



DOI: 10.22363/2618-897X-2023-20-1-146-156

EDN: VGNYNP

Research Article

What's In A Russian English Username? A Case Study of Social Media Accounts Names

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Abstract. The present paper examines social media account usernames of Russian speakers of English. It aims to classify over a hundred Russian English usernames (collected between 2016–2021) in terms of their structure, typical linguistic features as well as translingual and transcultural patterns that underpin their creation. This paper argues that Russian speakers of English consciously and / or subconsciously creating their usernames employ a number of translingual and transcultural strategies and practices that are aimed at retaining and transmitting Russian linguacultural identity within such global multicultural English-dominated domain as international social media. Apart from signalling Russian identity of their owners, the analyzed usernames demonstrate that Russian social media users being bilingual en masse (at least, at a graphic level), do draw on Russian English for communication within the landscape of this social media thus facilitating further formation of the social media Russian English.

Key words: usernames, social media Russian English (IRE), Russian English, Russian linguacultural identity, Expanding circle, World Englishes (WE)

Article history: received 18.11.2022; accepted 04.01.2023

Conflict of interests: none

For citation: Lebedeva, I.L. 2022. “What's In A Russian English Username? A Case Study of Social Media Accounts Names”. *Polylinguality and Transcultural Practices*, 20 (1):146–156. DOI: 10.22363/2618-897X-2023-20-1-146-156

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Что в имени пользователя тебе моем: на материале русского варианта английского языка в социальных сетях

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Аннотация. Исследуются юзернеймы, которые создают в международной социальной сети русские носители английского языка. Впервые представлена классификация более ста юзернеймов, собранных в период с 2016 до 2021 год включительно, с точки зрения их структуры, рекуррентных лингвистических черт, а также транслингвальных и транскультурных паттернов, лежащих в основе их создания. Установлено, что русские носители английского языка при создании своих юзернеймов случайно или намеренно используют ряд транслингвальных и транскультурных практик, способствующих сохранению, закреплению и отражению родной русской лингвокультурной идентичности в виртуальном пространстве, глобальной доминантой которого является английский язык. Проанализированный корпус материала демонстрирует, что русскоязычные пользователи социальной сети не только в подавляющем большинстве являются русско-английскими графическими билингвами, но и активными пользователями русского варианта английского языка, что, в свою очередь, способствует развитию особого (язык социальных сетей) подвида русского варианта английского языка.

Ключевые слова: юзернеймы, русский вариант английского языка, русская лингвокультурная идентичность, лингвокультура, варианты английского языка

История статьи: поступила в редакцию 18.11.2022; принята к печати 04.01.2023

Конфликт интересов: отсутствует

Для цитирования: Лебедева И.Л. Что в имени пользователя тебе моем: на материале русского варианта английского языка в социальных сетях // Полилингвильность и транскультурные практики. 2023. Т. 20. № 1. С. 146–156. DOI: 10.22363/2618-897X-2023-20-1-146-156

Introduction

Since its introduction, the World Englishes (WE) paradigm [1] has been extensively used as a research framework for various varieties of English within different domains, including digital media discourse represented by social media networks, such as Google, Facebook*, Instagram*, Twitter**, YouTube and such [2]. Although the Russian variety of English or Russian English as an Expanding Circle

* Here and further in the text: It is part of the Meta corporation, recognized as extremist and banned on the territory of the Russian Federation since March 2022 / Здесь и далее по тексту: Входит в корпорацию «Мета», деятельность которой признана экстремистской и запрещена на территории Российской Федерации с марта 2022.

** Banned on the territory of the Russian Federation / Заблокирован на территории Российской Федерации.

variety has been generally acclaimed worldwide [3–5] and analyzed from a range of perspectives in a number of contexts [6–8], Instagram* Russian English (IRE) has rarely been the focus of scholars' attention [9]. Moreover, Instagram* usernames at large, albeit those created by the Russian speakers of English, have virtually never been the exclusive object of either WE or digital media discourse research despite the fact that, according to certain sources, the social media is considered to be one of the top five most popular social media networks by reach in 2020¹.

