

APPROACHES TO STUDYING KREATIVS (SHORT STORIES) ON RUSSIAN PADONKI-WEBSITES

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Abstract

The paper focuses on a new phenomenon in the modern Russian literary landscape, the so-called *kreativ* or *kreatiff* (Rus. *креатив/креатифф*, derived from the English word *creative*), which is a short fictional story. First *kreativs* appeared on the Internet fifteen years ago as a means of developing and stabilizing a new internet slang, *Novograf* (alias the *padonki* language, after the word *подонок* — *scumbag*, *riffraff*) that constitutes a linguistic practice characterized by deliberate orthographic distortions and use of publicly unacceptable, obscene lexics (so-called *mat*). During this period a number of "trash culture" websites published tens of thousands of *kreativs*, which are far from being studied. Moreover, no approach to such a study has been developed.

The paper aims to close this gap and proposes to consider the corpus of *kreativs* to be a valuable historical document of a specific Internet counterculture, at the same time linked organically to modern folklore. This document should be analyzed as a modern virtual countercultural discourse with its own ideology and set of topics, rhetorical instruments and strategies.

1. Introduction

The paper focuses on a new phenomenon in the modern Russian literary landscape, the so-called *kreativ* or *kreatiff* (Russ. *креатив/креатифф* (sing.), derived from the English adjective *creative*).

My main objective is to study **prosaic *kreativs***. I should note that the word *kreativ* is not an established term. It is mainly used for the mass of short prosaic narratives, which encompass all innovative features in question, but it also applies to a small amount of short poems.

2. A Short Historical Outline Of The *Padonki* Language

By their nature *kreativs* are **fictional** stories, mostly presented as real stories with real people. The reason for why these texts emerged in massive amounts in the early 2000's on the Russian Internet needs to be taken into serious consideration. At first *kreativs* appeared as a means of developing and stabilizing a new Internet slang. I have named this slang *Novograf* (Mokroborodova, 2006, p. 136), but its more common name is *the padonki* language or *Padonkaffsky jargon*, after the word *подонок* — *scumbag*, *riffraff* (the self-definition of the Internet community, using this slang).

The *padonki* language constitutes a linguistic practice characterized by deliberate orthographic misspellings (mostly based on a phonetic “correction” of Russian normative orthography) and the use of publicly unacceptable and obscene lexis (so-called *mat* (*mat*)). A new Internet users' movement for spelling mistakes, against automatic spell checking has spread across the Russian Internet since 1999. Very soon the countercultural potential of the orthographic distortions was largely appreciated, because correctness and normativity in language constitute an undeniable marker of social status in Russia. The movement's *Manifest of illiteracy* by the writer A. Andreev (1999) proclaims the right to make grammatical errors and propagandizes phonetic spelling:

“We are principally against so called spelling correctness on the net! [...] The main principle of our great Post-Cyber movement says: ‘The real art of the new century is what only man can do, not the computer!’ [...] These words are taken as a motto in our fight against soulless computer correctness[...]!” (Andreev, 1999).

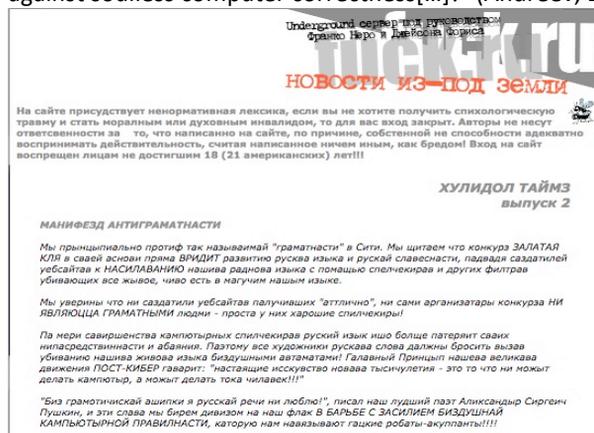


Figure 1. The *Manifest of Anti-Literacy*. The Author *Мэри Шелли* (Mary Shelley), pseudonym of A. Andreev (1999).

