). Она здо́рово заболела (She was really sick). Шум дождя здо́рово помогает мне засыпать (The sound of rain really helps me fall asleep).

Or it means to do something really well. Он здо́рово читает свои стихи (He recites his poetry brilliantly).

Alone, Здо́рово! means "Fabulous!" After a long train trip, you might say: Будет здо́рово поспать несколько недель на мягкой кровати (It will be great to sleep on a soft bed for several weeks). Так было здо́рово с тобой тусоваться (It was super to hang out with you).

Пообщаться – это здо́рово! (Getting together is awesome!)

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