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## It's Russian – but not as we know it

John Dunn  
University of Glasgow

John Dunn, who is well-known to readers of *Rusistika* and to Russian scholars world-wide, has decided to take early retirement and will be moving to Italy this summer. This is an enormous loss to Russian studies in Britain and it is hoped that John will still continue with his research work and be an active presence at conferences for many years to come. He will be sorely missed both by his colleagues at Glasgow and by his students and we would like to take this opportunity to wish John and Marie many years of health and happiness in their new home. John can still be contacted via his email [J.Dunn@slavonic.arts.gla.ac.uk](mailto:J.Dunn@slavonic.arts.gla.ac.uk) and mail can still be sent to him at the Slavonic Studies Department, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ. *Margaret Tejerizo*.

**А.В.: Сложно ли правильно неправильно писать слова?**

**Г.Г.: Абсолютно просто. Смотрите – «сложна ли правельна нпправельна писатъ слава». Тут все зависит от уровня грамотности неграмотности пишущего.<sup>1</sup>**

Terry Wade was always noted for the enthusiasm with which he monitored as closely as he could the state of the Russian language and for the keen eye that he kept on changes taking place in the language. It thus seems inconceivable that the phenomenon being simultaneously discussed and illustrated in the above piece of dialogue would have escaped his attention, even if his equally strong concern for linguistic propriety and rectitude might have caused him to react to it with less than total approval.

This exchange purports to be part of a conversation between the journalist Artem Vernidub and a prominent member of Russian blogging fraternity (Ruslan Paushu, aka Goblin Gaga), and they are referring to something that has become a significant feature of the Russian language as used on the internet and sometimes beyond. This is known by various names, but most commonly as *падонский язык* or, less often, *аффтарский язык* and is a specific variety of the written language based on the deliberate misspelling of words.

The origins of this particular type of language game are not exactly shrouded in mystery, though they do give rise to some disputes among those who care to dispute such things.<sup>2</sup> It seems most probable that it first appeared in certain counter-cultural corners of the internet sometime in the mid to late

1990s. In 1999 a website which did not exactly go to inordinate lengths to hide its counter-cultural credentials (<http://www.fuck.ru>) published a so-called *Манифест антиграматности*,<sup>3</sup> and other elements of this language began to appear separately at around the same time on other websites.<sup>4</sup> If part of the exercise was a rebellion against the constraints of traditional orthography, there also seems to have been a practical purpose, namely the need to find ways of by-passing filters designed to exclude certain forms of unconventional language. The main practitioners of this new orthography seem to have been a group calling themselves *падонки*, who hung about on the site <http://www.udaff.com>.

What brought the language out of its initial obscurity was a sudden increase in the numbers of Russian users of the blogging site LiveJournal (<http://www.livejournal.com>) sometime at the end of 2003. Among these were some of the above-mentioned *падонки*, who brought their own special language with them and, in so doing, drew it to the attention of the wider community of Russian internet users.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the most common and widely known elements of *падонский язык* are what may be called evaluative terms; that is, they appear in comments appended to texts (known as *креативы*) posted on the LiveJournal site. These comments can express approval: *аффтар жжот, аффтар пешиш исчо, Аццкий Сотона*; disapproval: *аффтар вытей йаду, в Бабруйск, животное, учи албанский*; or be ambiguous, as in the abbreviation: *КГ/АМ*, which can be expanded either as *Креатифф – гавно, аффтар – мудака* or as *Креатифф гениален, аффтар – маладец* according to taste.

Some of these expressions belong to an internet folklore: the phrase *учи албанский*, for example, goes back to an incident when an American user of LiveJournal asked why people were posting texts in an incomprehensible foreign language.<sup>6</sup> And although in principle any lexical item can be placed in front of the distorting mirror of *падонский язык*,<sup>7</sup> a substantial part of the language consists in practice of a limited number of 'падонский' neologisms, mostly coined in circumstances of interest only to

