

RUSSIAN-TO-ENGLISH HOMOGRAPHS

LEE B. CROFT
Tempe, Arizona

Most dictionaries define homograph in terms of words taken from the same language, saying nothing about words from two different languages involving partially overlapping alphabets (e.g., the English Latin alphabet and the Russian Cyrillic alphabet). For example, in their Dictionary of Linguistics (Littlefield and Adams, 1969), Mario Pei and Frank Gaynor define homograph as "a word identical in written form with another given word of the same language, but entirely different in origin, sound, and meaning". In contrast, this paper, in considered conformance with the etymology of the word from the Greek, defines an interlingual homograph to be one of two or more words which are identically written regardless of their meanings, derivation, pronunciation, language membership or alphabet constituency.

This non-discriminatory definition enables one to thwart any literary derogation of this kind of study in that it includes the following literary uses of Russian-to-English homographs. The first such usage may be found in the November 1973 Intellectual Digest (pp. 10) in an interview of the Russian poet, Andrei Voznesensky, by Herbert R. Lottman. This interview mentions that, in his collection of experimental visual poetry, Maga, Voznesensky presents the English words ECHO WHEN with the Russian words TECHO MHE ("I feel cramped") lying flat below them as if reflected upward from a pool. The second usage involves the Russian letter 'H' (phonetic 'n') which Agatha Christie's detective hero, Hercule Poirot, found embroidered on the corner of a handkerchief in Murder on the Orient Express. At first, of course, this vital clue was disregarded since it was assumed that the letter was an English 'H'. A third, more critical, literary usage of Russian-to-English homography may be found in a scholarly article entitled "'P' or 'R': Who wrote the Mnemosyne review?" (Russian Literature TriQuarterly, No. 10, pp. 274-278) in which Antonia Glasse mentions the fact that a letter 'P' written in signature after the review in question could be either Latin 'P' (standing as an initial, perhaps, for 'Pushkin') or Cyrillic 'P' (phonetic 'r', standing as an initial for 'Ryleev' or, more likely, an abbreviation of 're-daktor', the Russian word for editor).

With these literary usages in mind, S. I. Ozegov's 53,000 word Slovar' russkogo jazyka ("Dictionary of the Russian Language"), published in Moscow in 1960, was scanned to see if any other Russian-to-English homographs could be found. The first problem was to decide which of the 33 letters of the Russian Cyrillic alphabet would be

allowed as homographic. After some sampling, it was decided that A, B, E, K, M, H, O, P, C, T, Y and X would be allowed even though some of the lower-case variants differ slightly from those of English. Cursive variants were not considered at all, although there are some cursive variants of Russian letters which are not allowed in printed form which would be recognizable to an English reader. Perhaps another study could include cursive homographs as well as printed ones.

In scanning the Russian dictionary, one has to keep in mind not only the form cited, but also the many possible inflectional variations which may occur. For example, Russian POK (fate) has no English counterpart until one recalls the prepositional case ending -Е which then yields POKE, and the Russian CHOCKA (footnote) has no counterpart unless one uses the genitive plural zero ending which yields CHOCK. Also, a word may have more than one counterpart as in the case of the English TOM which, in Russian, is either prepositional (that) or nominative (volume). In addition, one-letter words are excluded as are Russian words which are homographic with English abbreviations: Russian HY (well), past tense verb POC (he grew), and inflected forms PTA, PTE, PTY of POT (mouth).

In the following lists, an English translation of each Russian word is given, sometimes with bits of grammatical information. The English meanings of the words are left to the reader who can easily look them up in Webster's. The lists follow the Russian alphabetical order.

AH 'but'	HA 'on'	OH 'he'
AY 'hello, hi'	HE 'not'	OX 'och!'
AX 'ach!'	HO 'but'	TO 'this'
APT 'art'	OHO 'it'	
BAP 'pitch, wax'	PAM gen. pl. 'frames'	
BAT gen. pl. 'weddings'	PAH gen. pl. 'wounds'	
BOH 'over there!'	PAC gen. pl. 'races'	
BOP 'thief'	POM 'rum'	
BOT 'here is..'	POT 'mouth'	
MAK 'poppy'	CAM 'himself'	
MAT 'check' (in chess)	CEP short adj. 'grey'	
MAX 'stroke, blow'	COB gen. pl. 'owls'	
MEX 'fur'	COM 'small fish'	
MOP 'pestilence'	COP 'litter, trash'	
MOT 'squanderer'	COX gen. pl. 'wooden plows'	
HAP gen. pl. 'slat bed'	TAM 'there'	
HEM short adj. 'dumb'	TAP gen. pl. 'packings'	
HET 'no'	TOM prep. 'that', 'volume'	
HOC 'nose'	TOP gen. pl. 'Torahs (?)'	
HOT gen. pl. 'notes'	TOT 'that'	
ATOM 'atom'	MACK gen. pl. 'masks'	
BATE prep. 'wadding'	MATE prep. 'check' (in chess)	
BOCK 'wax'	MOPE 'sea'	
MAKE prep. 'poppy'	MOTE prep. 'squanderer'	
MAMA 'mama'	HATE 'to these'	

HOBO	short adj. neut. 'new'	COKY	dat. 'juice'
PAME	prep. 'frame'	COMA	gen. 'small fish'
PACA	'race, genotype'	COME	prep. 'small fish'
PACE	prep. 'race, genotype'	COPE	prep. 'litter, trash'
POKE	prep. 'fate'	COCK	gen. pl. 'nipples'
POME	prep. 'rum'	TOME	prep. 'volume, tome'
CEPE	prep. 'sulphur'	TOCK	gen. pl. 'sadnesses'
COKE	prep. 'juice'		
HAPAX	prep. pl. 'slat beds'	COCKY	acc. 'nipple'
CHOCK	gen. pl. 'footnotes'	TOTEM	'totem'

As it turns out, no homographic Russian verb forms were found despite the likely inflectional endings -ET (3rd singular), -EM (1st plural), -ETE (2nd plural) and -YT (3rd plural). (Note that the 3rd plural -AT is precluded by the possible range of preceding Russian letters.) There are no legitimate homographs of more than five letters in the list. The English counterpart of the Russian TAPTAP (Tartar) is hyphenated, and Webster's doesn't include the possible (?) English counterparts of BEPECK (heather) or PEAKTOP (reactor). Analogously, there appears to be no Russian counterpart to the English word PECTATE, mentioned in the February 1973 Word Ways as the longest English word written entirely with Cyrillic characters. ATOM, MAMA and TOTEM are the only homographs which have the same meaning in both Russian and English.

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