International Conference on Communication in Multicultural Society, CMSC 2015, 6-8 December 2015, Moscow, Russian Federation

Global English-related digraphia and Roman-Cyrillic biscriptal practices

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Abstract

This paper deals with the new sociolinguistic phenomenon of global English-related digraphia, or the use of the Roman script, commonly associated with English, to represent local languages alongside the native scripts. In non-English speaking communities, script alternation does not always coincide with language alternation; speakers of local languages creatively broker the resources provided by the Roman alphabet, without necessarily switching into English. The paper aims to investigate Roman-Cyrillic biscriptal practices, such as script-switching (nonce transliteration), script-mixing (grapho-hybridization) and script-ambiguation (bivalent graphic forms), the factors contributing to Roman-Cyrillic script manipulation and the socio-pragmatic purposes of its use in modern Russia are.

Keywords: Globalization of English; digraphia; code alternation; script alternation; sociolinguistics

1. Introduction

Studies in the relatively new field in sociolinguistics, the sociolinguistics of written multilingualism, argue that language contact phenomena, such as code-switching or language mixing, "in writing are substantially different from the corresponding practices in the spoken mode and require a theoretical approach and analytical tools that are specifically designed for written language" (Sebba, 2012, p. 113).

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One of the specific concepts that can provide a deeper insight into the mechanisms of code-switching in writing is the concept of "digraphia". Generally, it means the use of different scripts for one language. The most recent examples of digraphia are the situations in some former Soviet states, such as Moldavia or Turkmenistan, which used to share the Cyrillic script, but after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990s shifted to Roman. This type of script change over time is known as "diachronic (historical, or sequential) digraphia". The classic example of "synchronic (concurrent) digraphia" is Hindi/Urdu situation, as the two communities speaking basically the same language differentiate from each other by the script they use, Devanagari and Persian-Arabic. The sociolinguistic study of digraphia focuses on social factors, such as ideology, culture, or religion, determining script choice (Grivelet, 2001); for example, the shift to the Roman script in many cases is seen as prompted by the idea of modernization and westernization.

Lately, the notion of digraphia has caught the attention of linguists who study the globalization of English in the sphere computer-mediated communication. A new synchronic digraphic situation has emerged in this domain due to the fact that initially the Internet was technically restricted by the obligatory use of the ASCII (American Standard Code for Information Interchange), based on the Roman alphabet character set. Speakers of languages with non-Roman writing systems adapted to the constraints of the Roman-alphabet-only keyboards by developing the Romanized/Latinized representations of their languages, for example, "Latin-alphabet Greek" (Androutsopoulos, 2012). In the last two decades, thanks to technical innovations, the online use of other scripts has been made possible and there is no longer any technological necessity to use the Roman script. However, Roman-local script digraphic practices have developed the sociolinguistic implications of their own and computer-mediated communication in non-English speaking communities all over the world is carried out not only in English or in local languages, but also often in local languages transliterated into the Roman script. Androutsopoulos describes this phenomenon as "computer-mediated digraphia" (Androutsopoulos, 2012, p. 359).

Similar English-related biscriptal practices are registered in other domains, though the term "digraphia" is not usually employed. Research on the globalization of English indicates that the correlation between the use of the English language and the use of the Roman script in non-English speaking communities is not one-to-one. Bhatia and Ritchie point out that the assessment of the scope of English in advertising and global media is "deceptive" unless it takes into account "the use of English wrapped in non-Roman scripts" (Bhatia and Ritchie, 2013, p. 573), that is, the use of English language units transliterated into local scripts. And vice versa, transliteration from local languages into the Roman script, or "pseudo-English in Roman characters" (Proshina and Ustinova, 2012, p. 43) is described as common practice in different countries, for example, in the sphere of linguistic landscape. In general, the Roman script has spread globally and "most modern societies have become digraphic (or polygraphic) to a certain extent" (Angermeyer, 2012, p. 255).

