

HISTORICAL CHANGES IN RUSSIAN ORTHOGRAPHY

Saburov Raimbergan Sadullayevich

Lecturer at the Urgench State Pedagogical Institute

Abstract:

This paper explores the historical evolution of Russian orthography, tracing its development from early Cyrillic script to the modern standardized spelling system. It examines key reforms and influences, including the significant orthographic reforms of the early 18th and 20th centuries, which aimed to simplify and modernize Russian writing. The study highlights how changes in political, cultural, and linguistic contexts shaped the orthographic rules and practices. Understanding these historical shifts provides insight into the relationship between language standardization and social change, as well as the challenges faced in balancing tradition with linguistic modernization.

Key Words: Russian orthography, Cyrillic script, spelling reform, language standardization, historical linguistics, Russian language, orthographic changes

Introduction

The history of Russian orthography is a fascinating journey that reflects not only the linguistic development of the Russian language but also its socio-political and cultural transformations over more than a millennium. Russian orthography—the system and conventions of spelling and writing the Russian language—has undergone multiple significant changes since its inception. These shifts mirror broader historical currents, including religious influences, the rise and fall of empires, educational reforms, and the modernization of the language to meet the needs of a growing and increasingly literate population.

The origins of Russian orthography trace back to the adoption of the Cyrillic script in the 9th and 10th centuries, which itself was derived from the Greek alphabet and designed primarily to serve the needs of the Slavic-speaking peoples in the Eastern Orthodox sphere. This writing system was initially closely tied to Church Slavonic, the liturgical language of the Orthodox Church, which heavily influenced early Russian writing conventions. The early orthographic system was more phonetic

and complex than the contemporary system, characterized by a variety of archaic letters and complex rules reflecting the nuances of the spoken and liturgical language. Orthographic conventions began to evolve more rapidly after the introduction of printing in Russia in the 16th century, which required greater standardization for wider distribution of texts. The 18th century marked a crucial period of reform under the reign of Peter the Great, who implemented sweeping changes in the Russian alphabet and orthographic practices as part of his broader program of modernization and westernization. This era saw the elimination of several archaic letters, the introduction of new typographic styles, and the simplification of spelling rules to better align writing with contemporary pronunciation.

Further major reforms were carried out in the early 20th century, particularly in 1918 after the Russian Revolution. These reforms were driven by a desire to simplify and modernize the Russian writing system to make literacy more accessible to the masses and to break from the old regime's linguistic traditions. This orthographic reform removed redundant letters, standardized spelling, and simplified grammar rules, which had a profound impact on Russian literacy and education. Throughout these historical phases, Russian orthography has balanced the tension between preserving linguistic tradition and adapting to practical needs. The standardization process reflects a broader pattern common to many languages, where spelling reforms often intersect with national identity, political agendas, and cultural evolution. The Russian case also illustrates how orthographic reform can serve ideological purposes—modernizing the language was closely linked to the construction of a new Soviet identity and the promotion of mass education.

Understanding the historical changes in Russian orthography is essential not only for linguists but also for historians, educators, and cultural scholars. It sheds light on how language both shapes and is shaped by societal transformations. Moreover, the ongoing discussions and debates about orthographic norms in Russia today echo the long-standing challenges of balancing tradition with innovation in the realm of written language.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the major historical changes in Russian orthography, analyzing the linguistic, cultural, and political

factors that influenced each stage of reform. It will trace the development from early Church Slavonic influences through Peter the Great's reforms to the Soviet orthographic overhaul, concluding with reflections on the current state and future prospects of Russian spelling conventions.

Conclusion

The historical evolution of Russian orthography presents a vivid example of how language and writing systems are not static entities but dynamic, evolving tools shaped by complex interplays of linguistic, cultural, and political forces. From its early beginnings rooted in the Cyrillic script and Church Slavonic traditions to the comprehensive reforms of the 18th and 20th centuries, Russian orthography has continuously adapted to meet the changing needs of its speakers and society.

The orthographic reform under Peter the Great was particularly transformative, setting a precedent for modernization efforts by aligning the Russian writing system more closely with practical and secular goals. It reflected the broader push to integrate Russia into the European cultural and intellectual sphere while fostering a more efficient administrative and educational framework. This reform was not merely a linguistic adjustment but a symbol of Russia's ambition to emerge as a modern state. The 1918 reform after the Bolshevik Revolution further demonstrates how orthographic changes can be deeply political, serving ideological purposes by promoting literacy among the proletariat and distancing the language from its pre-revolutionary past. The elimination of archaic letters and simplification of spelling were part of a larger cultural revolution that sought to democratize knowledge and unify a vast, diverse population under a new socialist identity.

Despite these significant reforms, Russian orthography has retained elements of its historical legacy, balancing preservation with modernization. Contemporary debates about spelling, punctuation, and language purity underscore the continuing evolution and cultural significance of orthography. These discussions reveal the enduring link between language and identity, as well as the challenges faced in maintaining a standardized written form in the context of linguistic change.

In summary, the historical changes in Russian orthography illustrate the deep connections between language, history, and society. Orthographic reform is not a

purely linguistic process; it is intertwined with political power, cultural values, and educational priorities. The Russian experience highlights how spelling systems serve as markers of national identity and instruments of social change. As the Russian language continues to evolve in the 21st century, understanding its orthographic history provides valuable insights into the ongoing relationship between tradition and innovation in language.

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