The aim of this particular paper which represents a part of a wider research dealing with Russian English and Russian Culture via English [9; 10] is to collate and classify the Instagram* usernames of Russian speakers of English as well as the linguistic strategies that implicitly or explicitly underpin the inclination of Russian users to retain and transmit local linguacultural identity within Instagram* as a multicultural social media domain. This paper puts forward the hypothesis that usernames of Russian English speakers reflect the Russian linguacultural identity of their owners as well as the bilingual nature of the linguistic practices employed for the creation of their Instagram* usernames. In this paper, Russian linguacultural identity is viewed as a combination of national and lifestyle identity or Russianness that stem from the transference of the Russian language and culture according to specific translingual and transcultural patterns.

Data description

The data set of the present paper comprises over 100 randomly selected Instagram* usernames. The timeline of research 2016–2021. All of the usernames belong to Russian users who are either Russian by their origin or consider themselves to be Russian regardless of their present residence. Therefore, the place of their present residence or citizenship is irrelevant for the research as long as the users are mother tongue speakers of Russian. The principal method of the research is qualitative analysis. It determined the Russianness of the users and confirmed that they are mother tongue speakers of Russian and not, for instance, international students who studied in Russia. This is evident from the users' profile and posts. In dubious cases, interview has helped to clarify and confirm certain facts concerning linguacultural identity of several Instagram* account owners and / or original concepts behind their usernames.

Structural aspect has been chosen as the key principle for the classification of the collated data which can be divided into six categories that are to be briefly outlined further on: 1. Russian personal names, 2. Russian personal names + Russian

¹ Global active usage penetration of leading social networks as of February 2020 <https://www.statista.com/statistics/274773/global-penetration-of-selected-social-media-sites/> (Accessed Jan. 13, 2021).

concepts¹, 3. Russian concepts, 4. Russian concepts / names + numbers, 5. Russian concepts + English concepts, 6. English concepts.

The first category comprises the usernames that represent the transliteration of the Russian personal names, displaced or supplemented by a surname in various combinations, from Cyrillic script into English writing system, or English for short, which is presented by the Roman or Latin script. The end product of such transliteration is an example of Romanized or Latinized Russian rather than English due to the fact that usernames do not look meaningful to the speakers of other varieties of English although they are created via the English writing system.

This category is typically represented by seven models:

1. ‘Full last name + full first name’ model outnumbers the other models in this category: *@brotkinaolga*², *@proshinazoya*, *@sidelnikova_elizaveta*, *@rivlinaalexandra*. This accounts for the fact that in accordance with the Russian tradition of addressing people in formal settings, specifically in writing, the last name is expected to precede the first name. Indeed, several decades ago this was the only acceptable option for formally addressing people in Russia. In many cases, the Russian name is translated into English as in *@polshinajulia*, *@bryanskaya_ann*.

2. ‘Full first name + full last name’: *@alexei.romanov*, *@oksanarudskaya*, *@violettalebedeva*, *@yuliapoporetskaya*. Depending on the contents of the Instagram* accounts, the usernames can be verbalized by precedent names of famous Russian historical personalities. For instance, *@alexei.romanov*, the name of the last heir to the Russian throne, is the username of the account devoted to famous Russian people in history.

3. ‘Affectionate diminutive first name form + full last name’: *@slava_kostin* with *Slava* being a diminutive form of the full name *Вячеслав* [vyacheslav] or *@lenokossova* where *lenok* is a diminutive form of the Russian name *Елена* [yelena] formed with the help of one of the many common Russian diminutive markers or suffixes. In this instance, the suffix *-ok* is used.

4. ‘Full first name + shortened last name’: *@yanadubr*, *@olganag* where *dubr* is short for *Dubrovskaya* and *nag* for *Nagaitseva*.

5. ‘Shortened first name + full last name’: *@a.nefedova* with *a* for *Anna* and *@t_diagileva* **with** *t* for *Tatiana*.

6. ‘Shortened first name + patronymic + full last name’: *@jdkolomeets* where *j* stands for the person’s given name *Julia* and *d* for her patronymic [otchestvo] *Dmitrievna* which according to the rules of Russian patronymic formation derives from her father’s name *Dmitry* and is accompanied by the female suffix *-evna*.

