

Transliteration of Cyrillic and Greek characters

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Foreword

Attention is drawn to the following British Standards on related subjects:—

BS 1219, *Printers' and authors' proof corrections*.

BS 1629, *Bibliographical references*.

BS 1749, *Alphabetical arrangement*.

BS 1991, *Letter symbols, signs and abbreviations*.

General principles

Transliteration is the art of representing characters (letters or signs) in any one alphabet by those of any other, but this British Standard concerns only transliteration into the Latin (Roman) alphabet. The manner in which a given alphabet is rendered into another will depend upon the purpose in view, and may range all the way from the purely phonetic to the strictly letter-for-letter; it is here convenient to designate the former as “transcription” and the latter as “transliteration”.

Transcription gives a good idea of pronunciation, and this is important when a whole language with all its traditions is given a new outward form or script, as was done for Turkish 30 years ago, or when the Latin alphabet is introduced as an aid to phoneticization of a non-alphabetic script, as in China today, but it is of secondary importance in documentation.

Transliteration means representing visual characters or signs, not sounds; that is, characters considered as written symbols rather than according to their phonetic or etymological values. It should be virtually automatic, so that anyone able to identify the language of the original can transliterate by rule-of-thumb and, conversely, transliterate back to the original characters. Clearly, 25 or 26 Latin letters cannot be made to render 40 or 50 Cyrillic characters (except by overuse of diacritics) without occasional resort to letter combinations; when essential, this should be done with the minimum of ambiguity. The same symbols should not be used to transliterate different characters in any one language, and the use of two or more letters for a single character is acceptable only when the Roman alphabet offers no reasonable alternative.

In transcription, deference to the phonetic peculiarities of different languages often produces startling national variants—as for instance, of the Russian name **Щедрин**: this is traditionally written Šćedrin in Croat and Czech, *Szczedrin* in Polish, *Shchedrin* in English, *Chtchedrine* in French, *Sjtsjedrin* in Dutch and *Schtschedrin* in German, thus requiring up to seven Latin letters for the single Cyrillic character **щ** and making for a bewildering dispersal of entries in any internationally compiled catalogue or list.

To simplify and improve communication and exchange of information, there is need of a single internationally recognized system of romanization for every non-Roman alphabet at all widely used in the world, especially perhaps for Cyrillic, which is the vehicle for an immense and increasing output of scientific and technical literature today. In fact, a system intended to fulfil just this need for modern Slavonic languages written in Cyrillic has recently (1955) been published by the International Organization for Standardization [ISO] as ISO Recommendation No. 9 [Ref. ISO/R9]—see “International” system (p. 5), and Table C which conforms to it.

However, as the alphabet into which transliteration is made by this system is an amplification of the Serbo-Croat *latinica*, it can hardly be expected that it will be used for all purposes in countries with alphabetic traditions and literary heritage as strong as those of English, and it is significant that ISO/R9 contains a proviso that “if so desired, the standard international system . . . may be supplemented by a recognized national system based on the characteristics of the non-Slav language concerned”.

Present recommendations

This British Standard provides both “national” (British) and “international” systems for transliteration of Cyrillic (Sections 1 and 2) and a simple rule-of-thumb system for Greek (Section 3); it also includes an appended Note on Cyrillic alphabets, which it is hoped will be of use to those interested in the historical aspects.

“British” system for Cyrillic. Since English is the most widely used of all languages, at least so far as scientific and technical literature is concerned, it is desirable to provide a system of the type traditionally used throughout the English-speaking world. Though no general-purpose “English” system¹⁾ has yet been accepted by Anglo-American agreement, it is now possible to recommend, for direct everyday rendering of names and passages in Cyrillic, a “British” system which should appeal to all English-speaking users, and especially to those concerned with the bibliography, abstracting and reference work of science and technology.

This “British” system, given in Section 1, is based on recommendations for Russian, Serbian and Bulgarian made jointly by the Royal Society and the British Academy in 1953, but slightly modified for Russian²⁾ and amplified to include Ukrainian and Byelorussian (White Russian). As regards Serbian, the Royal Society scheme gave the *latinica* as an alternative to its “English” transliteration and, since recent experience has shown increasing use of the *latinica* in Yugoslavia, it is recommended that this should now be used exclusively for transliterating Serbian (and Macedonian) Cyrillic.

