

8.3. Online dimensions of Russian subcultural scene: Padonki Community.

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Abstract

The paper deals with the specialties of the online slang-centered subculture of padonki, appeared in the Russian Internet in the beginning of the twenty-first century. In the first part of the paper, we focus on the origin and evolution of padonki subculture, which started as a few in number community of the first Runet users and then exceedingly expanded, which resulted in the appropriation of its communicative strategies and slang by the mainstream culture. In the second part, we analyze communicative practices of padonki and peculiarities of their slang, so called "Olbanian language", which is based on the organizational principle "write as you speak", and includes erratic spelling/mistakes made on purpose. We also demonstrate how the slang and the corpus of pictures and texts (commentaries, posts, poems, jokes, tales and other pieces of online literature, as well as memes), created by members of the subculture are assigned to perform a challenge to the symbolic order of the dominant and mainstream culture. We show how padonki deconstruct cultural codes of grander culture, using in their narratives methods of irony, self-irony, parody and intertextuality; violating the politically correct and tolerant discourse of formal language. In the third part, we discuss the most popular memes and kreatiffs (creative works) and state that online carnivalesque activities of padonki and their language games can be analyzed as postmodern cultural phenomena. In the last part of the article, we consider social portraits of padonki, identity construction strategies, used by the members of the community, and examine their set of values and ideology.

Keywords: online community, padonki subculture, identity, slang, internet literature, post-folklore.

Padonki: the origin of the community

Russian online subcultural scene is many-sided and diversified. Since the Runet (a term that refers to Russian-language community on the Internet and websites) appeared, offline subcultural members, who wanted to extend their presence in digital form, ran the major part of blogs and clubs. The situation changed in the very beginning of the twenty-first century when alongside with online communities of goths and emo, hippies and punks, cosplayers and many other traditional subcultures that were popular in Russia in that period of time, a radically new type of online subculture appeared. Its self-name is *padonki* and its essential distinctions from all mentioned subcultures are as follows:

- it did not have any off-line predecessor;
- it is a literature-centered and language-centered community;
- its special language ("Olbanian" or "padonkaffsky" slang) is an important self-identification tool and the main marker of belonging to the group.

The name of the subculture "padonki" is a misspelled alteration of the word "podonki" (plural) from "podonok" (singular), which in Russian language has an offensive meaning, literally a "worthless man", a "bastard", or a "scumbag". As long as "padonki" is a self-name of the subculture, its members use it ironically. To describe the slang rules briefly, we shall now mention that it is based on phonetic spelling of the Russian language, it includes misspellings, mistakes, made intentionally and on purpose, as well as the use of low style and obscene words. Although padonkaffsky slang reached the peak of its popularity in 2006, its origins can be traced back to 1995-1997 when Runet had just started its extensive developing. Some parts of the slang vocabulary and its rules appeared among first Russian Internet users, who were developing and using open-source software Live Journal and Russian FidoNet. They were IT-specialists, journalists and those, whose hobby was writing different kinds of texts. Thus, the slang emerged as a language of the first, and on this reason, advanced computer users, Russian Internet "elites", who were making fun of the slowly joining Runet dummies and their incorrect use of computer

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terms. Later this slang was enriched, developed and popularized by the padonki subculture and its second birth happened on websites Fuck.ru created by Egor Lavrov and Konstantin Rykov, and Udaff.com. Olga Goriunova in her research shows an extraordinary popularity of the Udaff.com in 2005 and compares its success with one of the main Russian informational agencies, specializing in the field of business information (Goriunova, 2006). Udaff.com became the main platform for padonki and their online activities. It is a wide resource with numerous sections and fora, where users discuss different topics, starting with political issues, computer games, personal matters, new books and music and ending with sports and everyday life; the site includes facilities for displaying pictures and photos, usually graphically edited and transformed. All the texts, posted on Udaff.com are recognizable due to the provocative and non-normative style of padonkaffsky slang, violating the politically correct and tolerant discourse of formal language.

The language of padonki received the name "Olbanian". The term "Olbanian" is an alteration of "Albanian", although not a single word from Albanian language was used to create the subcultural vocabulary. The name "Albanian" was taken from the discussion in American Life Journal, when one of the American users saw a post in Russian; trying to read the comments, he did not understand anything, so he wondered what language it was. He could not identify it as Russian and he was given an unexpected answer: one of the Russian users jokingly said it was Albanian, and suggested that this American needed to go and learn this language. Many of the commentators supported the Russian user and there was a flash mob of jokes, mocks, comments and messages addressed to the unlucky American. The phrase "Learn Albanian!" became a popular meme, and a bit later, the word "Albanian" was transformed into "Olbanian" according to the grammar rules of padonkaffsky slang.

