Reviving the Traditional Russian Orthography for the 21st Century

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Old Russian Orthography: what and why

- The Russian orthography was reformed in 1918
 - ▶ 4 letters Ѣь, Өө, li, Vv were physically removed from printing presses
 - ★ Often, Ъъ was also removed by mistake
- Classic Russian literature used the old orthography:
 - Pushkin, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Nabokov, ...
- Replace $b \rightarrow e$, $\theta \rightarrow \phi$, $i \rightarrow u$, $v \rightarrow u$
 - motivation: "simplify the spelling"

Old Russian orthography: example

Nabokov, Storm (1930)

ГРОЗА

На углу, подъ шатромъ цвътущей липы, обдало меня буйнымъ благоуханіемъ. Туманныя громады поднимались по ночному небу, и когда поглощенъ былъ послъдній звъздный просвъть, слъпой вътеръ, закрывъ лицо рукавами, низко пронесся вдоль опустъвшей улицы. Въ тусклой темнотъ, надъ желъзнымъ ставнемъ парикмахерской, маятникомъ заходилъ висячій щить, золотое блюдо.

Вернувшись домой, я засталь вътерь уже въ комнатъ: — онъ хлопнуль оконной рамой и поспъшно от-

Natural language orthography changes naturally...

Hobbes, De cive (1651)

I. ALL Authors agree not concerning the definition of the Naturall Law, who notwithstanding doe very often make use of this terme in their Writings. The Method therefore, wherein we begin from definitions, and exclusion of all equivocation, is only proper to them who leave no place for contrary Disputes; for the rest, if any man say, that somewhat is done against the Law of Nature, one proves it hence, because it was done against the generall Agreement of all the most wise, and learned Nations: But this declares not who shall be the judg of the wisdome and learning of all Nations:

Some letters are now added: somwhat, judg Some letters are now removed: doe, generall, wisdome

...or when guided by a committee of experts

- A proposal for English, similar to the Russian spelling reform...
 - ▶ Omit the silent "e" in endings, replace vowels to "simplify"
 - \star breathe o breath, some o sum, made o maid, gate o gait
 - ▶ Replace the letters $c \rightarrow k/s$, $x \rightarrow ks$, $y \rightarrow i$
 - ★ played \rightarrow plaid, hence \rightarrow hens, xerox \rightarrow kseroks
 - ▶ Physically remove the letters C, X, Y from all computer keyboards
 - because they are a heritage of the "horrible old times"

What happens if you ban a few letters...

- One generation later, nobody remembers anything was ever different
- You lose effective access to your own culture
 - ► Cannot print adequate critical editions of classic literature
 - ▶ Nobody wants to read even 100-year old books
 - Converting each old book to new spelling is hard for editors
- In Russia:
 - lacktriangle People born after pprox1950 are loath to read texts in the old orthography
 - Such texts are perceived to be unquestionably obsolete
 - ▶ No typewriters **or computers** support the old Russian orthography

Main challenges in processing old Russian orthography

- As of 2000, no 8-bit encodings contained the letters $5\mathfrak{b}$, $9\mathfrak{e}$, Ii, Vv
 - Unicode support was not widespread
- No keyboard layouts, no screen fonts, few vector fonts
 - ► LATEX font support: nonstandard font encoding by AMS
- No spelling checker support, no OCR, no hyphenation

Back to 2015: State of the art

- The letters $5\mathfrak{b}$, $9\mathfrak{o}$, Ii, $9\mathfrak{o}$ are present in most Cyrillic fonts
 - typesetting, printing supported through Unicode
 - LATEX font support: OT2 font encoding only!
- Some spelling checker support (ispell, AbiWord, Open Office)
- Some language support for OCR
- No hyphenation support, no standard keyboard layouts

The oldrus-ispell project (1999-2003)

- http://oldrus-ispell.sourceforge.net/koi8-extended.html
- KOI8-C encoding (IETF draft), localization for the links browser
- A keyboard layout for X-Window and MS Windows 95
- Bitmapped X-Window fonts (BDF), the xcyr package
 - Became part of ucs-fonts and xfonts-cyrillic
- ispell dictionary for old Russian orthography
- A PostScript typesetter using BDF as Type 3 fonts (Perl)
- ullet A primitive converter, new ightharpoonup old orthography (Perl)

