

1. 11 The Chuvash Alphabet

The following alphabetical table gives the letters in the Chuvash alphabet of Yákovlev, that of the present-day, and the transcription into English letters as given in this book.

Old Alphabet	Present Alphabet	English Transcription	Comment or Explanation
а	а	а	
ӑ	ӑ	ă	
(б)	б	b	In Russ. & for. words only
в	в	v	
(г)	г	g	In Russ. & for. words only
(д)	д	d	In Russ. & for. words only
е	е	ye	Old = e everywhere; new = ye- initially and e elsewhere
ё	ё	ě	
-	ё	yo or ě	Only in Russian loanwords
(ж)	ж	ž	In Russ. & for. words only
(з)	з	z	In Russ. & for. words only
и, i	и	i	
ӕ	ӕ	i or y	Occurs only after vowels. Transcribed as y except after i
к	к	k	
л	л	l	
лъ	(лъ)	l or ly	Not a separate letter today
м	м	m	
н	н	n	
нь	нь	n or ny, n'	Not a separate letter today
(о)	о	o	In Russ. & for. words only
п	п	p	
р	р	r	
ръ	ръ	r or ry, r'	Not a separate letter today
с	с	s	
ç	ç	ś	
т	т	t	
тӑ	тӑ	t (t')	Not a separate letter today
у	у	u	

Old Alphabet	Present Alphabet	English Transcription	Comment or Explanation
ѳ	ф	ü	
(ф)	ф	f	In Russ. & for. words only
х	х	χ or x	
(ц)	ц	ts	In Russ. & for. words only
ѣ	ч	č	
ш	ш	š	
(щ)	щ	šč	Only in Russian loanwords
(ъ)	ъ	" or omitted	Only in Russian loanwords
ы	ы	i	
(ь)	ь	' or omitted	Both foreign and native words
-	э	e	Occurs initially and in loanwords
(ѳу)	ю	yu	
(ѳа)	я	ya	

Although the old Yákovlev alphabet is no longer used, there are still many books in Chuvash in this alphabet which the student may have need to consult, as the works of Ashmarin on Chuvash. Those consonants given in parentheses in the preceding table did occur in Chuvash transcriptions of Russian and foreign names, but were not used in any native Chuvash words. Today, however, those consonants are counted as part of the regular Chuvash alphabet. The order of that alphabet, too, was rather different from the present one, which follows the Russian order closely. The old alphabet has all the vowels first, with the reduced ä and ě last, followed by the semivowels y and v. The consonants range in order after that. In transcription this alphabet ran as follows: a, e, i, u(o), ü, ä, ě, y, v, k, l, l', m, n, n', p, r, r', s, ś, t, t', č, (f), χ and š. This is the order used in Ashmarin's 17-volume Chuvash dictionary. Note particularly that Russian e has the value of e, not of ye as it does in the present alphabet. Further, the sounds represented by the present-day Russian letters ю and я were given in the old alphabet as ѳу and ѳа.

About 1938 a revision of the Yákovlev alphabet was introduced in Chuvashia, which meant the dropping of the four letters ѳ, ѳ, ѳ and ѳ, the use of Russian ю and я, as well as э/е, the introduction of the voiced consonants (b, d, g, ž, z and so on) as part of the alphabet, and the adoption of the Russian order of letters as given in a second column.

In Western works on Turcology, the student may encounter yet another transcription of Chuvash words. The chief differences are that $j = i$, $\varrho = \check{e}$, $\hat{e} = \check{a}$, and $t\check{s} = \check{c}$. Other changes are easily understood.

In the present work, we are going to use an English transcription of the Chuvash alphabet, for several reasons. In the first place, the English letters represent a mechanical substitution of certain English letters for the corresponding Chuvash or Russian letters, that is, a is a, t is t, and so on. The student faced with learning the vocabulary and grammar of a new language should not have the hurdle of new letters to contend with. When he has learned what some words mean, then it will be meaningful to see them in their native dress. Further, the relationships between Turkic languages and Chuvash are more apparent when a Latin alphabet is employed. Lastly, from a practical point of view, it is very difficult to prepare the text of such a work as the present one employing two or three typewriters at once, one for each of several scripts involved.

The reading selections accompanying this work are, however, given in the regular Cyrillic alphabet for all contemporary selections, and the Latin alphabet is only used for folkloristic selections. The student should begin to familiarize himself with the Russian-type alphabet as soon as a few lessons have been covered, by beginning one of the first reading selections in the modern script.

The English order of letters is used in the Glossary of the Reader, and is as follows: a, ä, b, č, d, e, ě, f, g, i, ı, k, l, m, n, o, p, r, s, ś, š, t, u, ũ, v, χ, y, z, and ž. Note that the Russian order differs by placing at the end some letters we are accustomed to find at the beginning, and vice versa.