

# ФИПОПОГИЯ

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## НЕОРТОДОКСАЛЬНОЕ ИСПОЛЬЗОВАНИЕ КИРИЛЛИЦЫ

### UNORTHODOX USES OF THE CYRILLIC ALPHABET

В случае замены символов кириллицы латинскими символами в европейских словоформах, они приобретают определенную самостоятельность, т. к. являются частью специальных, сложных знаковых систем. В результате лингвистическое и культурное пересечения могут быть проанализированы с эстетической, семиотической или социально-лингвистической точек зрения. «Искусственная кириллица», используемая, по крайней мере с 1960-х годов, применяет символы кириллицы не для обычного фонетического обозначения, а в соответствии с восприятием их сходства с латинскими буквами (например, «Yussia»). Это позволяет сделать скрытую аллюзию на Россию или СССР в самой словоформе, которая сочетает в себе как свободу, так и инаковость. Будучи ксенографическим и интертекстуальным, этот имитационный и коннотативный принцип может быть использован как для достижения положительного эффекта, как, к примеру, в наименованиях иностранных брендов, так и комического.

В то время как «искусственная кириллица», как правило, ограничивается отдельными словоформами, наличие реальных символов кириллицы или символов, похожих на них в современных компьютерных системах, свидетельствует об их использовании в рамках более сложных форм коммуникации, в которых связь с исходным языком и культурой не прослеживается.

Воспринимаемая инаковость в данном случае характеризует англо-, франко- и германо-говорящих коммуникантов, которые, используя исследуемую идиосинкразическую знаковую систему, в каком-то смысле похожую на язык коротких сообщений, определяют свою индивидуальность или принадлежность к какой-либо субкультуре. Примеры подобного кодирования могут также быть найдены среди русскоговорящих коммуникантов в аспекте использования знаков английского языка.

*When Cyrillic characters are substituted for Roman ones in European wordforms, they acquire a certain autonomy as they are appropriated and re-purposed as part of ad hoc,*

*composite sign systems. The resulting linguistic and cultural intersection may be analyzed from an aesthetic, semiotic or socio-linguistic point of view. “Faux Cyrillic” typography, in use since at least the 1960s, uses Cyrillic characters not for their usual phonetic value, but for their perceived resemblance to Roman letters (for example, “Яussia”). This enables a discreet allusion to Russia or the Soviet Union within the wordform itself, which combines both familiarity and otherness. Both xenographic and intertextual, this imitative and connotative principle may be used either to positive effect, as in foreign product branding, or as a mechanism of humour.*

*While “Faux Cyrillic” is generally limited to individual wordforms, the availability of actual or apparently Cyrillic characters on modern computer systems has seen their use spread to more sustained forms of communication, in which the allusion to the source language and culture is no longer present. The perceived otherness in this case is that of Anglophone, Francophone or Germanophone scriptors, who, through an idiosyncratic sign system comparable in some ways to SMS language, aspire either to individuality or identification with a subcultural group. Examples of such encoding may also be found among slavophone scriptors in particular uses of English.*

*КЛЮЧЕВЫЕ СЛОВА. «Искусственная кириллица», ксенография, интертекстуальность, возвышенное, девиантное правописание, языковая идентичность.*

*KEY WORDS. “Faux Cyrillic” typography, xenography, intertextuality, the Sublime, deviant spelling, language identity.*

In 1872, the French novelist and critic Barbey d’Aurevilly wrote about the Paris art Salon of the same year an article entitled “An ignoramus at the Salon”, affirming “I am that ignoramus [2]” while expressing the hope that some good might come of his inexpert perspective. The author of the present paper was reminded of that title when invited to participate in the *Russian Orthodox origins of culture and literature* conference, his command of Russian being still somewhat modest. It seemed to him fitting, therefore, to consider what one can do with the Russian language and alphabet without fully understanding them. Put more seriously, this paper addresses the relationship of non-Russophones to the Cyrillic alphabet.