The KOI8-C encoding and screen fonts

Viewing Nabokov, Despair (1934) in Netscape using KO8-C

росту не знаю, съ чего начать. Смѣшонъ пожилой человѣкъ, который бѣгомъ, съ прыгающим томъ, догналъ [3] послѣдній автобусъ, но боится вскочить на ходу, и виновато улыбаясь, ещо ужто не смѣю вскочить? Онъ воетъ, онъ ускоряеть ходь, онъ сейчасъ уйдеть за уголъ, непоп это разсказа. Образъ довольно громоздкій. Я все еще бѣгу.

ь мой быль ревельскій нѣмець, по образованію агрономъ, покойная мать — чисто-русская. С въ жаркіе лѣтніе дни она, бывало, въ сиреневыть шелкахъ, томная, съ вѣеромъ въ рукћ, пол в, кушала шоколадъ, и наливались сѣнокоснымъ вѣтромъ лиловые паруса спущенныхъ што аго подданнаго, интернировали, — я только-что поступилъ въ петербургскій университеть, г тырнадцатаго, до середины девятнадцатая года я прочелъ тысяча восемнадцать книгъ, — вен нію я на три мѣсяца застрялъ въ Москвѣ и тамъ женился. Съ двадцатаго года проживалъ въ стаго года, уже переваливъ лично за тридцать пять — —

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Working with the oldrus-ispell dictionary

Proofreading Melgunov's Red Terror in Russia (1924)

File Edit Search Preferences Shell Macro Windows

Shell Command in Progress -- Press Ctrl+. to Cancel

"Еженедъльникъ Ч. К." *(6) никогда ничего больше {39} не было опубликовано. А между тъм мы знаем, что людей в эти дни в Москвъ по общим свъдъніям было разстрълено больше 300 *(7).

Тъ, которые сидъли в эти поистинъ мучительные дни в Бутырской тюрьмъ, когда были арестованы тысячи людей из самых разнообразных общественных слоев, никогда не забудут своих душевных переживаній.

было время
террора".

без File: spellTmp

невольно вновь вспоминаешь слова В. Г. Короленко, мимолетно без каждом авт
"с вещами"
связывать
связывать
1: безе
2: безо
2: безо

сидъл в эт 3: безъ кошмары. В 3: безъ

Main linguistic challenges

To convert texts to the old Russian orthography, we...

- disambiguate word pairs that became homographs...
 - ▶ самого самаго, синее синѣе, оселъ осѣлъ
- ...and also some homophones that became homonyms
 - есть ѣсть, нежить нѣжить, некогда нѣкогда
- restore old grammatical endings
 - lacktriangle они, туманные звезды ightarrow онlacktriangle , туманныя звlacktriangle зв
- restore old letters in word stems, prefixes, and suffixes
 - ▶ Оедоръ (Theodor), орөографія (orthography), муро (myrrhe)
 - lacktriangle рассвирепел ightarrow разсвирlacktriangleпвливней нежнейшего ightarrow нlacktriangleвний намеральный намерал

Main linguistic challenges

Disambiguation requires:

- identifying parts of speech
 - ightharpoonup cuhee \rightarrow cuhee (blue), cuhe (more blue)
 - ightharpoonup тем ightarrow (of themes), тъмъ (by that)
- identifying grammatical forms (number, gender, case, tense)
 - ightharpoonup в море (into the sea), въ моръ (within the sea)
 - ▶ есть \rightarrow есть (it is), ѣсть (to eat)
- for some words, identifying semantic content in advance
 - ightharpoonup миръ (peace), міръ (world)
 - ightharpoonup лечу (I fly), лѣчу (I heal)
- prononciation details (stress, e/ë) do not always disambiguate

Outlook: the future of the old Russian orthography

- Keyboard layouts will become standard in OSes
- Hyphenation dictionaries for LATEX and other systems
- Spelling dictionaries and grammar checking
- Fully disambiguating converter between new and old orthography