As a result, script-alternation today does not always coincide with language-alternation; speakers of local languages use the Roman alphabet as a creative resource, without necessarily switching into English. By analogy with the notion of "diglossia with or without bilingualism", as suggested in Angermeyer (2005, p. 495), this phenomenon may be referred to as "digraphia without bilingualism". Many people in non-English speaking countries have a limited proficiency in English, but most of them are familiar with the Roman script and can manipulate both scripts for various purposes. In other words, such people may not be bilinguals in the traditional understanding of the term, but they are "biscriptals" (Bassetti, 2013, p. 652). Another notion which is relevant in examining global Roman-local script digraphia is "functional digraphia", or "an incomplete coexistence of two writing systems" (Unger, 2001, p. 141), when people learn a Romanized version of their language, but typically do not produce or read extended texts in it.

In each non-English speaking community, English-related digraphia has certain similarities and certain peculiarities, conditioned by the sociolinguistic situation of English/Roman script acquisition and the typology of the writing system of the language with which English contacts. This paper aims to highlight the major peculiarities of Roman-Cyrillic digraphia and "Roman-alphabet Russian" ("Latinized/Romanized Russian"), creatively employed by modern Russian speakers.

2. Data and methodology

The data for this paper have been selected from the corpora used in my previous studies on English-Russian interaction, mainly in Russian linguistic landscape and Internet domain names (Rivlina, 2015a, 2015b). The rationale behind such a cross-domain approach is that, first, as the data suggests, Roman-Cyrillic script manipulation is most visible in these domains in Russia today; second, despite some differences, the types, the causes and the implications of script choice in these domains are overall similar; and finally, biscriptal practices developed in different domains are not restricted by domain borders, but inevitably influence each other, contributing to the development of Russian speakers' digraphic/biscriptal skills.

The examples analyzed include the following three types of Roman-Cyrillic biscriptal patterns: a) Roman-Cyrillic nonce transliteration, or script-switching; b) Roman-Cyrillic grapho-hybridization, or script-mixing; and c) the use of bivalent graphic forms, or script-ambiguation. The unique features of the two scripts will be addressed to account for these patterns of the Roman script use in Russian written discourse. The analysis of the formal linguistic characteristics of the two scripts interacting with each other, which is the primary focus of the paper, will be accompanied by functional analysis of the socio-pragmatic meanings rendered by script choice in various cases.

3. Roman-Cyrillic digraphic/biscriptal practices: formal analysis

3.1. Roman-Cyrillic nonce transliteration, or script-switching

Conventional transliteration employed for lexical borrowings, which can be subsequently used by monolinguals, is not relevant for multilingualism discussion, whereas nonce transliteration can be seen as a feature of bilingual speech, a subtype of code-switching in writing, namely, as script-switching.

The peculiarities of nonce Roman-local script transliteration, including Roman-Cyrillic transliteration in Russia, are determined primarily by the fact that in most countries transliteration standards are "hardly known outside expert circles" (Androutsopoulos, 2012, p. 361), being "neither acquired through the normative mechanisms of the educational system nor controlled by norm-enforcing authorities" (Androutsopoulos, 2012, p. 369). Therefore, what is usually called "practical transliteration" is highly variable, inconsistent and different in a number of ways from the conventional transliteration systems. It does not mean, however, that practical transliteration has no rules and people "transliterate as they please" (Androutsopoulos, 2012, p. 372). Just the opposite, the variations in practical Romanized orthographies reveal some unique features of the Romanization process in each particular local context.

The Romanization of the Cyrillic character <x> may illustrate this point. In most transliteration standards, the Russian letter <x>, rendering the sound similar to English [h], is transliterated by the combination of Roman graphemes <kh> (see Table 1); for example, the name of the Russian city of *Хабаровск* is normatively transliterated as *Khabarovsk*. This correlation reflects the difference between the velar fricative [x] in Russian and glottal fricative [h] in English. However, in practical transliteration most Russians seem to disregard this subtle phonetic difference and transliterate Russian <x> as <h>, for example, *holodilnik.ru* (the transliterated Russian word "холодильник", "refrigerator"). Another option for this character widespread in Russian Internet is the use of a homographic Roman grapheme <x> with a different phonetic value ascribed, [h], for example, in *mexa.ru*, where the Russian word "меха", meaning "furs", is pronounced approximately as [me`ha].