The recommended “British” system is, for most practical purposes, without ambiguity and provides not only for the direct Cyrillic-English transliteration normally required (Table A), but also for English-Cyrillic back transliteration (Table B). It can therefore be recommended with confidence to all those who require a national system at once practical and in harmony with English alphabetic traditions.

For extreme simplicity, when avoidance of ambiguity in back transliteration is not a paramount consideration, all accents, diacritics, etc., may be omitted in the “English” rendering.

“International” system for Cyrillic. The system given in Section 2 is aimed at satisfying the need for a letter-for-letter system of transliteration of Cyrillic, suitable especially for the widening field of international communication between countries using the Roman alphabet but not necessarily familiar with, or ready to adopt, English alphabetic traditions.

Table C of this Standard conforms to the recommendations of ISO/R9 for modern languages written in Slavonic Cyrillic characters, i.e. other than those of the Iranian, Caucasian, Uralian, Altaic and Palaeoasiatic groups; it also includes one Romance language, Moldavian, for which the transliteration mainly follows modern Rumanian orthography. In addition, there are separate (Table D and Table E) for Church Slavonic and Rumanian Cyrillic respectively, and a back transliteration (Table F).

¹⁾ For their specialized cartographic requirements, the Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use [PCGN] and the U.S. Board on Geographic Names [BGN] employ uniform systems for the transliteration of Russian and Bulgarian geographical names; these differ from the “British” system mainly in using *y* for *ѣ* (as well as for *ѣ*) and *e* for *ѣ* (as well as for Russian *ѣ*, except initially, after vowels and after *ѣ*, and *ѣ*, when *ye* is used).

²⁾ The modifications are the use of “ ” (instead of ‘ ’) for the “hard” sign *ѣ* and *ѣ* (instead of *th*) for the obsolete character *ѣ* (Table A, Nos. 38 and 46 respectively).

ISO/R9 was the outcome of years of postwar work in the International Organization for Standardization on a draft scheme prepared by its forerunner, the International Federation of National Standards Associations [ISA], and issued in 1939. In this connection, it is interesting to note that the pre-war Russian standard OCT 8483 is no longer applied in the U.S.S.R. and that the Linguistics Institute of the Academy of Sciences, after correspondence with ISO, has drawn up a transliteration table differing only in minor refinements from ISO/R9.

Greek. The problems of Greek transliteration are less complicated than those of Cyrillic. Section 3 (Table G) provides a letter for-letter system for cataloguers and other documentation workers, and deals with the Greek alphabet without special regard to phonetic, etymological or other linguistic peculiarities of Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Greek—in short, a straightforward rule-of-thumb system in line with international practice.

Notes on cataloguing and indexing

1. Cross-referencing of variant transliterations. In catalogues, indexes, etc., where “English” and “international” variants are in use, appropriate cross-references should of course be made.

e.g. under Ch:	“ <i>See also</i> entries under Č . . . for Cyrillic words beginning Ч . . .”
under Kh (and Ch):	“ <i>See also</i> entries under H . . . for Cyrillic and Greek words beginning X . . .”
under Ph:	“ <i>See also</i> entries under F . . . for Greek words beginning Φ . . .”
under Shch:	“ <i>See also</i> entries under ŠČ . . . for Cyrillic words beginning Щ . . .”
under Yu:	“ <i>See also</i> entries under Ju . . . for Cyrillic words beginning Ю . . .”

Similarly, cross-references will also be necessary under Č to Ch, under H to Kh (and Ch), under Ju to Yu, and so on.