Padonkaffsky slang soon left the boundaries of Udaff.com and spread in Runet with a high speed, having become an extremely fashionable online and off-line practice. It penetrated into epistolary genre of e-mail and social network messages, Internet-media, everyday speech, and finally its elements entered traditional media, firstly informal ones, and later formal media-sources as well.

Padonkaffsky slang and artworks (kreatiffs)

Padonkaffsky language has certain rules, which were collectively created and spontaneously transformed and enlarged by the users of Udaff.com while they were posting their texts and comments on the site. The slang is based on the wrong orthography, which can be described in four words: "write as you hear", as well as on the erratic spelling, made on purpose, when a word can display all possible mistakes. This quickly made the slang very popular not only among padonki themselves (who actually have quite a certain ideology behind the language games) but among regular internet users and especially younger generation of schoolchildren, who are not good at Russian grammar. Padonkaffsky slang helped them to hide their lack of knowledge in online dialogs and mailing. Berdicevskis and Zvereva in their research of the rise and fall of Olbanian call the language a "convenient" one:

Many users regarded Padonki slang as an adaptation of the Russian language to the possibilities and demands of new media communication. Those who used to spend a great deal of time online were attracted by the convenient spelling of Olbanian, which made it possible for virtual interlocutors to avoid the constraints of formal rules. Padonki slang was praised for the sense of intimacy and immediacy it lent to communication. (Berdicevskis A. and Zvereva V., 2014)

Texts in Olbanian also contain many abbreviations, acronyms, neologisms, vulgarisms, Anglicisms, Slavisms, distorted words, and foul words, which are softened by the misspelling and because of that become less non-normative. The usage of foul language according to padonki must be well placed, performed in the delicately chosen word combinations, in some new form, displayed exclusively in a friendly conversation, in an anecdote or a joke (Goriunova, 2006). Every member of the community (padonok) should be as creative as possible when posting a text; he/she can use already existing forms of slang words, but at the same time, should try to misspell the words in some unheard and funny way. Padonki are excellent at free language games: they parody clichés, laugh at bureaucracy language, play with different slangs (southern pronunciation that sounds village-like for citizens of the capital), use a postmodern method of intertextuality, making visible and invisible quotations; irony and self-irony are the main features of their posts and texts. Freedom of self-expression and creativity seem to be the main in padonki set of values, while other values are not important at all or their importance depends on the personality and world outlook of the community member.

To give an example of padonkaffsky slang we shall cite a line from “Feersum Endjinn”, a science fiction novel by Iain M. Banks. No need to say, that it is not exactly what Albanian like, but it gives an idea of the language specifics for non-Russian speakers. A quarter of the Banks’s book is told by Bascule the Teller and is written phonetically (the same way as texts in Albanian) in the first person:

Woak up. Got dresd. Had brekfast. Spoke wif Ergates thi ant who sed itz juss been wurk wurk wurk 4 u lately master Bascule, Y dont u ½ a holiday? & I agreed & that woz how we decided we otter go 2 c Mr Zoliparia in thi l-ball ov thi gargoye Rosbrith. (Banks, 1994)

The following table shows the examples of Albanian spelling with the most common Russian words and phrases and words essential for padonki memes:

In English	Written Russian	Spoken Russian	Albanian (padonkaffsky slang)
a girl	девочка (devochka)	девачка (devachka)	деффачка (deffachka)
Hello!	привет! (privet)	привет! (privet)	превед! (preved)
How are you?	как дела? (kak dela?)	как дела? (kak dela?)	кагдила? (kagdila?)
author	автор (avtor)	афтор (aftor)	аффтар (afftar)
a shrimp	креветка (krevetka)	криветка (krivetka)	креведко (krevetko)
a bear	медведь (medved')	медведь (medved')	медвед (medved)

