

# Current Comments

## Introducing ISI's *Transliterated Dictionary of the Russian Language*

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Over the years I've felt a great deal of frustration in examining Russian scientific texts. One reason is that I simply haven't been able to keep up with my Russian. Another is the Cyrillic alphabet which presents a significant obstacle to reading Russian.

This alphabet, introduced in the ninth century by St. Cyril, combines letters from the Greek and Roman alphabets. As such, it is unfamiliar to most of us in the West. We learn our alphabet as children through endless repetition until we know it by rote. As adults, everyday use of alphabetically arranged tools, like telephone books or encyclopedias, reinforces our skill. But this constantly reinforced learning is impossible for people who deal with Russian occasionally.

Indeed, while the appearance of non-Roman letters slows down one's reading of Russian, Cyrillic's different alphabetic ordering scheme creates additional frustrations. I know people who can converse in Russian but still find it difficult to locate a word in a Russian-English dictionary.

The unfamiliar ordering scheme thus makes most standard Russian-English dictionaries difficult to use. I can well remember my problems

with such dictionaries during my recent travels in the Soviet Union. Yet since I know some Russian, I am not completely stymied by a Cyrillic text. But I often wonder how many people don't even consider learning Russian because of its unfamiliar alphabet. A recent Modern Language Association survey of 2,376 US colleges and universities shows that Russian is one of the least popular languages among American students.<sup>1</sup>

To help people who must occasionally read Russian overcome the obstacles of Cyrillic, ISI® is introducing the *Transliterated Dictionary of the Russian Language*, to be published next month. This transliterated dictionary is designed to help scholars, students, and educated lay persons deal with a variety of Cyrillic texts. For the librarian, this may mean bibliographic citations. For the scientist it may be an abstract or an entire journal article. For the tourist it may be a poster or sign.

The dictionary results from my long-term interest in the transliteration of non-Roman alphabets.<sup>2,3</sup> Transliteration is the spelling of words from one language with characters from the alphabet of another. Ideally, it is a one-for-one character-by-character replacement. For example, *London* is the Roman trans-

literation of the Russian word Лондон. Publication of this dictionary reflects my conviction that transliteration can help bridge the communication gap that is created by the use of non-Roman alphabets. It is always amusing to illustrate this problem by asking friends if they recognize the word Хрущев ("Khrushchev").

The dictionary contains a standard conversion table (shown in Figure 1), that makes it possible to quickly determine the Roman equivalent for each Cyrillic letter. Any person can transliterate a Russian text with minimum effort. In fact, the procedure is purely mechanical and can even be done by machine.

Once transliterated, nearly 17,000 Russian words can be looked up in the Russian-to-English section to obtain the translation. This is simple because in this section, the Russian words are not only in Roman letters, they are also arranged according to the *order* of the Roman alphabet. In addition to the transliterated form, brief definitions and designations of parts of speech are provided for each Russian word. Sample entries are shown in Figure 2.

While the dictionary is designed primarily for reading Russian texts, there is also an English-to-Russian section. When you need the Russian equivalent of an English word, just look up the word in the English-to-Russian section. (See Figure 3.) It provides the Russian word in transliterated form. You use the conversion table to reconstruct the word in its Cyrillic form.

The words contained in this dictionary were transliterated by the

**Figure 1.**

The Cyrillic-to-Roman and Roman-to-Cyrillic conversion tables from ISI's *Transliterated Dictionary of the Russian Language*.

Cyrillic	Roman	Roman	Cyrillic
А	a	a	А
Б(б)	b	b	Б(б)
В	v	ch	Ч
Г	g	d	Д
Д	d	e	Е, Ё
Е, Ё	e	é	Э
Ж	zh	f	Ф
З	z	g	Г
И, Й	i	i	И, Й
К	k	k	К
Л	l	kh	Х
М	m	l	Л
Н	n	m	М
О	o	n	Н
П	p	o	О
Р	r	p	Р
С	s	r	С
Т	t	s	С
У	u	sh	Ш
Ф	f	shch	Щ
Х	kh	t	Т
Ц	ts	ts	Ц
Ч	ch	u	У
Ш	sh	v	В
Щ	shch	y	Ы
Ъ	"	ya	Я
Ы	y	yu	Ю
Ь	·	z	З
Э	é	zh	Ж
Ю	yu	·	Ь
Я	ya	"	Ъ

staff of ISI following the system of the British Standards Institute (BSI). This system was used because it seemed to combine the best features of two other leading systems, the Library of Congress and Board of Geographic Names.

