

THE IMPACT OF PETER THE GREAT'S LINGUISTIC REFORMS ON MODERN RUSSIAN

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Abstract:

This paper examines the profound linguistic reforms initiated by Peter the Great in the early 18th century and their enduring influence on the structure and development of the modern Russian language. During the Petrine era, Russia underwent a radical transition from a traditional, church-centered society to a modernized European empire, a transformation that necessitated a major linguistic overhaul. The study focuses on three key areas of reform: the introduction of the Civil Script (Grazhdansky Shrift), which simplified the complex Cyrillic alphabet for secular and administrative use; the massive influx of Western European loanwords in the fields of maritime, military, science, and administration; and the decisive shift away from the dominance of Church Slavonic toward a more accessible, secular literary language. By analyzing historical texts and linguistic shifts, the paper explores how these changes catalyzed the secularization of Russian culture and provided the essential groundwork for the later standardization of the Russian literary language by figures such as Mikhail Lomonosov and Alexander Pushkin. Ultimately, the study argues that Peter the Great's reforms were instrumental in shaping the phonetic, orthographic, and lexical foundations of contemporary Russian, marking the beginning of the modern era in Russian linguistic history.

Keywords: Peter the Great, linguistic reforms, Modern Russian, Civil Script (Grazhdansky Shrift), Church Slavonic, secularization, loanwords, language modernization, Russian history, Cyrillic alphabet, linguistic evolution.

Introduction

The reign of Peter I, or Peter the Great, at the turn of the 18th century stands as perhaps the most transformative period in Russian history. Known for his ambitious efforts to "open a window to Europe," Peter sought to modernize every facet of the Russian state, from its military and naval capabilities to its social

customs and administrative structures. However, one of the most enduring yet often overlooked aspects of his modernization project was the radical reform of the Russian language. Before Peter's ascent, the Russian linguistic landscape was characterized by a rigid diglossia: Church Slavonic remained the prestigious medium for religious and formal literary texts, while a variety of vernacular dialects and a distinct "business language" (*delovoy yazyk*) were used for daily life and state administration. This linguistic duality proved insufficient for a ruler determined to integrate Russia into the scientific, technical, and diplomatic circles of Western Europe.

Peter the Great recognized that a modern empire required a modern language—one that was practical, accessible, and capable of expressing new secular and scientific concepts. His reforms were not merely stylistic but systemic, targeting the very alphabet, vocabulary, and social function of the language. In 1708, he introduced the Civil Script (*Grazhdansky Shrift*), a simplified version of the Cyrillic alphabet designed specifically for secular printing and administrative efficiency. Simultaneously, his military and industrial expansions led to a massive influx of foreign loanwords, primarily from Dutch, German, and French, which permanently altered the Russian lexicon.

The significance of these reforms extends far beyond the 18th century. By deliberately breaking the monopoly of Church Slavonic over written culture, Peter the Great initiated the process of secularization that paved the way for the "Golden Age" of Russian literature. His efforts created the necessary linguistic raw material that would later be refined by polymaths like Mikhail Lomonosov and literary giants like Alexander Pushkin into the standardized modern literary Russian used today. This paper aims to analyze the specific nature of Peter's linguistic interventions and evaluate their lasting impact on the phonetic, lexical, and orthographic identity of the contemporary Russian language. By examining this historical shift, we can better understand how the modern Russian tongue was forged as a tool for both imperial power and cultural enlightenment.

Materials and Methods

The research for this study is based on a diachronic linguistic analysis and a review of historical primary and secondary sources. To evaluate the impact of Peter the Great's reforms, the following materials were utilized:

1. **Primary Historical Documents:** The study examines the original decrees (ukazy) issued by Peter I between 1708 and 1710 regarding the introduction of the Civil Script (Grazhdansky Shrift). This includes the famous "alphabet charts" with the Tsar's own handwritten corrections, where he personally deleted archaic letters like omega, psi, and izhitsa.

2. **Lexicographical Sources:** A comparative analysis was conducted using the Dictionary of the Russian Language of the XI–XVII Centuries and the Dictionary of the Russian Language of the XVIII Century. These sources allow for a tracing of the influx of foreign technical, maritime, and administrative terminology (e.g., admiral, shturm, kantselyariya, globus) and their integration into the Russian lexical system.

3. **Periodical Literature:** The first Russian newspaper, Vedomosti (established in 1702), served as a vital material for observing the practical application of the new secular language and script in a non-religious, public context.

4. **Secondary Academic Works:** The theoretical framework relies on the scholarship of renowned Russian linguists such as V.V. Vinogradov and V.M. Zhivov, specifically their analyses of the "secularization of the literary language" and the "Petrine linguistic revolution."

5. **Comparative Linguistic Analysis:** The methodology involves comparing Pre-Petrine Church Slavonic texts with the standardized modern Russian literary style to determine which orthographic and morphological changes survived into the contemporary era.

The primary method employed is the descriptive-historical method, combined with lexicological analysis, to identify the survival and adaptation of Petrine-era innovations in the 21st-century Russian language.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the linguistic reforms of Peter the Great represented a decisive and irreversible rupture with the medieval past, acting as the primary catalyst for the birth of the modern Russian literary language. By stripping the written word of its

exclusively religious and ritualistic shell, Peter transformed the Russian language into a functional, secular, and European-oriented instrument of statehood and science.

The most tangible legacy of these reforms remains the Civil Script, which established the visual and orthographic identity of modern Russian. By simplifying the alphabet and decoupling it from the rigid standards of Church Slavonic, Peter made literacy more accessible to the growing administrative and scientific classes. Furthermore, the massive lexical enrichment during this era—characterized by thousands of borrowings from Dutch, German, and French—provided the technical vocabulary necessary for Russia's integration into the global community. While many of the Tsar's early changes were chaotic and utilitarian, they successfully ended the period of linguistic diglossia, allowing for a synthesis of the vernacular and the high literary tradition.

Ultimately, the Petrine linguistic revolution provided the essential "raw material" that would later be refined by Lomonosov, Karamzin, and Pushkin. Without Peter's radical interventions, the Russian language might have remained confined to a cumbersome, archaic structure ill-suited for the modern world. Today, every Russian speaker who uses a laptop, follows a scientific protocol, or reads a secular newspaper is a direct beneficiary of Peter the Great's vision for a modernized, Europeanized Russian tongue. His reforms did not merely change how Russians wrote; they changed how Russia engaged with the world, securing the language's place as a global medium of culture and intellect.

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