The text of the *Manifest* gives an example of the new slang. Compare the original version of the *Manifest* with the same text written correctly:

“Мы прынцыпиально протиф так называимай “граматнасти” в Сети. [...] Главный Принцип нашева великава движения пост-кибер гаварит: ‘Настаящие исскуство новавя тысячелетия - это то что ни можыт делать кампьютер а можыт делать тока чилавек!!!’ [...] Эти слава мы бирем дивизом на наш флак в барьбе с засилием биздушнай кампьютерной правилнасти [...]” (quoted in the original orthography)(Andreev, 1999) and

“Мы принципиально против так называемой грамотности в Сети! [...] Главный принцип нашего великого движения пост-кибер говорит: ‘Настоящее искусство нового тысячелетия – это то, что не может делать компьютер, а может делать только человек.’ [...] Эти слова мы берем девизом в борьбе с засильем бездушной компьютерной правильности.”

In this excerpt we can see all basic principles of how *Novograf* works: the reduction of unstressed vowels, the assimilation of consonants, the violation of traditional spelling, hypercorrection.

The rejection of the social taboo has proven popular among users, and dozens of websites have started practicing *novograf*, i.e. the *padonki* language (e.g. fackru.net, padonki.org, down.ru, udaff.com and others). The administration of udaff.com (the most visited *padonki* website) encourages users to use misspellings along with obscene words and expels everyone who does not like to support such a policy with the following words: “Those who don’t like the words *dick* and *cunt*, can fuck off” (udaff.com, 2000).

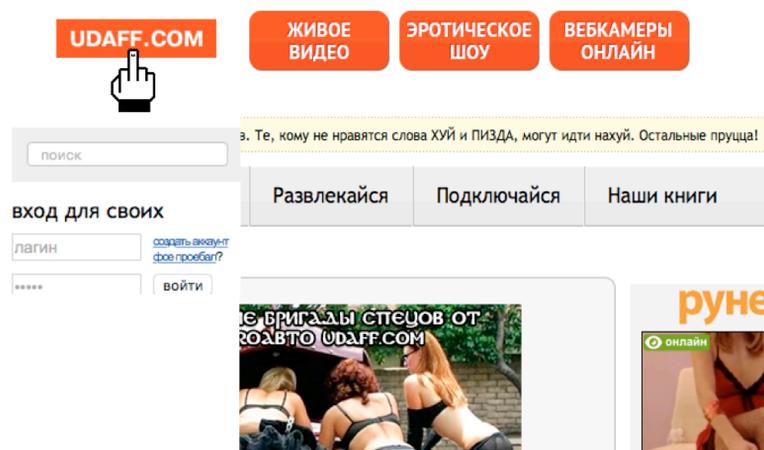


Figure 2. udaff.com’s starting page.

The power of this movement when it comes to its influence on the Internet is seen in the following numbers: during the first ten years of udaff.com (2000-2010) this website was visited by around 1 million people monthly (now an average figure is around 150 thousand visitors per month).

Novograf (the *Padonki* language) went beyond just computer-mediated communication between users in chats and forums. *Padonki* websites (such as udaff.com and padonki.org) also provide a place where users can publish online their short (mostly) fictional stories (*kreativs*) for readers to evaluate and comment. During fifteen years since 2000 tens of thousands (!) of *kreativs* have been published and thus contributed to the new “orthographical” countercultural ideology. However, despite the magnitude of the movement, texts of *kreativs* are far from being studied. The only exception is a recent dissertation by an American scholar (Oliyntyk, 2015) who gives a mostly descriptive analysis of the phenomenon in question. Oliyntyk (2015, p.170) states that the *kreativ* is “a new form ... of literature” which “incorporates forms of linguistic innovation”, “new archetypes (*Real Padonak as an archetype continuum*)” and utilizes “technological advancements and creates a new medium of publication”.

3. *Kreativs* As Countercultural Texts

I think that wider approaches to studying a new kind of Internet literature should be developed, and this paper is aimed to explain some possible concepts, which are relevant to the issue.

One of the most promising approaches is to study *kreativs* as a continuum, in which a modern virtual subculture with its own mores, set of topics, rituals, rhetorical instruments and strategies is developing.

The *padonki* language is definitely an anti-establishment cultural phenomenon. The followers of this practice have formed their online subculture by maintaining an internal cohesion mainly due to the cult of “freedom” from orthography (“*I write as I speak*”) and the use of *mat* (Russian obscenity). But from the very beginning *kreativs*, created by *padonki* writers in a big numbers, have also shown to be a productive literature form for a wider range of different countercultural settings.

The collapse of the Soviet totalitarian regime in the early 90’s and the revolution in information technology, among other things, made all countercultural activity on the Internet (texts, videos, pictures etc.) available for millions of people. From this point of view, websites publishing *kreativs* (especially *udaff.com*) can be considered as platforms for the *padonki* subculture, characterized by certain elements of counterculture.