The European learner of Russian is immediately confronted with the barrier of a graphic sign system whose elements are either unknown, or present a deceptive appearance of familiarity. Initially, a peculiar relationship to the sign develops: words are perceived in their materiality, which usually goes unnoticed, before they are able to be decoded as lexical signifiers. While verbally opaque, they are not without possible meaning, as they have aesthetic and indeed metonymic value as visual objects. This may be postulated as a key factor in the subject which will be developed here: the substitution of Cyrillic characters for Roman ones in European wordforms. Best known as faux Cyrillic typography, this graphic practice tends to be dismissed as a form of “sensational spelling [5]”; its mechanisms and semiotic consequences warrant, however, closer attention.

Faux Cyrillic can be defined as  
[...] the use of Cyrillic letters in Latin text to evoke the Soviet Union or Russia, regardless of whether the letters are phonetic matches. For ex-

ample, *R* and *N* in *RUSSIAN* may be replaced by Cyrillic Я and И, giving «ЯУССИАИ». Other examples include Ш for W, Ц for U, Я/Г for R/r, Ф for O, Д for A, Б or Ъ or Ь for B/b, З or Э or Ё for E, Ж for G, Ч or Y for Y. [6]

The above definition is borrowed from Wikipedia, which, interestingly, does not offer a Russian version of the article in question. The basic principle is simple, and based on a popular misconception of similarity between the two sign systems. For example, the comedian Rik Mayall once joked that the Russian language consists of writing the letter R backwards [24]. As an aside, there might perhaps be a link between this perception and the chiasmus-based “Russian reversal” joke structure which also appeared in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century:



Fig. 1: Russian reversal meme

Faux Cyrillic is principally used either for humorous effect, or for foreign product branding, a marketing strategy based on the perceived prestige of foreign goods. Examples of both will be given subsequently, but firstly, the implications of the process itself should be considered.

In an article entitled «The spectacle of words [1]», Jean-Philippe Antoine considers the oft-neglected material dimension of lexical signifiers, with reference to writers such as James Joyce and Stéphane Mallarmé, and visual artists such as Edward Ruscha. For Joyce’s protagonist Stephen, the appropriation of words occurs via a process of desemantisation:

[...] he found them also at haphazard in the shops, on advertisements, in the mouths of the plodding public. He kept repeating them to himself till they lost all instantaneous meaning for him and became wonderful vocables [23].

For the non-speaker of a foreign language, it is in this desemantised state that words are initially encountered. When the alphabet itself is unfamiliar, even the phonetic level becomes inaccessible: the word is simply a juxtaposition of shapes indicative of otherness. Faux Cyrillic typography exploits this otherness, while simultaneously diminishing it. Essentially xenographic [25], it is based on a recontextualisation of individual foreign characters which results in a defamiliarisation of the wordform itself. As the Cyrillic characters are used according to their perceived

graphic similarity with Roman ones, not for the sound they designate in Russian, the mixture of the two sign systems requires interpretative effort from a reader familiar with either language, and perhaps more if the reader knows both. The wordform can thus be said to be unstable, as it belongs to neither of two languages but to a third, composite, partially codified sign system. The result of this instability for the reader may be enlightened via Freud's notion of the Uncanny, "a mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar that is experienced as being peculiar [2]". Moreover, attention is drawn to the materiality of the sign, rather as is the case, for example, in certain works by Edward Ruscha: the lexical meaning of the word is complemented simultaneously by the particularity of its visual representation.

