

RUSSIAN-ENGLISH HOMOGLYPHS, HOMOGRAPHY, AND HOMOGRAPHIC TRANSLATIONS

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A *homoglyph* is a letter whose visual form is more or less identical to that of a letter in some other alphabet. For example, the Cyrillic uppercase letters A, B, E, K, M, H, O, P, C, T, Y, and X all resemble letters from the Latin alphabet (though they do not necessarily have the same sound values). In the February 1973 “Kickshaws” [1] we find the seven-letter sequence PECTATE, which at the time was the longest known English word which can be written entirely with Cyrillic-looking characters. By 1979, this record had been broken with the eight-letter TEAMMATE [2]. The present author’s own computer-assisted search turned up over 2000 more sequences, including 166 of length 8 or greater. The longest is the 13-letter CHATTAHOOCHEE, the name of an American river, followed closely by the 12-letter PHAEOPHYCEAE, a class of algae. Some less esoteric words in the list include the 10-letter POCKETBOOK, HOTCHPOTCH, PACKET-BOAT, HOMEOPATHY, HOKEY-POKEY, HEMATOMATA, HACKMATAK, and APPOMATTOX.

A special case of such letter sequences is the *homograph*, which Lee B. Croft defines as “one of two or more words which are identically written regardless of their meanings, derivation, pronunciation, language membership or alphabet constituency”. In a 1975 *Word Ways* article [3], Croft searched a 1960 edition of S. I. Ozhegov’s *Dictionary of the Russian Language* to come up with 70 Russian–English uppercase homographs. He noted with surprise that he was unable to find any homographic Russian verb forms, nor any homographs of more than five letters. In this article we improve upon his findings by providing over a hundred more homographs, among them several Russian verbs, plus several words with more than five letters. We also identify a few possible errors in Croft’s original list.

First, the errata: Croft gives COCK, CHOCK, and MACK as the “genitive plural zero ending” form of the words COCKA, CHOCCA, and MACKA, respectively. However, these nouns all belong to a declension where the -O- in the suffix is fleeting; the actual genitive plural forms are therefore COCOK, CHOCOK, and MACOK, none of which are listed as words in our English sources. Some of Croft’s other genitives are also

problematic, though the homographs are still valid. Specifically, BAT is not the genitive plural of “wedding” but rather of “wadding”, and HAP is not the genitive plural of “slat bed”, but rather the nominative form.

Our list of supplemental homographs below excludes acronyms and abbreviations, but includes proper nouns where they exist in our sources. For English, the word forms marked with an asterisk have been checked against *Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition; the remainder are from the *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd edition. All corresponding Russian word forms have been checked against the online dictionary Wiktionary. Note that some of the homographs exploit the fact that the Russian letter Ё is usually written as E.

The homographs are listed in order of length, and then in Russian alphabetical order. A brief definition of each Russian word is provided.

A ‘but’	M ‘em’	P ‘er’	Y ‘at’
E ‘ye’	H ‘en’	C ‘with’	X ‘kha’
K ‘ka’	O ‘about’	T ‘te’	

AC ‘ace’	KY ‘carriage’	CO ‘with’
BO ‘in’	MA ‘ma’	CY ‘sou’
EE ‘her’	HY ‘well’	TA ‘that’
EM 1s pres. ‘eat’	OM ‘ohm’	TE ‘those’
KA ‘ka’	OC acc. pl. ‘wasp’	TY acc. ‘that’
KO ‘to’	PE ‘re’	

ACE prep. ‘ace’	HOP gen. pl. ‘hole’	COE dat. ‘soybean’
BAM dat. ‘you’	OKA ‘Oka’	COT gen. pl. ‘comb’
BAC acc. ‘you’	OKE dat. ‘Oka’	TAY ‘tau’
BOH ‘there’	OPT ‘crosscut’	TEM dat. ‘those’
MAE prep. ‘May’	OCA ‘wasp’	TET gen. pl. ‘theta’
MAM ‘mom’	PAC gen. pl. ‘race’	TEX gen. ‘those’
MOE ‘my’	POE prep. ‘swarm’	TYE dat. ‘thuja’