¹ The term *concept* used in this classification has a broad meaning including culture-specific or culture loaded words or notions that are transliterated from the Cyrillic script into English and that are classified as Russian concepts. English concepts are, consequently, verbalized by either loan translations or standard English words.

² In order to ease the understanding of the usernames, the first component of the model is highlighted in bold type.

7. ‘One name only’ category verbalizes the usernames consisting of last name (@*bernuhova*, @*kryukovskiy*) or first name (@*liza_vettaa*) only. Overall, ‘first name only’ is the least represented model in the entire category.

In many cases, the Russianness of the above-presented usernames is transmitted not only through the names that are originally considered to be typically Russian: *Elizaveta*, *Irina*, *Ksenia*, *Yulia*, *Slava*, *Svetlana* and such. Indeed, many names like *Olga* or *Lena* are used internationally, not to mention *Julia* or *Alexandra*, which may not be perceived as Russian per se. It is the combination of first names and last names transliterated verbatim letter by letter including gender endings (female *-a* or *-aya* as in *Brotkina* or *Rudskaya* and male zero endings or *-iy*, *-y* as in *Kostin* or *Kryukovskiy*) together with the usage of diminutive and affectionate suffixes that transmit the Russianness of their owners.

The second category contains usernames that are examples of Russian names used in combination with Russian concepts transliterated into English. This category is generally represented by four models:

1. ‘Name + general Russian concept’. According to this model, usernames look like word combinations with the concept being a one word nomination functioning as an adjective characterizing the personal name (@*mashakrasnaya* where *krasnaya* stands for *red*; @*tamara_vrednaja_burmistrova* where *vrednaja* stands for *mean*, *annoying* or *obnoxious*, @*tigranastya* where *tigra* means *a tigress* and all the behavior associated with one), a fragment (@*alisa_v_strane* which basically is an allusion to an immortal internationally acclaimed *Alice in Wonderland* as *v strane* means *in the land*) or even a full-fledged sentence (@*spasibo_yura* or *thank you, Yura*; @*olya_lubit_more* which stands for *Olya loves the sea*);

2. ‘Name + city’: @*irinadspb*, @*marisha-v*, @*olyavl*. Here, *spb* presents a common abbreviation for the so-called cultural capital of Russia, *St. Petersburg*, whereas *v* and *vl* stand for *Vladivostok*, which is the largest port city in the Russian Far East;

3. ‘Name + profession’: @*alina_fotograf* meaning *a photographer*, @*irinaffl* where *ffl* is a standard abbreviation for *the Faculty of Foreign Languages* in the system of higher education in Russia, which indicates that the person is employed at this institution;

4. ‘Name + profession + city: @*olya_make_vl* belongs to the user who earns her living as a makeup artist in Vladivostok. Interestingly, the word *makeup* (*мейкан*) has been borrowed from English into Russian and started functioning as an independent shortened item *мейк* [make] in the meaning of a makeup. Therefore, for a Russian speaker of English this username presents no trouble for decoding which may not always be the case for the speakers of other Englishes regardless of their competency in English.

The third category of usernames incorporates direct and ambiguous Russian concepts transliterated into English:

1. ‘Direct Russian concepts’ model is typically verbalized by general Russian concepts (@*deti_doma*, @*doch_ribaka*, @*hitryi_mam*) as well as key national concepts (@*matreshka_matryoshka*, @*neduet*, @*russskaya_belka*, @*toska_sobachja*, @*vsemedvedi*). Transliterated direct Russian concepts are expected to be perceived literally by the majority of Russians since they are not characterized by any additional interpretations. For example, @*detidoma* means *children at home*, @*doch_ribaka* is *the daughter of the fisherman*, @*hitryi_mam* stands for *crafty* or *foxy mom* and not *ma’am* as speakers of other varieties of Englishes might think. Among the key Russian concepts transliterated in the usernames, there is a number of stereotypical national Russian concepts such as *MATRESHKA* (@*matreshka_matryoshka*, a Russian wooden doll in a doll) or the concepts of stereotypical Russian BEAR (@*vsemedvedi* which means *all bears*) and SQUIRREL (@*russskaya_belka*) that is not very commonly associated with Russia but nevertheless is a highly popular character of Russian folk tales and classical literature. The concept of cold air DRAFTS which the majority of Russians believe to be harmful for their health and therefore whenever inside they typically check that *there is no draft* or *не дуем* [neduyet] is represented by @*neduet*. Another famously elusive national Russian concept verbalized in a username is TOSKA which is a word untranslatable into English — type of Russian despair. When the verbalization of the concept TOSKA is used in combination with the notion *dog*, it manifests a traditional Russian idea of an indescribable despair worse than leading a dog’s life: @*toska_sobachja* can be literally rendered into English as *dog’s despair*.