the most dedicated students of counter-cultural minutiae.<sup>8</sup>

On the principle that the best way to keep a secret is to announce it on the internet, this language might have remained the private plaything of a small and select group of people. What seems to have brought *падонский язык* out of the virtual world and into the real world was an article published in May 2005 in the Russian version of *Newsweek*.<sup>9</sup> This was followed by various internet refutations and supplements, but now this language has spread to radio stations (which at first sight would appear problematic, but see below), t-shirts, advertisements, graffiti (someone claims to have found *превед* written on a door in an Israeli prison)<sup>10</sup> and even political protests: on 23 February 2006 activists from the *Soiuz pravyykh sil* held a demonstration outside the main military commissariat in Moscow with banners saying: *Иванов, превед!* and *Ф аццтафку, аццкккй сотона!*,<sup>11</sup> while on 11 May a group of five young people attempted to hold an unsanctioned tasting of Borzhomi mineral water (which has been banned by the Russian trading standards authorities). The latter group used the slogan *Вьтей йаду*, though from reports of the event it is difficult to avoid the impression that it may have had more to do with an excuse to use a slogan taken from *падонский язык* than with trying to make a serious point about the banning of Georgian wines and mineral waters.<sup>12</sup>

Meanwhile, those who monitor the latest developments in Russian literature will have noticed that Viktor Pelevin has incorporated an example of *падонский язык* in the title of his latest work: *Шлем ужаса. Креатифф о Тесее и Минотавре*.<sup>13</sup> It is therefore perhaps not surprising that there is a further example (*Афтар неши исчо*) in an interview that Pelevin gave to *Izvestiia* in connection with the publication of the work at the end of last year.<sup>14</sup>

Some indication of the popularity of *падонский язык* is given by the following statistics for various 'misspellings' of the word *автор*, taken from the search engine <http://www.google.ru> on 21 May 2006:

афтар	486,000 hits
аффтар	598,000 hits
аффтор	96,000 hits
афтор	133,000 hits

A similar search carried out on the same site for *превед* on 15 June 2006 came up with no fewer than 3,910,000 responses.

In an age marked by the rapid assimilation of counter-cultural and popular cultural phenomena it is perhaps inevitable that the *падонский язык* should itself become a subject of study, and the German-based scholar Gasan Guseinov has already published a fully-referenced academic paper, which is accompanied by a dictionary.<sup>15</sup> Guseinov's dictionary is useful for its explanations, though the fullest dictionary is that found on Wikipedia;<sup>16</sup> for all its deficiencies Wikipedia, as a site that can be updated and renewed on a rapid basis, is ideally suited for this kind of material. And Wikipedia also has the best reading list of secondary material;

again, for this particular purpose it is the ideal location, not least because all the relevant materials are, not surprisingly, available on the internet.

There are a number of points that can be made about *падонский язык*. The first is that it started out and largely remains a counter-cultural language. A large proportion of the entries in the Wikipedia dictionary relate to *mat* or other forms of sexually explicit language; there is also, as Guseinov has noted, a rather nasty homophobic and anti-semitic thread running through some forms of the language, though the nature of this particular medium makes it difficult to assess how seriously this is intended to be taken. None the less, there is occasionally some verbal creativity that is perhaps worthy of a wider audience, for example *гидрокалбаса*, which means 'tap water used to dilute vodka in the absence of proper *zakuski*'.

The second point relates to a comment made by James Muckle in a recent issue of *Rusistika*, when, referring to his experiences of learning Russian at the Joint Services Schools for Linguists, he said that 'the notion was not discouraged sufficiently that Russian spelling was "phonetic"'.<sup>17</sup> The present system of Russian orthography that readers of this journal have come to know and love so well was to a large extent the creation of early eighteenth-century printers and in many respects betrays the Church Slavonic basis of their linguistic training. Certainly *падонский язык* reveals with great clarity the complicated relationship that exists between this system and phonetics of the standard modern language.

To a very great extent *падонский язык* is based on four areas which are problematic for standard orthography (and which correspond to a large extent, though not completely, with the issues mentioned by James Muckle): these are *akan'e*, the neutralisation of the distinction between voiced and unvoiced consonants in certain positions, the arbitrary use of letters to indicate vowel sounds (and especially *o*, *u* and *ы*) after those sibilant consonants that do not form hard and soft pairs and certain specific redundancies within the system (сч = щ; йа = я); the phrase *аффтар неши исчо* contains examples of all of these. One oddity is the preference for фф over ф, which goes back to West European transcription practices of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and specifically to the orthography frequently used for émigré surnames. One area of difficulty is the spelling of final consonants: words such as *красавчег* or *превед* work in the nominative singular, but are problematic in other forms, when an ending is attached and the distinction between voiced and unvoiced consonants restored.