Table 1- Albanian vs Russian

Albanian language successfully “legalized” using of profanity; due to misspelling, obscene words are softened in Albanian; nevertheless, they remain expressive and emotional. Thus social groups, whose speech is conventionally more or less normative, such as schoolchildren, teens, and females, got a chance to use filthy vocabulary “legally” in their everyday communicative practices. The “convenience” of the slang, the manifold of “cool” expressions it offered and foul words, softened by misspelling, made the language very attractive for the crowds. The main Russian search engine Yandex.ru “learned” to correct wrong spelling of the main words in Albanian according to the slang rules, for instance, it corrects the word “aftar” (“author”/“avtor”) to a more authentic “afftar”. Padonkaffsky slang started to spread in Ukrainian digital space, with Ukrainian analogs of Albanian (see <http://muhom.org/2006/08/21/vocabulary/>; <http://shoki.ru/?p=931>). For those who had some difficulties in writing in Albanian “correctly” were created special translating engines, where one could insert a text in normal Russian and get it automatically translated into padonkaffsky slang (<http://www.russki-mat.net/e/krivetizator.htm>). Padonkaffsky slang was used in TV advertisements, exploited in modern literature, was popularized by one of the most famous contemporary Russian writers Viktor Pelevin in a bestseller “Empire V”, published in 2006.

At the same time, rapid spreading of Padonkaffsky slang stirred up a great discontent among supporters of “Pure Russian”. They subjected Albanian to destructive criticism and started a struggle for the purge of Russian. For example, they encouraged users to write in correct Russian and to promote normal spelling with placing special banners into their blogs with the text “I speak clear Russian. Padonki are not welcome here!” (<http://www.tyv.name/cy.htm>). Accused of illiteracy, spoiling and destructing Russian language, padonki, in their turn, blame their critics for “absence of creativity and flexibility”, “stiffness”, and “excessive purism”. Padonki say that their illiteracy is actually an imitation of illiteracy, a parody on the “correct” writing of a regular internet user, who is helpless without a computer spell-checker. They underline the importance of self-identification freedom and creativity, their dislike to self-limitations and all kind of standards and “boring rules”, and their ability to speak normal and correct Russian:

“We really know proper Russian, we use Albanian not because of lack of education, we can write literary if necessary, and we can explain why we use certain words in certain situation, we are free to choose the form of expression, and believe that both purists and low-educated persons use limited language”. (From the interview with padonki community member).

Creativity is the main and strong requirement to the subculture members, whose participation in the life of the group consists of active posting on Udaff.com and other platforms (fuck.ru, padonki.org). Every post or comment, made by a user on these sites is called a kreatiff (a kreatiff), which means “a creative piece of work or artwork”. Kreatiffs can be made in all possible genres: different forms: short stories, poems, essays, articles, news, visitors’ notes, reports, letters, film and book reviews, photos, pictures, comments, verbal and non-verbal memes. They can be presented as parts of diaries, letters, autobiographies, memoirs and instructions. So, padonki subculture should be identified as a literature-centered, as long as texts have become the only available form for padonki to express themselves and to deconstruct cultural codes of grander culture.

Padonki subculture and internet post-folklore

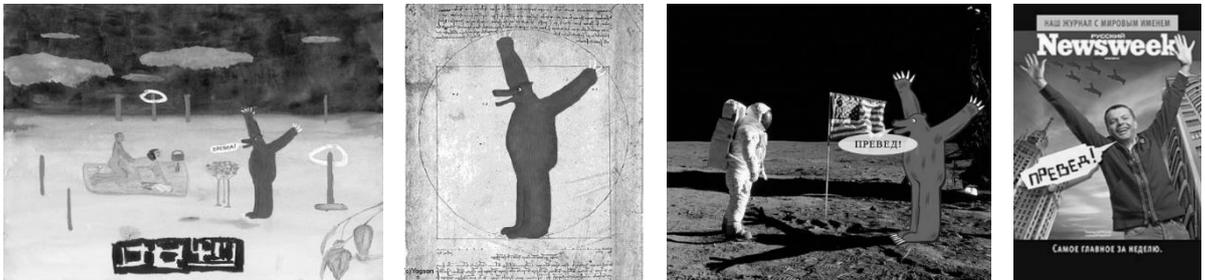
Padonki subculture has been extremely creative in enriching Runet-lore by means of producing numerous post-folkloric narratives. New memes based on padonkaffsky slang have become very popular among internet users. One of the most important memes in Runet culture is so called “Preved Medved” (“Hello Bear”) meme, which entered Russian Internet in 2006. A Russian internet blogger, Roman Yatsenko, who was firstly known only by his nickname Lobzz, and who revealed his real name much later, reposted a transformed watercolor by the American artist John Lurie called “Bear Surprise”. The original picture is featuring a man and a woman making love in the clearing of a forest, being distorted by a bear calling “Surprise!” with its paws raised. In Lobzz’s version of the picture, the bear shouts a greeting word “Preved!” (“Hi!”), which is misspelled according to the rules of Albanian slang and in normal Russian spelled “Privet!”. The picture got its new name “Preved Medved” and gained vast popularity with the speed of an avalanche. From then on, the bear has been inserted into many other pictures where its appearance adds new dimensions to the jokes. The “Hello Bear” meme was spread through different online channels as life journal community, Russian social networks as Vkontakte and Odnoklassniki, multiple fora and blogs and so on. Some web users formed an online community devoted solely to variations on the theme (see for example http://ru_preved.livejournal.com). The words “Preved Medved” and the bear image have also found their way into the mainstream mass media, the picture and the phrase were even used for government PR and as a poster for the Russian edition of Newsweek.