2. ‘Ambiguous Russian concepts’ model is an illustration of a language play and bilingual creativity which lead to an ambivalent interpretation of the same username by various Russian web users. At the same time, the examined usernames are undecodable for the speakers of other varieties of Englishes unfamiliar with Russian language. Let us consider several examples:

@*nipponyatki* is a transliteration of the Russian word *непонятки* [niponyatki] which can be roughly translated into English as *slight misunderstandings* or *confusion*. However, many Russians familiar with the Japanese language and culture, specifically the ones residing in the Russian Far East, are bound to see the second meaning of the username through the Russian word *Ниппония* ([nip’ponia]) which is used for referring to Japan. In fact, *Nippon* in English is basically a transliteration of a Japanese name for Japan¹. Indeed, the owner of the discussed username has graduated from the Japanese department of Far Eastern National University and currently resides in Japan. Her Instagram* account targets Russian Instagram* users keen to find out more about life in Japan, including misunderstandings.

Depending on the web user, @*prosta_ta* can be perceived both as *simply that one* (*просто та* [prosta ta]) and / or *simplicity* (*простота* [prosta’ta]). In fact, this

¹ Collins English Dictionary <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/nippon> (Accessed Jan. 13, 2021)

word can also be decoded as *prostate* (*npocтaтa* [pros'tata]). In the interview, the owner of the username explained that she was aware of the multiple interpretations that her username would trigger. She specifically enjoys the cognitive dissonance that her username evokes due to the fact that ultimately it turns out to be much more meaningful than might seem initially. *@alkagolikova* is another example of creative semantic ambiguity. On the one hand, it can be classified as an illustration of 'affectionate diminutive first name form + full last name' model where *alka* is an affectionate for *Alla* and *golikova* is the last name. On the other hand, in case if Russian users are unaware of the user's real name which is stated only in a profile and is impossible to decode without referring to the one, they can read the username as *she-drinker*, *she-alcoholic*.

The next category of usernames is verbalized by transliterated Russian words in combination with numbers. It primarily falls into three typical models:

1. 'Name / concept + number at the end'. According to this model, Russian speakers of English tend to create their usernames by combining their personal names that are often presented in diminutive forms (*@ksu84*, *@ksu_plus5*, *@oksanchik77*), nicknames (*@kapik7473*), last names (*@bugaeva2007*, *@voloshenko643*), or other transliterated Russian concepts (*@zemlya25*) with numbers at the end. These numbers are significant for the users and typically mean the year of birth (*@ksu84*, *@oksanchik77*), the important year (*@bugaeva2007*) or even the number of children in the family (*@ksu_plus5*). Furthermore, the number might have additional hidden culture-specific meaning. For instance, *@zemlya25* where *zemlya* means *land*, *territory*, number 25 symbolizes the car license plate number for Primorskiy Region in the Russian Far East. In certain cases, the number in the username might not bear any obvious significance and can be used due to the fact that all the other versions of the username with numbers already exist, as in *@kapik7473* or *@voloshenko643*. These numbers are traditionally interpreted in the first language of the Instagram* users and do not present any difficulties for decoding irrespectively of the web users' languages.

