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When It's Time to Call the Junk Man

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Brandon Green / unsplash

Хлам: junk

In my part of the world, my neighbors seem to be doing some intensive early spring cleaning. Every day by the garbage bins there are new piles of tattered armchairs, ancient toilets, fake wood storage units, bags of baby clothes and (revoltingly stained) mattresses. In Russian, all this is хлам: junk, rubbish, old stuff, clutter.

No one is sure of the derivation of the word — one etymologist threw up his hands and suggested that the "expressive" letter x was perhaps added to ломкий (broken). No matter. It's an essential word in your vocabulary, regardless of where it comes from.

What is it? Well, it's the mess left behind by tenants: Вердикт местных властей был непоколебим — квартиру от хлама очистить и произвести санобработку (The verdict of the local authorities was set in stone: clean all the junk out of the apartment and decontaminate it).

Хлам can also by anything worthless, materially or spiritually: Когда в середине 1920-х годов в СССР началась антирелигиозная кампания, не только ёлка, но и Дед Мороз превратился в "религиозный хлам" (When an anti-religion campaign was begun in the USSR in the mid-1920s, not only the Christmas tree but Grandfather Frost also became “religious junk”).

Хлам can be a chorus of useless thoughts: Голова забита всяким хламом (My head is filled with all kinds of claptrap). Or, rather infrequently but very powerfully, it can be a person: Современный мужчина — хлам (Men today are junk).

Harsh.

And apparently it was once the slang word for Aeroport, the Moscow neighborhood where the intelligentsia lived. Хлам is the abbreviation of художники, литераторы, артисты, музыканты (artists, writers, actors, and musicians). Amusingly, one could say proudly: Живу в хламе (I’m living in Junk). У нас в хламе самый дорогой рынок в Москве (Where I live, in Junk, we’ve got the most expensive farmer’s market in Moscow).

There is also the expression в хлам, which could express, say, that something is only good for the junk pile: Носок ⊠ в хлам (That sock goes into the rag bag). Разбил машину в хлам и чудом выжил (He smashed the car to pieces, and it was a miracle he survived).

But when used with drinking or drug-taking в хлам means “blind drunk, out of it, fried.” Ему хватало немного спиртного, чтобы напиться в хлам (All it took was for him to drink a little alcohol to get blind drunk).

Another important word for spring cleaning — or lack of it — is барахло. Etymologists argue about this word, too, with one word-tracker insisting it was derived from the old Russian word брошень (throw-away) and another insisting it came to Russian from Mongolian. Who am I to say? But it is another word for a collection of junk, old stuff, broken furniture, and general detritus. Выкиньте все это барахло в мусорную корзину (Throw all that crap into the waste basket).

It can be word-junk, as one person defines it: Подобное барахло публикуется про-западной жёлтой прессой в России практически каждый день (Garbage like that is published by the pro-western tabloids in Russia almost every day).

Or it can be things that are not old or worthless, but just unneeded: Позвонил Марек, сказал, чтоб лишнего барахла не брали, в Греции, как известно, всё есть (Marek called and told me not to take too much stuff because as everyone knows, Greece has everything you need).

You can find all the varieties of барахло at a special market that is sometimes called by a translation of its English name: Блошиный рынок, или именуемый в народе “барахолка”, — это наследие из 90-х годов, когда люди пытались выжить за счёт ранее накопленного имущества (The flea market, what people call a *barakholka*, is a hangover from the 90s when people struggled to survive by selling things they’d bought in the past).

My favorite related word is барахольщик, which is wonderfully either the person who sells

барахло or the person who keeps too much барахло. Барахольщик продаёт всё, что связано с одеждой (The vendor at the flea market sells everything connected with clothing).

Возможно, вы по природе барахольщик, и вам чрезвычайно трудно выбрасывать вещи (Maybe you're a hoarder by nature and have a really hard time throwing things away).

Рухлядь is yet another word for junk. The original meaning of the word is moveable property, chattel, household effects. Somehow over the years personal property became that junk stored in the attic. Now it can also refer to old people or things that are falling apart.

It is often used to refer to old junky cars: Можно найти старую рухлядь и превратить её в мегаскоростного гоночного монстра (You can find an old junker and tune it up into a high-speed racing monster.)

It is also the word for a vehicle used in a translation of the first Star Wars movie: Чуи, давай посмотрим, на что способна эта рухлядь (Chewie, let's see what this piece of junk can do).

It's surely not something you'd like to be called: Сидит, старая рухлядь, днем в потемках, а ночь читает толстые книги (During the day the old biddie sits in the dark, and at night she reads thick books).

If you need to talk about old clothing or fabric, ветошь is the word. It refers to rags, old or tattered clothing. It is most often used to describe some old garment ripped up to make cleaning rags: Пётр пошёл в дом, вытирая на ходу руки ветошь (As Pyotr walked in the house he was wiping his hands with a rag).

For many Russians, this word almost immediately conjures up a scene at the end of Pushkin's Yevgeny Onegin, when Tatiana meets Onegin years later as a respectable married woman. Here it has the sense of glad rags, what Vladimir Nabokov translates as frippery. Tatiana tells him: Сейчас отдать я рада, Всю эту ветошь маскарада, Весь этот блеск, и шум, и чад, За полку книг, за дикий сад... (Now I'd happily give up all the frippery of the masquerade, all the glitter, and noise, and smells, for a shelf of books, for an garden grown wild...)

Finally, all of this old stuff can simply be called, well, old stuff: старьё. It might be old clothes: Как удачно, что я надел это старьё (How lucky I just happened to be wearing this old thing).

Or old music, as this young DJ complains: Они любят лишь старьё, ну представляешь, то что было модно когда Тутанхамон был молод (They only like the oldies, you know, from when King Tut was young).

Or old cars, as this new manager complains at a farm: Земли запущены. Машинный парк — старьё (The land was neglected and the equipment fleet was a heap of junk).

Or just old junk: В тёмной, без окон, комнате хранились чемоданы и разное старьё в двух больших шкафах (In a dark room without windows they stored suitcases and all sorts of old stuff in two big cupboards).

Why so many words for stuff that should be tossed out? The thing is: junk is not so easy to get rid of, as writer Viktor Pelevin understands: Хлам имеет над человеком странную власть. Выкинуть какие-нибудь треснувшие очки означает признать, что целый мир,

увиденный сквозь них, навсегда остался за спиной, или, наоборот и то же самое, оказался впереди, в царстве надвигающегося небытия... (Junk hold strange power over people. To throw away some old pair of cracked glasses is to admit that the entire world seen through them is forever behind you, or it’s the other way around and now it lies ahead in the kingdom of looming nothingness...)

But sometimes people want to see "out with the old, in with the new." You just have to give them a chance.

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