These two alternative options are supported by some transliteration systems (see Table 1). It is unlikely, though, that Russian speakers choose these transliteration options consciously. A more feasible explanation would be that the choice is made intuitively, triggered by the differences in the writing systems typology. English belongs to so-called "phonologically opaque languages" with complicated correspondences between graphemes and phonemes, employing two-letter and three-letter graphemes, while Russian belongs to "phonologically transparent languages", with one phoneme typically correlating with one grapheme and one grapheme typically representing one phoneme (Bassetti, 2013, p. 650). Therefore, Russian speakers are inclined to avoid, if possible, the use of digraphs in their practical Cyrillic-Roman transliteration. There are other examples, which substantiate this tendency in practical transliteration from Cyrillic into the Roman script.

Another peculiarity, which makes Roman-Cyrillic script interaction unique, is the overlap between the two scripts. As can be seen from Table 2, some Cyrillic graphemes are unique, such as <Ж> or <Я>, others are homographic with or at least similar to the Roman script, especially, as capital letters, with some of them sharing the phonetic value, such as <O> or <K>, and some not, such as <B> rendering in Russian the sound similar to [v]. The use of the homographic character <x> to render the sound similar to [h], like in Russian, in *mexa.ru* can be described as "visual orthographic transliteration" (Androutsopoulos, 2012, p. 372), based on visual similarity rather than on phonological representation.

Table 1. Common systems for Romanizing/Latinizing Russian[1].

Cyrillic	Scholarly	ISO/R9: 1968; GOST 1971(1); UNGEGN (1987)	GOST 1971(2)	ISO9: 1995; GOST 2002(A)	GOST 2002(B)	ALA-LC	BS 2979: 1958	BGN/ PCGN	Passport
X/x	x (h)	h	kh	h	x	kh	kh	kh	kh

Table 2. Overlap between the character inventories of the Roman and Cyrillic alphabets (capitals only; based on Angermeyer, 2012).

Script	Unique characters	Shared characters, similar phonetic value	Shared characters, different phonetic value
Roman	D F G I J L N Q R S U V W Z	A E K M O T	B C H P X Y
Cyrillic	Г Ж Й Л П Ф Ц Э Ю Д И З Ч Ш Щ Я Ы Б Ь Ъ		

Thus, practical transliteration of Cyrillic <x> as <h> or <x> is consistent with the Russian, rather than English system of writing. Digraphs, which are common in English, tend to be avoided, different phonetic values are ascribed to graphemes and some verbal products, like *mexa.ru*, cannot be even read correctly by non-Russian speakers. Therefore, the linguistic product of such practical transliteration cannot be treated as English proper (cf., "pseudo-English in Roman characters", mentioned above). A more accurate description would be "Russian English" and even more precisely "Roman-alphabet Russian", or "Latinized/Romanized Russian", constituting the periphery of Russian English.

As for language contact description, tentatively, Romanized local languages can be interpreted as a specific type of code-mixing in writing, when the lexis of one language is mixed with the written code of another language. Another interesting point is that Romanization creates the opportunities for a *sui generis* type of code-switching in writing: code-switching without script-switching, between Romanized local languages and English, as in *mexa.ru* (Romanized Russian + English).

3.2. Roman-Cyrillic grapho-hybridization, or script-mixing

Grapho-hybridization is an integral part of code-mixing in written speech, widely reported in different countries, including Russia (Rivina, 2015b, pp. 443-444). In addition, there are some unique forms of Roman-Cyrillic grapho-hybridization, which do not imply English-Russian language mixing and can be accounted for by the peculiarities of the Russian writing system typology. Due to the overlap between the Roman and Cyrillic scripts, as discussed above, some Roman letters, which differ graphically from the Cyrillic script, but correspond to similar phonemes,