2. 'Concept with number as a Cyrillic letter' model. Several letters in Cyrillic alphabet can be substituted by numbers owing to the fact that the numbers' initial sound is pronounced in the manner of the letters they are used instead of. The most commonly interchanged numbers are 4 [**chetire**] instead of the letter Ч [ch] and 6 [**shest'**] instead of the letter Ш [sh]. It is noteworthy that these letters are unique for the Cyrillic script and are not in any way represented in Latin. For instance, *@s4astlivayaira* consists of the Russian word *happy* (*счастливая* [**schastlivaya**]) and a personal name *Ira* translated from Russian *Ира*. Another example is *@vi66nya* which is the Russian *вишня* [**vishnya**] or *cherry* in English. Russian speakers of English will definitely deconstruct the hidden message behind the usernames and read them as one lexical and semantic unit whereas the speakers of other Englishes perceive them as several units as they tend to read these numbers in an English-like manner as has always been the case at the international conferences when this material has been presented. Overall,

the presented cases are examples of English-Russian code-switching or transcribing that reflects a translingual pattern underpinning the username creation.

3. ‘Concept with Cyrillic / Latin numbers’: @hane4ka, @olya_4ya. In the presented cases, number 4 can be perceived ambiguously, i.e., English-like [hanefoka], [olyafoya] and / or Russian-like [hanechka], [olyacha]. Consequently, their meaning will vary depending on the script the web user chooses to rely on. Likewise, the non-Russian speakers are more likely to decode *honey* in the first example and *Olya for you* in the second unlike their Russian counterparts who are prone to perceive *olya_4ya* as *Ольча* [ol’cha] which is nickname for *Olya* and who see the English *honey* with the added diminutive Russian suffix *-чка/-chka* in [hanechka]. However, some Russian speakers of English are able to deconstruct both versions depending on the level of their English proficiency.

The next numerous category is presented by the model ‘Russian concepts + concepts in English’ according to which Russian words verbalizing various concepts are transliterated into English writing system and are hybridized with standard English words: @devushka_from_vladivostok (a girl from Vladivostok), @little_chernika (little blueberry), @the_leonova. Again, many of the presented merges are quite challenging in terms of meaning for non-Russian speakers of English who are unable to decode that @english.govori.project is an account devoted to teaching how to speak ([govori]) English, @korizzashop means cinnamon shop and @photostrana stands for the Russian word *country*. Therefore, non-Russian speakers are highly likely to never use the services that these Instagram* accounts offer since searching for them might be quite challenging. Furthermore, even if English speakers do accidentally come across those accounts, whose usernames might not seem meaningful as well as their true nature and services they offer. This proves that the primary target audience of such Instagram* accounts is Russian speakers of English able to identify the message behind whose usernames. For instance, the above-mentioned @photostrana account (literally *photo country*) belongs to a professional photographer posting her photos of the country she currently resides in.

The final category of the classification manifests through concepts in English, that are either loan translations or common equivalents. Accordingly, it falls into two models:

1. ‘Russian English concepts’ are expressed through culture-specific Russian words denoting Russian culture phenomena such as @herring_under_a_fur_coat or @forest_in_my_soul. In essence, they are predominantly loan translations in English. The first example is a verbatim English translation of the Russian traditional New Year dish *селёдка под шубой* [seledka pod shuboy] or *dressed herring* as it is often named in English cook books. The second example triggers key Russian concept SOUL and demonstrates an allusion to a common Russian proverb *чужая душа — тёмный лес* (a stranger’s soul is a dark forest) meaning *still waters run deep*.

2. ‘Global English concepts’ are verbalized through regular English words which do not instantly activate any Russian context and do not indicate the linguacultural identity of their owners: @ellynot_in_kanzas, @happinness_beam, @_merry_marry_, @moor_spirit, and @the_perseids. However, in many occasions the text above or below the Instagram* username which is shown in search mode tends to immediately project the Russianness of the username owners through the Russian script or Russified English: @ellynot_in_kanzas *Через тернии к звездам* (per aspera ad astra), @happinness_beam *Медина Бююн* (first + last names) or @_merry_marry_ *Mariya*.

The classification presented above, being the first attempt to organize and systematize the most common types of Russian English usernames, undoubtedly requires further modification in order to incorporate all types of the collected usernames and to avoid overlapping of several categories which is challenging to implement at this stage.

Discussion

The body of earlier classified data demonstrates that the majority of Instagram* usernames of their Russian owners, apart from the last category, indeed instantly reflects their cultural identity via several translingual and transcultural practices.

