

Romanian Transitional Alphabets: A Critical Reevaluation

Written Romanian radically changed during the 19th century as it went from Cyrillic to Roman. Since no alphabet change can actually be completed ‘over night’, there is always a phase of overlapping writing traditions, but the Romanian case stands out due to two characteristics:

- (α) The overlap between Cyrillic and Roman writing lasted at least from 1820 to 1880, leading to a situation described as biscriptality (Bunčić *et al.* (eds.) 2016).
- (β) During this time, a third way of writing emerged and was used parallel to Cyrillic and Roman writing at least between 1830 and 1860: so-called Transitional alphabets.

Thus, my research question is: How and why were these complex writing practices maintained?

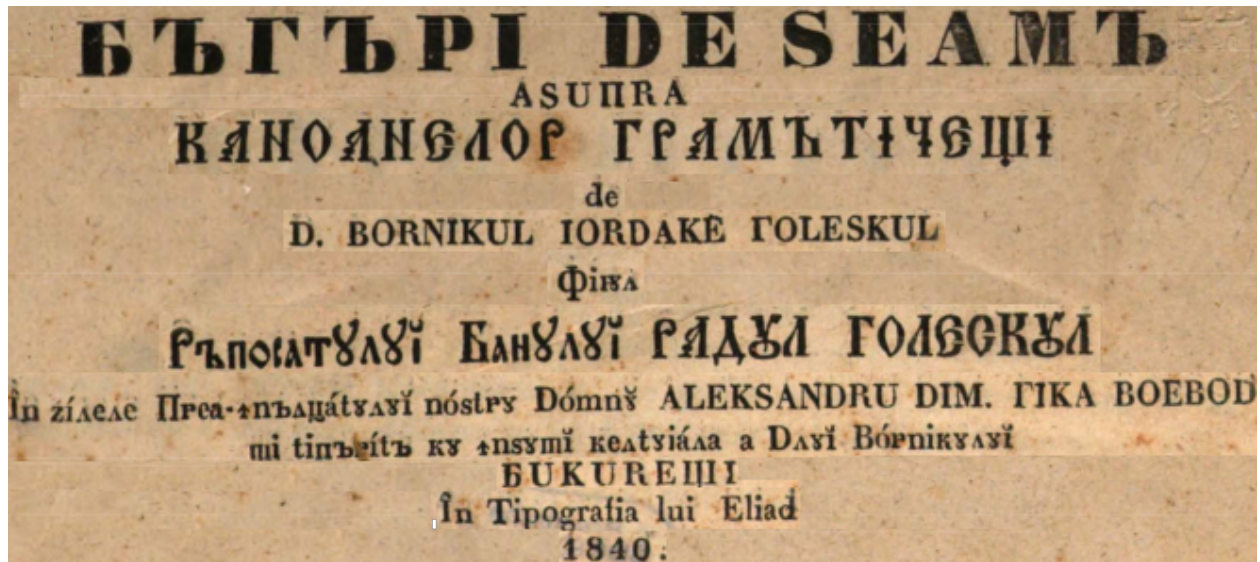


Figure 1. Parallel use of (old) Cyrillic, Roman, and three Transitional alphabets (Golescu 1840)

Transitional alphabets incorporate a variable number of Roman characters that replace their Cyrillic equivalents (cf. **Figure 1**). Some aspects of this ‘transition’ have been researched in the past, but the main focus lay on its one-sided functionalization as a bridge between Cyrillic and Roman writing (cf. Cazimir 2006; Ferrand 2008). My research involves three consecutive steps to first falsify the assumption of a directed development towards a purely Roman alphabet and then to introduce a novel and in-depth understanding of these practices.

(1) In order to uncover possible chronological or other trends, I will first use grapholinguistic analyses (cf. Dürscheid 2016) to compile the complete graphematic inventory of more than fifty Transitional alphabets. This allows me to calculate the ratio of Cyrillic to Roman graphemes in each alphabet, sortable by year, printer, author, and region. Unfortunately, the corpus is a convenience sample that consists mostly of digitized library material, which necessitates a critical reflection of production, preservation and accessibility of these materials.

(2) Sociolinguistics of writing as an emerging field (e.g. Lillis 2013) has not only adapted several sociolinguistic concepts like code-mixing (cf. Auer 1990), but has also introduced own concepts such as scriptural visibility (cf. Spitzmüller 2013) and hybrids like iconization (cf. Sebba 2015). Their combined application sets the methodical framework for introducing the findings from the structuralist and functionalist graphematic analysis into the realm of sociolinguistics.

This is necessary because, even though the underlying system for each Transitional alphabet facilitates or stifles further developments (e.g. |p| for [r] or [p]?), each specific composition is not in itself functional. Neither chronological nor geographical trends can be derived from the data. However, a sociolinguistic approach can elucidate attitudes towards the different writing systems, their interdependence, and their entrenchment in competing groups. Since this alphabet change took place in the past, there is also the need to locate it within its surrounding discourses.

(3) There are two types of discourse that have molded Romanian writing in the 19th century.

(a) Ideas pertaining to the concepts of ‘nation’ and continuity from Roman times.

(b) Newly developed insights into language development feeding from historical linguistics as well as social applications of evolutionary theory (‘Social Darwinism’ *avant la lettre*).

Furthermore, these two sets also inform each other: Imagining ‘Romanians’ as the community that is the Romans’ ‘true heir’ in Southeast Europe and establishing the alleged exceptionlessness of sound changes made the ‘co-evolution’ of both the language and its speakers from Romance to Romanian a cutting-edge thought. Consequently, a ‘purification’ of the language and its writing ensued, constructing and emphasizing its position as an ‘island of Latinity’ in a ‘Slavic sea’.

Due to the limited time, I will develop my theory and apply my methods for just the title page of Golescu (1840) to answer my research question: The complex practices of three writing systems in parallel use (α), including Transitional alphabets (β), were not actively maintained at all. Instead, the competition of (a) and (b) with the general inertia of writing and the powerful traditionalism entrenched in the multilingual elite and the Orthodox Church left visible traces in writing. There was no predetermined ‘evolution’ towards Roman writing, ‘essential’ to Romanian. Transitional alphabets were not a means to an end, facilitating the change from Cyrillic to Roman writing. Both systems must have been already known for the Transitional alphabets to be intelligible. Instead, the decades surrounding the ‘revolution’ of 1848 were re-framed at least since the 1960s into a ‘national awakening’ to fit the needs of that time and the decades to come.

References

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