If one wishes to consider the cultural significance of *падонский язык*, the obvious comparison would be with the special form of English that has evolved for use in text messages. Both are examples of ludic language, playing games with the vagaries of inadequate orthographic systems to produce in one case visual puns and in the other case intentional nonsense. Both are essentially written forms: the use of *падонский язык* on the radio, mentioned earlier,

apparently involves certain characteristic items of vocabulary and phraseology, rather than the more salient characteristic of eccentric orthography.<sup>18</sup> The third feature the two varieties have in common is that they seem to indicate a common view that the traditional norms are not required and perhaps not even desirable in certain new forms of writing, but at the same time both are evolving their own standards; to use the terminology that the present writer has used elsewhere, both are prime examples of contextually determined micro-standards, existing as part of a larger, post-standard language.<sup>19</sup> True, there are problems with the standardisation of a language that has as its *raison d'être* the subversion of a standard, a point that is neatly demonstrated by the exchange quoted at the beginning of this article.

The process of standardisation was highlighted in a curious way by the Yandex search engine: apparently at one time if someone typed in *афтор*, it asked the enquirer if there had been a typing error and suggested instead *афтар*.<sup>20</sup> This eccentric step evidently provoked objections, which in turn prompted a response in Yandex's corporate blog [sic]. Parts of this response are worth quoting:

Отвечаем: [автор] и [афтар] — два разных слова, они принадлежат к двум разным пластам языка, имеют разную сочетаемость.

По ассоциациям запросов видно, что такую опечатку делают т.н. «падонки», которые намеренно пишут это слово через «ф». Нормальный человек не поставит случайно вместо «в» букву «ф» — и по звучанию не похоже, и расположена на клавиатуре не рядом.

Иными словами замену [афтор] -> [афтар] мы считаем вполне адекватной. Более того, по-видимому, орфографической ошибкой является написание [автор жжот]. Правильно [афтар жжот].<sup>21</sup>

The response by Yandex illustrates one of the differences between the language of text messages and *падонский язык*: with the exception of *lite/light* (which occurs widely outside text language), the abbreviated forms created for the former are not generally regarded as separate words, but as more or less automatic substitutions prompted by a particular context. At least some of the elements of *падонский язык*, however, have become distinct words in their own right, which even in the context for which they were created have special fixed usages and specific combinatorial possibilities. In other words, an *аффтар* is not the same as an *автор*, and the combinations:

\*автор жжот

\*аффтар известного романа

are equally 'wrong', unless, that is, one is deliberately trying to flout the conventions of *падонский язык*.

There is a second difference between the two varieties: text language came into being for a particular practical purpose, namely to allow for the creation for as long a message as possible within the

tight confines prescribed by the SMS regulations. The practical purpose behind *падонский язык*, the evasion of filters for bad language, relates to only part of the language and is not fundamental. It is true that *падонский язык*, like *жаргон*, started out as a form of corporate slang: if the latter is, or was originally, the private language of certain sections of the criminal fraternity, the former was designed by a specific community of internet users simultaneously to create group solidarity and to exclude outsiders. Like *жаргон*, however, it has escaped from its original confines to be used, if not by all and sundry, then by anyone who feels like it.<sup>22</sup>

*Падонский язык* is probably best seen as part of the *стёб* tradition. This form of cultural and linguistic mockery apparently appeared in the 1970s, though it flourished publicly only in the immediate post-Soviet period. Though the term appears to be capable of a certain elasticity of meaning, an essential element of *стёб* is the subversion of hierarchies. If the traditional political and cultural hierarchies of the Soviet period have disappeared and not been as yet replaced, the one area where a clear hierarchy remains is the orthography and grammar of standard Russian. And this seems to be the motivation that lies behind the *Манифест антиграматности* and some of the statements quoted by Guseinov in his article.

There remains one final question: given the relative unimportance of any practical function of *падонский язык* and the limited lifetime of anything which is essentially a joke, does this variety have any long-term future? Viktor Svintsov, the chief editor of the *gramota.ru* website, considers that it will not survive for more than a year,<sup>23</sup> and there does appear to be an element of fashion about the whole concept. It is also the case that a sort of *anti-padonskii iazyk* movement is forming, an insistence on observing traditional orthography as a reaction against the *хулиганство* of this particular variant of *новояз*.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, two factors suggest that *падонский язык*, or, at least, some of its elements, may enjoy a more permanent status: the first of these is the general popularity of various forms of slang and unconventional language among certain sections of the Russian population, especially young people; the second is the fact that certain parts of the language appear to have become separate lexical or phraseological items in their own right. One thing seems clear: 100 years from now a group of Slavists will gather in some as yet unknowable location to listen to a paper explaining just exactly what Pelevin was doing when he settled on the title of his 2005 novel on Theseus and the Minotaur.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Sergei Belukhin, 'Afftary skazali Newsweek'u svoe "KG/AM", <<http://www.utro.ru/articles/2005/05/17/438788.shtml>> Vernidub did not use this pearl of wisdom in his own article (see note 5).