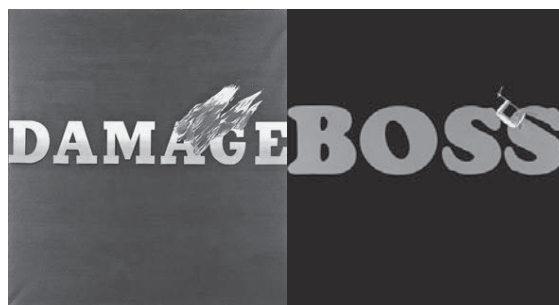


Fig. 2: Edward Ruscha, *Damage and Securing the last letter* (1964)

Xenography in itself could perhaps be said to be the most economic form of intertextuality: letters borrowed from another language build an allusion into the word itself, which technically no longer belongs entirely to one language or the other. The liberties taken in faux Cyrillic with regard to the actual Cyrillic alphabet enable the designation of this intertextuality as pastiche, "an artistic work in a style that imitates that of another work, artist, or period [7]". To perceive and interpret correctly the composite representation of the word, the reader must have a rudimentary awareness of the second sign system, and associate it with specific cultural data.

This data generally takes the form of *topoi* which may be either meliorative or pejorative. The meliorative aspect is visible in the use of faux Cyrillic in foreign product branding [8], of which a few examples will now follow. In the case of the Novik amplifier company's Red Bear line, produced in the early 1990s, and the currently available PETEYBURG guitar amplifiers, a red Cyrillic letter is used (or misused) to connote origin. Little Russian musical equipment is exported to the West, so alluding to the country of manufacture, somewhat mysterious for Western customers, particularly in the 1990s, underlines the products' rarity. In the first example below, the Cyrillic letter complements the imagery of the colour red (as one of two world powers, communism connotated strength) and that of the bear (again, a connotation of strength: this is, after all, a 120 watt amplifier). The R and Я together create symmetry in the logo.



Fig. 3: Petersburg and Red Bear guitar amplifiers

Another example from the world of guitar electronics is worthy of mention. In the late 1980s, some of the military equipment factories in Russia turned to making consumer electronics [9]. One product of this was the Sovtek Big Muff distortion pedal, one of several incarnations of a design which has its roots in the 1960s. Baptized the Big Muff  $\pi$ , its initials BMP happened also to be those of a Боевая Машина Пехоты, and some of its components were indeed military surplus. Thus arose, towards the end of the Cold War, the myth of a military-grade pedal. The printing on the product itself was in English and Russian, but the popular identification made between its sound and country of production is manifest in some entertaining Western derivatives: StompUnderFoot's GREEN RUSSIAN (also marketed in Cyrillic as "ГРИН МУФ", unusually) [10] and Skullytone Fx' ЯЦССИАИ Sp ("Russian SPi" > Spy, note the play on words around  $\pi$ ). In both of these examples, predominantly Cyrillic characters are used in the product name to situate the products in the imaginary lineage of the Russian original. Two of the three pedals shown indicate the aesthetic principle taking precedence over functionality. In the case of the грин муф, the control labels, like the name, use an accurate Cyrillic transliteration incomprehensible for the average Western user ("волюм" for "volume") [31]. The Russian Spy, meanwhile, uses faux Cyrillic to develop a less than intuitive lexical field: "Level", "Tone" and "Sustain" would have been more helpful labels for the controls, but "Lenin" "Marx" and "Stalin" extend the metaphor rather more effectively.



Fig. 4: Sovtek "Big Muff  $\pi$ " (c. 1994-2000)



Fig. 5: Stomp Under Foot “ГЯreen Яussian” and “грин муф”, Skullytonefx “яцsIAи sл”

One is reminded of Joyce’s “wonderful vocables”: even after decoding the graphic system, the user is left with a series of words which combine in a semantic network which does not fulfill its expected informative function. The user manual thus functions rather like a dictionary, with a list of the words and their signification in the context of the pedal. Clearly, faux Cyrillic is here a component in an elaborate imaginative strategy. It could also be argued that in these musical examples, the connotations of strength, solidity and power, combined with a certain trepidation on the part of the Western user confronted with Soviet imagery, contribute to a Burkian aesthetic of the Sublime [3].