2. Names foreign to the Slavonic languages. English or other non-Slavonic names occurring already cyrillicized in a text should be rendered back into Latin script according to the “British” or the “International” system letter by letter, and the correct form (in its original spelling), if necessary for recognition and indexing, should be added in square brackets whenever ascertainable, thus:—

Original name	Cyrillicized form	Rendering back into Latin
Howard	Говард	Govard [Howard]
Sternberg	Штернберг	Shternberg or Šternberg [Sternberg]
Weigl	Вейгл	Veigl or Vejgl [Weigl]
Winchester	Уинчестер	Uinchester or Uinčester [Winchester]

3. Alphabetical arrangement. In BS 1749:1951 (Alphabetical Arrangement) Clause 4, it is recommended that the presence of accents, diacritics and apostrophes should not affect alphabetical order.

Examples of titles of periodicals in Cyrillic with their “British” and “International” transliterations for comparison

RUSSIAN

1. Бюллетень. Энгельгардтовская Астрономическая Обсерватория
Byulleten'. Éngel'gardtovskaya Astronomicheskaya Observatoriya
Bjulleten'. Éngel'gardtovskaja Astronomičeskaja Observatorija
2. Гидротехническое Строительство. Москва
Gidrotekhnicheskoe Stroitel'stvo. Moskva
Gidrotehničeskoe Stroitel'stvo. Moskva
3. Известия Общества Археологии, Истории и Этнографии
Izvēstiya Obshchestva Arkheologii, Istorii i Étnografii
Izvēstija Obščestva Arheologii, Istorii i Etnografii
4. Общее Собрание Академии Наук СССР. Ленинград
Obshchee Sobranie Akademii Nauk SSSR. Leningrad
Obščee Sobranie Akademii Nauk SSSR. Leningrad
5. Техника, Промышленность и Торговля
Tekhnika, Promyšlennost' i Torgovlya
Tehnika, Promyšlennost' i Torgovlja
6. Химия и социалистическое Хозяйство. Москва
Khimiya i sotsialisticheskoe Khozyaistvo. Moskva
Himija i socialističeskoe Hozjajstvo. Moskva

UKRAINIAN AND BYELORUSSIAN (White Russian)

7. Біохімічний Журнал. Київ
Biokhimichnĭi Zhurnal. Kŭyiv
Biokhimičnyj Žurnal. Kyjiv
8. Вісник Української Районової Геолого-Розвідкової Управи
Visnĭk Ukrayins'koyi Raĭonovoyi Heoloho-Rozvidkovoyi Upravĭ
Visnyk Ukrajins'koyi Rajonovoyi Geologo-Rozvidkovoyi Upravy
9. Харчова та Сільсько-господарська Промисловість. Харків
Kharchova ta Sil'sko-hospodars'ka Promyslovist'. Kharkiv
Harčova ta Sil'sko-gospodars'ka Promyslovist'. Harkiv
10. Записки Академіі Навук БССР
Zapiski Akadēmii Navuk BSSR
Zapiski Akadēmii Navuk BSSR

BULGARIAN

11. Български Колоѣдачъ (Б.К. Съюзъ)
Bŭlgarski Koloēzdach (B.K. Sŭyuz)
Bălgarski Koloēzdač (B.K. Săjuz)
12. Мисълъ. Списание за наука, литература и критика. София
Misŭl. Spisanie za nauka, literatura i kritika. Sofiya
Misāl. Spisanie za nauka, literatura i kritika. Sofija
13. Медицински Напрѣдѣкъ. София
Meditinski Naprēdŭk. Sofiya
Medicinski Naprēdāk. Sofija

SERBIAN (AND MACEDONIAN)

14. Заштита Биља. Савезни Институт. Београд
Zaštita Bilja. Savezni Institut. Beograd [latinica]
15. Фолклор јужне Србије . . . Скопље
Folklor južne Srbije . . . Skoplje [latinica]
16. Српски Архив за Целокупно Лекарство
Srpski Arhiv za Celokupno Lekarstvo [latinica]
17. Македонски Јазик. Катедра за јужнословенски јазици. Скопје.
Makedonski Jazik. Katedra za južnoslovenski jazici. Skopje.

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Summary of pages

This document comprises a front cover, an inside front cover, pages i to vi, pages 1 to 15 and a back cover.

This standard has been updated (see copyright date) and may have had amendments incorporated. This will be indicated in the amendment table on the inside front cover.