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[1] Systematic transliterations of Cyrillic to Roman: 1) the International Scholarly System, scientific transliteration based on the Czech alphabet and used in linguistics since the 19th century; 2) GOST, developed by the National Administration for Geodesy and Cartography in the 1960s-70s at the USSR Council of Ministers, last updated in 2006; 3) ISO, the scientific transliteration by the International Organization for Standardization; similar to UNGEGN the United Nations Romanization system for geographical names; 4) ALA-LC, American Library Association and Library of Congress Romanization systems for Slavic languages; 5) British Standard, the main system of the Oxford University Press; 6) BGN/PCGN, the Romanization system developed by the US Board on Geographic Names and the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use; 6) the transliteration system for the names in Russian international passports, developed by the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Federal Migration Service.

are often embedded into Russian words to substitute their Cyrillic counterparts as the markers or tokens of English in Russian written text without destroying the phonemic structure of the Russian word. For example, in the name of a restaurant in Moscow *Ваниль*, meaning "vanilla", the Roman grapheme <v> substitutes Cyrillic <в>, which renders a sound similar to [v] in the Russian word *Ваниль* (*Ваниль* → *Vаниль*). The fact that the Russian writing system is "phonologically transparent" makes such Roman-Cyrillic separate grapheme substitution, which can be also seen as partial transliteration, the most natural and elementary technique of English-Russian mixing, namely, Roman-Cyrillic script-mixing, available to people with different levels of bilingualism, even if limited to biscriptalism only.

3.3. Roman-Cyrillic bivalent forms, or script-ambiguation

The overlap between the two scripts may also lead to ambiguous graphic forms, which blur the distinction between the languages, when shared characters with similar phonetic values are deliberately employed and emphasized. For example, in the name of a nail salon *НоготОК*, meaning "fingernail", or a flower salon *Цвет'ок*, meaning "flower", the fact that the Russian suffix <-ок> is homographic with the English *OK* is emphasized through the use of a different font size or of an apostrophe. Graphic manipulation makes this part of the word bivalent and invokes additional positive meaning. By analogy with the notion of "code-ambiguation" as a specific bilingual strategy, suggested by Moody and Matsumoto (2012), this biscriptal strategy may be defined as "script-ambiguation".

4. Roman-Cyrillic digraphic/biscriptal practices: functional analysis

It would be impossible to cover all the purposes of biscriptal practices in detail in one paper; only the most important ones will be briefly outlined in this section.

First, as mentioned, the purposes of Roman-local script manipulation may be purely technical and practical, such as coping with the technical constraints in computer-mediated communication or catering for the needs of monoliterate readers. Another important reason is that the "otherness", the unconventional use of one script against the background of the other, contributes to what Bhatia and Ritchie define as "cosmetic" communicative effects (Bhatia and Ritchie, 2013, p. 594), creating variety, attracting attention, increasing recognition and memorability. In addition, the interplay between the two scripts is often used for language play, for example, for bilingual punning, as in the case of *НоготОК*.

As for the socio-psychological implications of script-switching and script-mixing, they are conditioned by "visual symbolism" and "iconicity" of scripts (Sebba, 2015). For speakers of languages using other writing systems, the Roman script iconically represents English as the global language. Hence, it renders the ideas of modernity, sophistication, technological advance, or westernization/internationalization, and is widely employed for identity construction. People in non-English speaking countries indicate different degrees of "global-ness" and "local-ness" (in our case, "Russian-ness") by manipulating the two scripts, Roman and local.

Finally, in the contexts in which digraphia blurs the boundaries between the languages, it generates so-called "translingual" effects that challenge linguistic, national, cultural and domain boundaries. Further investigation of such cases is needed in terms of "translingualism" research, which "moves us beyond a consideration of individual or monolithic languages to life between and across languages" (Canagarajah, 2013, p. 1).

5. Conclusion

The globalization of English and the development of modern technologies have caused a number of new sociolinguistic phenomena, the global spread of the Roman script among them. The Roman-Cyrillic examples discussed here demonstrate that, being manipulated creatively, English-related digraphia warrants special examination, which can contribute to a deeper understanding of the mechanisms of the English language globalization in general and in each particular socio-linguistic context.

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