The famous bear has been introduced into the number of literary kreatiffs (kreatifs), starting with jokes, political anecdotes, tales, classical fairy-tales and ending with foreign literature, for instance, a well-known “Raven” by Edgar A. Poe. The following piece of transformed poem serves as an excellent example of padonkaffsky sense of humor, kreatiff author’s self-irony and postmodern genre and language games:

Once upon a sunny morning, while I fucked, so hot and horny,
 Beautiful Lenore, my girlfriend — on the forest grass — our bed,
 As I thrust her from the rear, suddenly there came a bear
 And my heart was filled with fear of the furious Medved!
 His enormous paws he lifted as his way to us he led -
 And produced a roar: «Preved!»
 And still stands he on the painting, next to myself, nearly fainting,
 On that evil, ghastly image people of the net adore.
 And in offices and classes they keep laughing off their asses
 As the wild «Preved!» trespasses in the heart of my Lenore...
 And my dick — thanks to the bear and to his so fearsome roar —
 Shall be lifted — Nevermore!
 (<http://lurkmore.com>)

This kreatiff was posted on the Lurkmore (Lurkomorye), which firstly served as an informal Russian-language online encyclopedia focusing on Internet subcultures, folklore, and memes. The amount of information on the site was rapidly expanding, and with the laps of time, Lurkmore turned into an informal encyclopedia about everything, containing a wide range of articles, although a very considerable number of them was still about the Internet culture. Lurkmore articles had a unique style: the combination of informality, semi-seriousness, sarcasm, the free

use of obscene language, and impudence. Lurkmore authors also performed a sharp criticism of the shortcomings of the considered phenomena. The site does not exist anymore since June 2015, when Dmitry Homak, the Lurkmore co-founder, declared on his Facebook page that the project would be frozen and become a "culture memorial" due to increasing pressure of Roskomnadzor (Federal Service for Supervision in the Sphere of Telecom, Information Technologies and Mass Communications).



Another example of the Medved meme inserted into classical texts is a tale "Masha and the Bear", transformed by Krokotot into "Masha and Medved". Krokotot's tale describes Masha's adventures in the woods, her meeting with the bear, that wants to make her stay in his house, but fails, and Masha's safe escape. The plot reminds the original one, except the classical bear here is replaced by Medved, who has obvious sexual intentions, eroticized speech and behavior. This combination of canonic and non-normative textual practice of the Krokotot's text allows H. Schmidt to trace this kreatiff back to the tradition of Secret tales (Zavetnye skazki), collected and published by Russian folklorist and philologist A. Afanasyev in the end of the nineteenth century, and which haven't been republished since then until post-soviet times (Schmidt, 2014). These tales differ much from texts read by parents to their children in the evening; original, uncensored texts are characterized by sexuality of main protagonists, expressive foul language and scabrous plots.

Memes based on padonkaffsky slang and kreatiffs quickly gained popularity and have been successfully commercialized as it happened, for example, with the "Ja – krevedko!" ("I'm a shrimp!") narrative. The evolution of the "Ja krevedko!" meme started from the site <http://www.bash.org.ru>, which is a grand collection of programmers' jokes, anecdotes and funny situations happened to users. It is said that an unknown student of one Moscow University wrote phrase "Ja – krevedko!" on the desk during a boring lecture. Somebody posted it on [bash.org.ru](http://www.bash.org.ru) and the glorious story of the meme started. "Ja - krevedko!" became of the most popular comment in blogs, due to its polysemy:

- the phrase means that its author is a bit disorientated (doesn't know much about the subject of discussion and doesn't want to get deep into it) but at the same time he/she is in a perfect mood and harmony with the world;
- the author doesn't want to do anything, he/she is procrastinating (just as a shrimp does through its life);
- the author admits he/she doesn't understand anything in this life (and is quite pleased with this fact).