<sup>2</sup> Pavel Protasov, *P@utina, vypusk 25* <<http://old.russ.ru/culture/network/20050523.html>>

<sup>3</sup> Now available at <<http://guelman.ru/slava/manifest/istochnik/shelli.htm>>

<sup>4</sup> Protasov, op. cit.

- <sup>5</sup> Artem Vernidub, 'U iazyka est' aftar', *Russkii Newsweek*, 17 (47), 16-22 May 2005 <<http://runewsweek.ru/theme/print.php?tid=16&rid=215>>
- <sup>6</sup> Belukhin, op. cit.
- <sup>7</sup> See, for example, the 'Щиталачга' [sic] published at the beginning of Kirill Denisov, 'Umiraed zaicheg moi', *Izvestiia*, 26 April 2006. Internet version: <<http://www.izvestia.ru/lpage/article3092421/index.html>>
- <sup>8</sup> Those who wish, for example, to read a full account of the circumstances in which the term *prevved* was coined and popularised may turn to Igor' Belkin, Aleksandr Amzin, *Polnyi prevved*, <<http://lenta.ru/articles/2006/02/28/prevved>>
- <sup>9</sup> Vernidub, op. cit.
- <sup>10</sup> Denisov, op. cit.
- <sup>11</sup> Belkin and Amzin, op. cit.
- <sup>12</sup> <<http://www.newsru.com/russia/11may2006/u4astnegi.html>> (with a transliterated example of padonskii iazyk in the URL); the report of the same incident in Gazeta.ru, however, uses the standard spelling <<http://www.gazeta.ru/cgi-bin/newsarc.cgi?lenta=lenta&day=11&month=05&year=2006>>.
- <sup>13</sup> Published by Otkrytyi mir, Moscow, 2005.
- <sup>14</sup> 'Viktor Pelevin: 'Glavnyi pisatel' Rosssii – polkovnich'ia dolzhnost', a ia leitenant zapasa', *Izvestiia*, 3 November 2005. Internet version: <<http://www.izvestia.ru/culture/article3003450>>
- <sup>15</sup> Gasan Gusejnov, *Berloga vebloga. Vvedenie v èrraticeskuiu semantiku*, <[http://www.speakrus.ru/gg/microprosa\\_erratica-1.htm](http://www.speakrus.ru/gg/microprosa_erratica-1.htm)>
- <sup>16</sup> <[http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Язык\\_падонкаф](http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Язык_падонкаф)>; for other dictionaries see: <<http://vrn.best-city.ru/forum/thread4193/>> and <<http://5h00.livejournal.com/218401.html?page=2>>
- <sup>17</sup> James Muckle, 'What have teachers of Russian achieved in fifty years? Reflections on some influences on our work', *Rusistika*, 30, autumn 2005, p. 16.
- <sup>18</sup> Belkin and Amzin, op. cit.
- <sup>19</sup> See, for example, J.A. Dunn, 'The Emergence of Slavonic Post-Literary Languages: Some Preliminary Observations', in *British Contributions to the XIII International Congress of Slavists*, Glasgow, 2003, <<http://hdl.handle.net/1905/24>> (p. 16); Id, 'How to speak new Russian', *Rusistika*, 20, September 1999, p. 23.
- <sup>20</sup> Belkin and Amzin, op. cit. This was no longer the case in May 2006, though, rather surprisingly, афтрап was suggested as an alternative to аффтрап.
- <sup>21</sup> <<http://company.yandex.ru/blog/?msg=100027&month=8&year=2005>>
- <sup>22</sup> In this context it may be noted that in the 1990s deliberate misspellings (such as the self-referential *Alles valsch*) were a feature of the Austrian television comedy series *Tohuwabohu*; some of these were used to make more or less pointless bilingual puns on the names of singers or rock groups, e.g. 'Chair' for Cher. More recently the controversial French rapper Monsieur R has released a CD with the title *Politikment Incorrek* <<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,1785103,00.html>>.
- <sup>23</sup> Quoted in Denisov, op. cit.
- <sup>24</sup> For example the Акция «Я умею говорить по-русски» <<http://www.tyv.name/action/>>.