HAM 'us' CHA gen. 'dream' TYP 'tour'
 HOB 'new' CHE prep. 'dream'

BATT 'watt'	HYTE prep. 'chickpea'	COTE dat. 'comb'
BEEP 'fan'	PACY acc. 'race'	COXA 'plough'
BEET 3s. pres. 'whiff'	PEBA 'crybaby'	COXY acc. 'plough'
KAMA 'Kama'	PEKE dat. 'river'	CYMA 'bag'
KAPA 'penalty'	POEM 1pl. pres. 'dig'	CYME dat. 'bag'
KAPE dat. 'penalty'	POET 3s. pres. 'dig'	TAPA 'package'
KETA 'chum salmon'	POKY dat. 'doom'	TAPE dat. 'package'
MAME dat. 'mom'	POTE dat. 'company'	*TEMA 'theme'
MATY dat. 'mate'	CAKE 'sake'	TEME dat. 'theme'
MAXY dat. 'stroke'	CAKY 'Saku'	TOKE prep. 'current'
META 'mark'	*CAMO 'self'	*TOMA gen. 'volume'
MOPY dat. 'plague'	CHAM dat. pl. 'dream'	TOPE dat. 'Torah'
HAEM 'rent'	CHOC 'demolition'	TYKE prep. 'fat'
HOPE dat. 'hole'	COPT 'sort'	TYPE prep. 'tour'
HOTE dat. 'note'	COPY dat. 'trash'	TYPY dat. 'tour'

ATOMY dat. 'atom'	MOPOKE dat. 'hassle'
BATTA gen. 'watt'	HACEK gen. pl. 'ceremonial baton'
BATTY dat. 'watt'	COCKE dat. 'pacifier'
MECCA 'mass'	*TECTA gen. 'dough'

CHOCHO 'so-so'

TOKAMAK 'tokamak'

The last homograph, TOKAMAK, merits special attention. In both Russian and English it refers to a particular apparatus for effecting controlled nuclear fusion. It is not surprising that Croft did not find this word: tokamaks were invented in the 1950s, which is probably too early for the term to have appeared in his 1960 dictionary. (The OED's earliest citation in English is from 1969.) At seven letters, it is the longest Russian–English uppercase homograph, and also the longest such homograph which has the same meaning in both languages. (Other homographs of ours with the same meaning are MA, KA, ACE, MAM, OKA, and KAMA.)

As noted above, some of the homographs are proper names: for example, KAMA and OKA are both tributaries of the Volga, and CAKY (Saku) is a municipality in Estonia. We did not extend our homograph search to gazetteers, though it's reasonable to suspect that this would produce some further examples of impressive length. For example, OKTAHA is the genitive form of the Russian word for “octane”, and according to the US Geographic Names Information System is the name of a populated place in Oklahoma.

Three of the homographs we discovered are verb forms in Russian: BEET, POEM, and POET. This allows us to construct some *homographic translations*—that is, phrases or even full sentences which are grammatically correct in both languages—albeit contrived and nonsensical. For example, “BOT, OH COXY POET!” uses “bot”, Australian slang for “borrow money” and “coxy”, a variant of “cocksy” (meaning “saucy”). A paraphrasing into standard English might be, “Borrow money, O saucy poet!”; in Russian the sentence means, “Here, he digs the plough!” A somewhat longer (and even more contrived) example relies on “ha”, the reduced form of English “have”: “OH BEET, HA COCKY PAM!” This would be read in Russian as “He whiffs, to the frames’ pacifier!” but paraphrased in English as “O beet, have cocky Pam!” Needless to say, the danger of encountering an accidental homographic translation of non-trivial length cannot be underestimated.

References

1. David L. Silverman. “Kickshaws.” *Word Ways* 6:1, pp. 37–52. February 1973.
2. Philip M. Cohen and A. Ross Eckler. “*Word Ways* challenges (Part 2).” *Word Ways* 12:2, pp. 83–87. May 1979.
3. Lee B. Croft. “Russian-to-English homographs.” *Word Ways* 8:4, pp. 204–206. November 1975.