Internet neo-mythology associates the "shrimp"-meme with Cthulhu, probably because creatures being water elements; this connection allows creating narratives that are more complex and polysemantic. "Ja krevedko" and Cthulhu compound meme is used for deconstructing popular propagandist Soviet poster "Have you registered as a volunteer?" Spreading of the meme stimulated emergence of many identical phrases with suffix "ko" on the end of the word: "Ja mashinko" ("I'm a car"), "Ja futbolko" ("I'm a T-shirt"), "Ja devochko" ("I'm a girl"). The meme started being printed on T-shirts, bags, phone-covers, expanding the borders of subcultural symbolic reality and becoming a part of mass consumption.



Padonki: social portraits and counter-cultural ideology of “post-punk”.

According to a thorough analysis of Udaff.com and Padonki.org visiting audience, made by Goriunova in 2006, the youngest users (and the most unfrequently met) are teens aged 14-16; basically they are college or university students, while an average visitor of Udaff.com is an adult or a young adult under 35 years old. If visitors are employed, they are most likely office managers, so called “white collars”. More than 80% of users, who answered questions concerning education, (a questionnaire was placed on Udaff.com by its founders) claimed to have had higher education, or even to have been doing a postgraduate course, all the rest were studying at gymnasiums and secondary schools. (Goriunova, 2006). Male visitors prevail, although the number of females is quite sizable. Koroed, one of the members of padonki community and a TV producer, claims:

Padonki are serious and intelligent people, who reached all the goals they had. We have everything, but we have remained the guys who still want to have fun. Visitors of Padonki.org are people of different age, belonging to different social groups, nationalities, etc., but most of them are adults, successful ones, some are into politics, some are entrepreneurs. (<http://www.akzia.ru/politics/24-05-2006/1528.html>).

As it is stated in padonki Constitution: “padonok is a person who is able to abstract himself from the social norms and rules, ideological, political, cultural or moral ones”. (<http://padonki.org/creo.do?topicId=8&creold=3908>). Thus, padonki declare their freedom from stereotypes, conventionalities, and standardized worldview, they are proud of their ability for critical thinking and analysis, they stress their capacity for opposing themselves to mainstream and mass culture. As Radchenko formulated it, padonki subculture emerged due to the “job age riot”, when people were expected to reach some professional self-actualization and at the same time wanted to stay careless and young. (Radchenko, 2009). This was not a traditional teenage riot against parents’ culture and their values; but a riot of office managers against slavery of corporate culture, values of consuming society, and against people’s fixation on material needs and material culture. Padonki wanted to be independent, at least in their free time and at least on the level of thinking, they wanted to be able to distance themselves from the reality by means of irony and language games. Members of the community identify themselves as nonconformists and contemporary punks, those ones who wear suits in the offices while doing “serious business” and perform themselves as clowns and tricksters during their carnivalesque activities on the named websites:

TV imposes upon us stereotyped ideas of success: to prosper you need to listen to certain music, to wear certain clothes, to be homosexual or look like gays. So called tolerance, which came to our country from the west, from Europe, is a very aggressive ideology, we do not accept it, we fight with it. In our kreatiffs, we protest against the accepted by the mass men life-style. We hate an average person / citizen in the streets; philistine, we hate hypocrisy. We can afford intolerance in our speech, and we never express ourselves in politically correct way. We are nonconformists, contemporary punks. (<http://www.akzia.ru/politics/24-05-2006/1528.html>)

Albanian language is not just a language game for game’s sake; it is a linguistic manifestation of their counter-cultural ideology. In their kreatiffs, padonki demonstrate their inner freedom from the society. Albanian is filled with politically incorrect words, for example, a true padonok will never use a term “Afro-American” or “Afro-Russian”, he/she will say “a nigger”, the word unacceptable in official discourse. A true padonok will also never use a term “homosexual”; this word will be replaced with the German word “Achtung” which in padonkaffsky

slang is used to speak about homosexual people, in order to demonstrate disagreement with the policy of tolerance. In their kreatiffs, padonki do not simply fight with official literacy and correct Russian, they believe correct and clear language to be an example of normativity of such social institutions as school, university, family, and offices.

It is important to underline the fact that counter-cultural intentions of padonki are limited only with their statement; padonki are not willing to change anything in economical or political spheres, their riot is *not a revolutionary* one. They have started only one revolution, a revolution in language; by means of the slang, they show their intolerance to the existing cultural order. Therefore, Olbanian is a way to perform a protest rhetoric and not punk, but rather a post-punk protest ideology of padonki. Their literature-centered riot shows the flexibility of the subculture, its ability to adapt and adjust to the disciplinary character of society and at the same time, to deconstruct the symbolical order of the grander culture, to parody it and to mock at it.

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