Reviving the Traditional Russian Orthography for the 21st Century

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Old Russian Orthography: what and why

- Classic Russian literature used the "old" orthography
 - ▶ Pushkin, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Nabokov, ...
- The orthography was reformed in 1918:
 - ► Replaced $\mathbf{b} \rightarrow \mathbf{e}, \ \mathbf{e} \rightarrow \mathbf{\phi}, \ \mathbf{i} \rightarrow \mathbf{u}, \ \mathbf{v} \rightarrow \mathbf{u}$
 - 4 letters Ѣϵ, θϵ, li, Vv were physically removed from printing presses
 - ★ Often, Ъъ was also removed by mistake
 - Replaced some prefixes, suffixes, and word endings
- Motivation for reform: "simplify the spelling"
- Old orthography continued to be used outside Russia

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" spelling
 - \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 50-year old books
 - Converting each 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 computers today fully support the old Russian orthography

Processing old Russian orthography in 2000

Main challenges:

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

Back to 2015: State of the art

- The letters $b_{,} \theta_{,}$ li, $v_{,}$ are present in most (vector) 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 9x
- 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 dictionary-based converter, new ightleftarrow old orthography (Perl)

The KOI8-C encoding and screen fonts

Viewing Nabokov, Despair (1934) in Netscape using KOI8-C

росту не знаю, съ чего начать. Смѣшонъ пожилой человѣкъ, который бѣгомъ, съ прыгающим гомъ, догналъ {5} послъдній автобусъ, но боится вскочить на ходу, и виновато улыбаясь, еще сужто 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, — венню я на три мѣсяца застрялъ въ Москвѣ и тамъ женился. Съ двадцатаго года проживалъ въ птаго 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 🗐 ispell террора". без File: spellTmp присутство Невольно вновь вспоминаешь слова В. Г. Короленко, мимолетно б автомобили , которая может ее молчаливо терпъть 5 протеста. И пожалъешь, как Г каждом авт "с вещами" 0: бей 1: безе связывать 2: безо сидъл в эт

кошмары. В "В пам 3: безъ

Main linguistic challenge: recover lost information

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 traditional word endings: requires parsing the grammar
 - ightharpoonup *они, туманные звезды ightarrow онightharpoonup , туманныightharpoonup звightharpoonup зв
- restore old letters in word stems, prefixes, and suffixes
 - ▶ **Ө**едоръ (**Th**eodor), ор**ө**ографія (or**th**ography), м**v**ро (m**y**rrhe)
 - lacktriangleright *paccвирепел ightarrow разсвирlacktriangleright нежнейшего ightarrow нlacktrianglerightжнlacktriangleright

Disambiguation tasks

- identifying parts of speech
 - ightharpoonup *синее \rightarrow синее (blue), синье (more blue)
 - \blacktriangleright *тем \rightarrow темъ (of themes), тѣмъ (by that)
- identifying grammatical forms (number, gender, case, tense)
 - ightharpoonup *в море (into the sea), въ морь (within the sea)
 - ▶ *есть \rightarrow есть (it is), ѣсть (to eat)
- for some words, identifying semantic content is required
 - \blacktriangleright *мир \rightarrow миръ (peace), міръ (world)
 - ightharpoonup *neчy \rightarrow neчy (I fly), лѣчу (I heal)
- prononciation details (stress, e/ë) sometimes help



Converter for the old Russian orthography

- Dictionary-based, with some simple heuristics
- No full disambiguation, results need proofreading

Tyutchev, Silentium (1830)

Молчи, скрывайся и таи И чувства и мечты свои - Пускай в душевной глубине Встают и заходят оне Безмолвно, как звезды в ночи,- Любуйся ими - и молчи.

Молчи, скрывайся и таи И чувства и мечты свои -Пускай въ душевной глубин**ь** Встаютъ и заходятъ он**ь** Безмолвно, какъ зв**ь**зды въ ночи,-Любуйся ими - и молчи.

Outlook: the future of the old Russian orthography

- Custom 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