

Is Your Language Sordid and Gross?

The Word's Worth

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

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Убогий: pathetic, cruddy, squalid, poor, wretched, crippled

A week or so ago there was a flurry of language-related commotion in Russia, which I decided to try to ignore, partially because I'm under strict doctor's orders to keep a lid on ranting — just kidding, folks! — but mostly because responding would involve writing things that would be the equivalent of “the sun rises in the East.” You know, statements like: all languages are rich in their own way; no language is “better” than another; Russian-language specialists may have non-Slavic surnames; and people who share a common language have been known to kill each other by the millions.

And the sun sets in the West.

But a couple of adjectives came up and got my attention — убогий, a word I use all the time but didn't know the origins of, and клоачный, a word that I only vaguely knew, never use at all but apparently should because everyone else is. Unfortunately, they make the theme of today rather grim — to be exact, squalid and gross.

But hey, life is not always pleasant, right?

With убогий, I mentally misinterpreted the root бог as god instead of rich (богатый, богатство) as etymologists tell us, so made up an original meaning of something like “away from God.” Although that is totally wrong, in a way it leads us in the right direction. Убогий means poor of body and spirit: squalid, crippled (poor physically) or mediocre (impoverished emotionally or intellectually).

It might be used to describe a poorly furnished hotel room: Мы вошли в двухместный номер, убогая комната с парой деревянных кроватей и тумбочкой между ними (We walked into the double, a squalid room with a couple of wooden beds and a nightstand between them.) Or homeless people: У них они какие-то совсем убогие, засаленные, грязные. Наши советские бомжи ☒ лучшие в мире. (They were just completely sordid, greasy, filthy. Our Soviet homeless people are the best in the world.) Or the spiritual poverty of a country: Мужчина, который вырвался из нашей убогой страны — стал человеком с большой буквы (A man who could break away from our wretched country became a Real Man.) Or even one's shape and size: Платье было слишком хорошо для моей убогой фигуры (The dress was too nice for my godawful figure.)

So what would убогий язык be? Meager vocabulary, poor choice of words, flat, colorless. You know people — often young people — who speak like that in any language. They've just come back from a theme park. Как съездили? (How was your trip?) Ну классно... супер... ну просто класс (It's was great... super... it was, like, great...) It makes teachers weep.

The other adjective клоачный comes from the noun клоака (cloaca), which is a really interesting word. For one thing, the original meaning was a man-made object and the secondary meaning is part of the anatomy. Usually it's the other way around — think about words like joint, elbow, spine, foot, etc.

Originally cloaca referred to a ditch or underground pipe that carried sewage out of a city. Then it was used to describe something we humans don't have: a common chamber and outlet in amphibians, reptiles, birds and some fish into which the intestinal, urinary, and genital tracts open. And then it came to mean a metaphorical cesspool, a morally reprehensible person or group of people — the kind whose minds are in the gutter.

Russian took all this and happily used it in every way, starting with descriptions of Roman engineering: Знаменитая римская канализация ☒ Клоака Максима ☒ просуществовала 1000 лет. (The famous Roman sewage system, the Cloaca Maxima, lasted a thousand years.) And then it describes the curious digestive system of some creatures: У птиц и рептилий нет мочевого пузыря и продукты выделения почек удаляются через клоаку (Birds and reptiles don't have bladders, so waste from the kidneys goes out through the cloaca.)

Клоака can refer to a filthy bathroom: Биотуалет превратился в клоаку (The bio-toilet turned into a cesspit.) Or a ramshackle, filthy apartment or shack: Квартира брата была настоящей клоакой (My brother's apartment was a sewer.)

It is also a word to describe groups of morally suspect people, something all parents regardless of nationality or century, don't want their children to socialize with: Родители Пастернака были в ужасе от его новых знакомств и называли нехорошую квартиру клоакой (Pasternak's parents were horrified by his new friends, and they called that unsavory apartment a cesspool.) Москва ☒ купеческая алчная клоака (Moscow is a greedy merchant swamp.)

The adjective клоачный describes any of this moral or physical filth. Until a few weeks ago it doesn't seem to have been used much in Russian except in biology texts and treatises on urban development in the ancient world. But now everyone is discussing whether or not certain speakers of Russian use клоачный язык, which the original accuser has defined as hate speech.

I can't say for sure, but we have клоачный язык in English, too, only it's potty mouth.

In any case, this week my language has certainly been vastly enriched by убогий and клоачный.

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