More generally, faux Cyrillic is relatively common when a thematic link between a product and Russia is to be suggested or underlined, for example on the cover of Artyemy Troitsky’s *Back in the USSR* [32]. The video game Tetris, created by the Russian programmers Alekseĭ Pajitnov, Dmitri Pavlovski and Vadim Guerassimov, was originally marketed as TetЯis. Interestingly, a 2004 survey indicated that for American customers, a vodka brand name written in faux Cyrillic (“Ždalo Цodka”) was more appealing than the same word in either English characters or actual Russian [11].

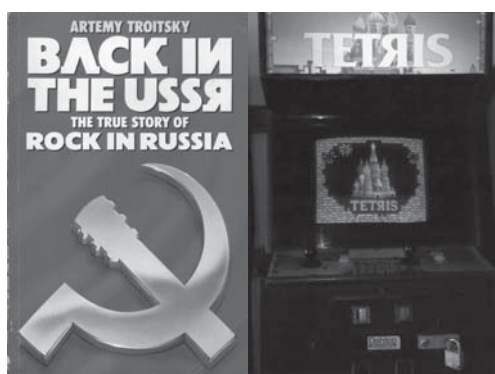


Fig. 6: A. Troitsky, *Back in the U.S.S.R.* (left); original Tetris arcade console (right)

The previous examples use the phenomenon of perceived distancing to positive effect. Distance, disparity and contrast are of course also among the foundations of humour, which explains that faux Cyrillic pastiche is also often associated with parody, or humour based on less positive stereotypical representations of Russia or Russophone countries. The two film posters shown below [26] are from 1966 and 2005 respectively. For the anecdote, in the series [4] on which the film *Borat* (and not “Vordt”, as the poster suggests) was based, the Cyrillic subtitles are simply English words typed on a Russian keyboard [12].



Fig. 7. Film posters (left and centre); screenshot from *Borat's Television Programme* (right)

With the omnipresence internet technology has achieved since the beginning of the millenium, Cyrillic characters have found more widespread use among non-Russian speakers, as attested to by the availability of dedicated pseudo-Cyrillic fonts, such as Kremlin Premier [13], as well as online text converters [14].

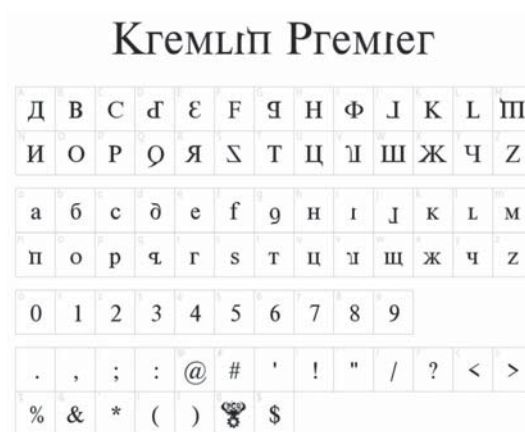


Fig. 8. Kremlin Premier character set

A certain number these more recent, popular uses of Cyrillic characters follow the same principles of allusion and graphic similarity mentioned previously. It is ap-

parent, however, that many differ from what is typically termed faux Cyrillic in that they do not imply an allusion to Russia. Moreover, Cyrillic characters may now be used not only in isolated words, but throughout one or more phrastic units, examples of which can be readily found in various languages, for example:

Ту те яррел де сетте ретиите fille mOdéle qu'elle était, avec тOут ses jOуets qui и'attendaais plus que ses ретиитs dOигts тOут mOиite qui s'емрyэссаиент де тOут тOучея „ la ретиите fille qu'elle était avec sa chambяе яOse бOибOи qui seитаит cette Oдеуя qu'elle яеииifle еисOяе dans les magasiins рOуя bébé [...] [15]

Broadly speaking, such productions can be analyzed from two points of view. On the one hand, a certain degree of creativity is undeniably involved in their production; like other non-standard approaches to spelling, they imply an individual, reconstructive approach to the most basic units of writing. Such an approach is, in a sense, audacious: as Michel Zacheria remarks,

[...] reading a text with fanciful spelling only becomes a real pleasure for those who, like the author, play with the written form of *words* and grin with pleasure at transgressions [33].