First of all, Russian users are apt to rely on the Russian variety of English which is characterized by a number of distinctive linguistic and extralinguistic features that stem from the transference of the Russian language and Russian alphabet (Cyrillic script), Russian culture as well as its communicative patterns. For instance, the absence of a unified Latin-Cyrillic transliteration system leads to the multiple ways of transliterating certain Cyrillic letters such as Ё (@matreshka_matryoshka), ЁI (@mysli_so_smyslom, @vnesistemi), or Я (@dariastegniy, @iana_olefir, @oksanarudskaya, @vilija_veru_v_chudesu) that do not coincide with Latin script.

Secondly, Russian Instagram* users deploy the creative potential of English-Russian language play which is generally manifested through transliteration of both Russian names (@natalia_dyadeva, @t_diagileva) and Russian concepts Russian SQUIRREL (@russkaya_belka¹), TOSKA (@toska_sobachja), BEAR (@vsemedvedi), direct translation of the key national concepts (@herring_under_a_fur_coat), English-Russian code-switching (@s4astlivayaira, @vi66nya) and hybridization (@korizzashop, @english.govori.project, @photostrana). Many of the analyzed usernames reflect creativity of Russian users, their sophistication and proficiency in English. For instance, @i_on_off is a coded Russian name *Ionov* [i:onof], @namislat is backwards for the Russian *mascot or talisman* (талисман [talisman]), @timanola is a combination of abbreviated family members’ names

¹ All of the usernames demonstrated in this section have been examined and described in the previous section. The newly introduced examples are presented with explanation.

(TIMur + ANdrey + OL'gA) and @mashka_ponymashka where the diminutive personal name *Mashka* incorporated in the word *ponymashka* can be perceived as one lexical unit *понимашка* [ponimashka] meaning *the one who understands* or as two lexical units: *pony* named *Mashka*.

Furthermore, the transference of the Russian language and culture features is manifested through the transliteration of Russian obscene lexical units. For instance, the Russian obscene word *ебенья* [yebenya] or 'backwater district' is hybridized with *gram* to form @yebenyagram. Another example of transcultural and translingual practices is the usage of Russified protagonists' names of the world famous *The Adventures of Little Onion* by Gianni Rodari and *the Jungle Book* by Richard Kipling. Thus, @chepolinko looks more like a diminutive of Russian *Чиполлино* [Chipollino] rather than *The Little Onion* in English or *Cipollino* in Italian whereas @mama-maugli is the transliteration of the Russian *Маугли* [Maugli] instead of Kipling's *Mowgli*.

Thirdly, Russian speakers of English treat Instagram* usernames primarily as a vehicle for intracultural rather than intercultural communication. Hence, they target the representatives of Russian culture whom they view as English-Russian graphic bilinguals or biscripters able to decode ambiguous bilingual concepts which otherwise are meaningless and incomprehensible for a wider multilingual and multicultural Instagram* audience who normally consider themselves to be proficient English speakers but fail to deconstruct the ideas presented via Russian English. Moreover, in many instances such units as @mysli_so_smyslom, @vnesistemi are considered to be examples of 'fake' English or end product of the process known as Englishization of Russian or Russification of English.

Due to all the above mentioned translingual and transcultural practices, Instagram* usernames indeed act as a reflection of Russian linguacultural identity. Moreover, they testify that Russian users of English use their own English variety not only creatively but also without apology.

Conclusion

This paper offers an insight into the Instagram* usernames of Russian speakers of English and presents a first attempt to categorize the translingual practices that lie behind their creation. It makes a significant contribution to the World Englishes paradigm as it confirms not only the existence of a Russian variety of English within the social media landscape and digital discourse at large, but also supports the hypothesis that even the tip of the Instagram* iceberg represented by usernames reflect the unique identity of their Russian users who are generally relying on three typical transcultural practices described earlier.

There is obviously a need for further solid research in terms of quantitative analysis of collected usernames to take the hypothesis further and illustrate more accurately the wide range of translingual and transcultural strategies and practices

that speakers of the Russian variety of English draw on in order to express their linguacultural identity and the bilingual nature of their digital interaction.

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