The British Standards Institute system's clarity and lack of special

**Figure 2.**

Sample entries from the Russian-to-English section. The abbreviation "n.m." stands for "masculine noun," and "n.f." for "feminine noun."

Russian	Grammar	English
abazhur	(n.m.)	lamp shade
abbat	(n.m.)	abbot
aberratsiya	(n.f.)	aberration
abonement	(n.m.)	subscription
aborigen	(n.m.)	aboriginal

symbols make it a useful system for people untrained in linguistics. In addition, it is the system used by several English-language publishers of Russian materials and by many agencies of the United States government. Since the Library of Congress (LC) system agrees with the BSI system in all but a few instances, it is a simple matter to convert one system to the other. One small difference is the use of an arc-like symbol called the ligature. It shows that a group of Roman letters represent one letter in Cyrillic. LC uses it but BSI does not. Thus, LC writes III as *shch* and BSI writes it as *shch*. Also, a few letters are different. LC transliterates Ю to *iū*; BSI changes it to *yu*. By the LC system Я is *iā*; but by the BSI system it is *ya*.

The 27th edition of the Akhmanova-Wilson *Russian-English Dic-*

**Figure 3.**

Sample entries from the English-to-Russian section.

English	Grammar	Russian
abbot	(n.m.)	abbat
aberration	(n.f.)	aberratsiya
aboriginal	(n.m.)	aborigen
lamp shade	(n.m.)	abazhur
subscription	(n.m.)	abonement

*tionary*<sup>4</sup> is the main source for the terms included in the *Transliterated Dictionary of the Russian Language*. The Akhmanova-Wilson dictionary covers words most frequently encountered in Russian texts. They are supplemented by over 1000 technical terms selected by the ISI staff. I considered including still more technical terms from other major sources such as glossaries and thesauri. But, in the end, we decided to keep the size of the dictionary down. In that way we could publish it at reasonable cost and serve the widest possible audience.

If our dictionary is successful, I hope to supplement this first edition with a list or volume of technical terms whose meanings are not obvious in transliteration. The remarkable fact is that the number of such words is relatively small. That is why transliteration "works." Once you have translated the truly Slavic terms in a text, you have little or no difficulty comprehending the rest of the transliteration. A large percentage of Russian technical words are cognates, or words borrowed from other languages. Their spellings and pronunciations remain much the same in Russian. Thus, in Cyrillic "electron" appears as электрон, which when transliterated becomes "elektron." "Algorithm" becomes "algoritm" and "escalator" becomes "eskalator." And apart from technical terms, the average reader will be surprised to see how many Russian words are derived from Western languages.

I believe this transliterated Russian-English dictionary will be of use to a variety of people who wish to

read or translate Russian. Librarians involved in cataloging Russian materials will find it a great timesaver, as should anyone who must occasionally index or abstract Russian material. Instructors teaching introductory courses in Russian should find this dictionary a handy study aid for their students. It will help overcome an initial resistance for the reasons cited before. Finally, the non-Russian traveler to the Soviet Union will find this dictionary a welcome companion.

As much as I have been personally involved with the conception and creation of this dictionary, it simply would not have been possible to complete without the assistance of my close colleague and friend, the late Robert Hayne.<sup>5</sup> As ISI's Chief Editor, he assisted me in clarifying the objectives and design of the dictionary. He also launched the data gathering effort and worked out the details of the typographic composition systems. After his death the project waned but was given new life with the establishment of ISI Press™. It would be reasonable to refer to it as the "Garfield-Hayne Transliterated Dictionary of the Russian Language."

I also wish to recognize the technical assistance of Yuri Meerovich in the transliteration work itself. Mr. Meerovich is currently teaching in the "English for Speakers of Other Languages" program of the Philadelphia Board of Education. Until 1974 he was a teacher and translator at the Institute of Foreign Languages in Moscow. Excellent advice was also received from Dr. Michael Zarechnak, of the Department of Languages and Linguistics at Georgetown University.

Any serious scholar who makes continuous use of Russian may regard this dictionary as an unnecessary crutch. If any person can look up names in a Russian phonebook as rapidly as in his or her own, then I would have to agree. But most scientists and scholars cannot afford the luxury of keeping up with their Russian. This dictionary is designed to save them a lot of time, energy, and frustration.

The *Transliterated Dictionary of the Russian Language* will be available in early May from ISI Press, 325 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA 19106. Its price will be \$25.00. Its ISBN (International Standard Book Number) is 0-89495-003-7.

#### REFERENCES

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\*Reprinted in: Garfield E. *Essays of an information scientist*. Philadelphia: ISI Press, 1977. 2 vols.