Kreativs cover a great variety of topics, virtually dropping you right into the hectic atmosphere of Russian modern life. Meanwhile, it should be noticed that not all of the *kreativs*, even using the *padonki* language, express explicitly values that differ substantially from those of most of society.

However, researchers have at least two tools, which allow demonstrating that *kreativs*, breaking social conventions in one way or another, are mostly successful and demanded by readers and administrators. These tools are, firstly, comments from readers who always favor this kind of texts. Secondly (what is more important), a collection of the “best” texts, according to users’ and administration’s opinion, which is set up by the website *udaff.com*. This collection, carefully selected during 15 years, has a remarkable name, *Netlenka* (*Нетленка*) (Timeless works), and currently numbers 219 *kreativs* (the last timeless *kreativ* was created 02.06.2015). The choice of the *padonki* community shows that the foundation of a writer’s success lies in neglecting the public morality and Russian civilization values.

Here are the most frequent manifestations of counterculture, represented in *kreativs*: overt sexism and homophobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, the use of taboo vocabulary, discrediting basic social institutions (motherhood, parenting, school etc.), glorification of anti-social behavior and all kinds of moral degeneration (drug addiction, alcoholism, theft, vandalism), mockery of figures of national adoration and disregard for the national cultural heritage. It is worth noticing that this complex of countercultural settings, colored in “masculine tints”, is accompanied by anti-Americanism, militaristic mood and strong nationalistic feelings.

In terms of both ideas and methodology the perspective of **discourse analysis** seems to be most fruitful for studying ideological structures and rhetorical strategies of counterculture in this literary production. Of special interest here is the study of intersection points of countercultural *padonki* discourse and Russian ideological discourse, partly marked by authoritarianism and nationalism.

4. *Kreativs* As A Part Of Literary Tradition

Another approach to study *kreativs* is to examine them as a part of literary tradition and to associate them with a certain genre form.

In the past ten years studies on computer-mediated communication as an important “venue” for the “oral language in written form” have been successfully developed. At the same time, the study of the relationship between computer-mediated literary texts (*kreativs*) and oral folklore genres is at an initial stage.

Meanwhile, *kreativs* are closely connected with oral narrations, such as personal experience short stories told by people (often called “urban stories”). These stories serve as an important resource for Russian folkloric genres *bayka* (Rus. *байка*) (a short moral or humorous story), *byval'shchina* (Rus. *бывальщина*) (a short “real” story about strange or interesting event), anecdote (Rus. *анекдот*) (a very short funny story with an unexpected turning point and resolution).

Urban stories, as research shows, are not amorphous, but quite clearly structured and based on certain compositional patterns (see more Labov, Waletzky, 1967).

Texts of *kreativs* are very close by their communicative structure to oral urban stories and folklore *baykas*, *byval'shchinas* and anecdotes. If we consider oral personal experience stories as a sort of proto-folklore, then we can regard *kreativs* as its written form, to some extent, and this is the most specific feature of this literary production.

A comparative study of oral narrations (proto-folklore) and *kreativs* could result in a better understanding of oral discourse structures and of correlation between pragmatic and rhetorical aspects of these texts. A study of *kreativs* could also substantially add to our comprehension of development of different thematic oral narrative types (army story, men's stories, student narratives, etc.).

5. *Kreativs* As An Online Archive Of Cultural Memory

The third approach to studying *kreativs* is to consider them as an enormous online archive of cultural memory. As already mentioned, *kreativs* are very often presented by writers as true, personal stories based on an author's or his friends' experience. It wouldn't be overstating the case to say that lived experience is transformed into literature in *kreativs*.

Rhetorical structuring is a mighty means by which to shape a personal and collective memory, and to formulate attitudes towards people, events and ideas.

Tens of thousands of *kreativs* contain invaluable information about all layers of modern life, all hidden fears and hopes of the living generation. Thus, these texts constitute a huge material database to study within the framework of numerous methodologies in cultural anthropology, history, and ethnography.

On the other hand, the approach to *kreativs* as a product of personal memory, gives the opportunity to explore the cognitive aspects of remembrance.

What driving force makes people capture moments of life and preserve them in texts, sharing personal acts of remembrance with others, using a variety of media?

Why do some fragments of reality remain in our brain to be transformed into memory and then into semi-fictional images?

A good start to answering this question is to remember a meaningful quote by a famous English novelist Aldous Huxley: "Every man's memory is his private literature".

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