In the case of a blogger named “воеся епгел [16]”, the hybrid text is initially difficult to interpret: “яichtig √ uch hab кеи яеспект меня → also fuckt euch jetzt еяст яecht !” In the first part of the sentence, “mehr” could almost be read as *меня*, which would be little less grammatical than the Anglicism which follows. On the other hand, transgression is perhaps the operative word here: a summary Google search suggests that the technique is or was popular in France among adolescents, a group well-known for aspirations to individuality which collectively tend to cancel each other out. Moreover, the attention paid to typography in the French example above contrasts with a number of elementary grammar mistakes. If, therefore, an aesthetic reading of such productions is subject to caution, they remain interesting as a “deviant” mode of expression specific to a subculture. The sustained use and partial deformation of two (or sometimes more) sign systems results in a graphic code which, like the spelling used in SMS messages [29], could be said to create identity.

This phenomenon can also be observed more modestly in the creation of user-names on internet forums or online video games, for example “divine яight” or “Уикисои Яэоу” [17]. In addition to the considerations mentioned previously, the advantage here is the probability of giving uniqueness to words or names which may already exist in the user database [27]. Again, the practice is not without risk; firstly, that the Cyrillic characters are not interpreted correctly by the forum or game software [30], or indeed other users [22]; secondly, that other users may tire of the fashion:

I hate it when people use foreign letters that “look like” Latin alphabet letters to look cool.

No, dipshit, Я does not equal R. Unless you pronounce all your r's as ‘ya’.  
And no, И is not N. Type with the alphabet English uses, plz.



And any latin letter with a hook, grave, accent, or anything else does NOT equal what it 'looks like' in English.

What pisses me off is the people who spend their time trying to type all their sentences like this. Ўõũ šěě шнат ĩ mêàñ?

If you do this, I hope your hands fall off so you can't move your mouse to key those letters in on Character Map all day long ever again.

It doesn't fucking look cool. You look like a dipshit, because you most likely have no idea how to pronounce half of the letters you're shitting out of Character Map [18].

Interestingly, video games apparently bring some players to acquaint themselves with actual Russian: as one remarks, "I learned most of the Russian alphabet and pronunciation playing ARMA2/DayZ honestly, lol I got sick of never knowing where the fuck I was so I started teaching myself how to read the road signs" [19].

Non-phonetic use of Cyrillic characters in foreign words can also be observed among speakers of Slavic languages, as when a Bulgarian fan announces a translation of lyrics by the group Iron Maiden: "iЯon maiden ... Тук заглавието и останалата част от текста... [20]". In this example, the Cyrillic Я is used as a substitute for the characteristic gothic script of the group's logo. More entertaining is the following example, from a Russian site [21].

My friend

и should like to begin my talk with a familiar quotation. ит is a pity и don't know whom ит belongs to. ит runs as follows: "friendship is the wine of life". So to have a true devoted friend is a great luck. [...]

The texts on the site are apparently model answers to typical academic assignments. Here, Cyrillic is systematically replace Roman ones, with the result that a search engine would be unable to find the English text which the student would presumably take to class.

In conclusion, the Cyrillic alphabet enjoys a variety of uses outside of the languages which it contributes to defining. The more creative constitute a linguistic and cultural intersection with interesting aesthetic and semiotic results; the more rudimentary provide the socio-linguist with insight into innovative language practices among particular groups. As such, the alphabet's signs acquire a certain autonomy as speakers of non-Cyrillic languages appropriate them and re-purpose them as part of *ad hoc*, composite sign systems.

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