

## **Charting the Path: Assessing Uzbek Language Alphabet Reforms and Their Sociolinguistic Impact**

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### **Abstract**

This article delves into the recent reforms in the Uzbek language alphabet, analyzing the motivations, methods, and outcomes. The study explores the advantages and disadvantages of the changes, considering technical challenges faced by different generations in reading and writing. It evaluates the role of the alphabet in society and education, highlighting divergent perspectives among linguists. While some argue that these reforms risk eroding cultural heritage, others view them as crucial for linguistic clarity and international integration. The results offer a balanced analysis, aiming to deepen understanding of the reforms' significance and their implications for both older and younger populations.

**Keywords:** uzbek language, alphabet reforms, linguistic clarity, cultural heritage, education

### **Introduction**

The alphabet is much more than a list of letters used in one language. The alphabet serves as a fundamental tool for communication, cultural expression, and knowledge dissemination. This article aims to go beyond the surface-level discussions surrounding the reforms and delve into the deeper significance of the alphabet in society and education. Changes in the alphabet can have far-reaching implications, affecting literacy rates, language preservation efforts, academic research, and economic development. By examining the potential consequences of the reforms, this article seeks to shed light on the broader implications they may have on the future trajectory of the Uzbek language and culture.

The Uzbek language alphabet has undergone significant reforms, marking a notable milestone in the linguistic and cultural development of Uzbekistan. These reforms have sparked intense discussions and debates among scholars, linguists, educators, and the general public regarding the advantages and disadvantages of the changes. This article aims to provide a comprehensive description of the forms in the Uzbek language alphabet, delve into the motivations behind these changes.

Moreover, this article is an experience of understanding the reasons of several changes on the Uzbek alphabet which have resulted to long discussions. Various linguists have explored these causes in different manners, and ongoing discussions continue regarding the positive and negative impacts of these reforms. A survey was conducted to gauge public opinions on the challenges, advantages, and drawbacks associated with these changes. This article presents the survey results to bolster the aforementioned ideas.

## **Literature Review**

Several significant studies have been conducted regarding the reform of the Uzbek language alphabet, shedding light on the issue and presenting various authors' perspectives and findings.

One prominent researcher in this field is Rasulova Zulfiya. In her work "Uzbek: History, Today, Future", she provides a comprehensive historical overview of the alphabet reforms and examines the challenges and potential benefits associated with the changes. Rasulova argues that the reform is necessary to address the technical difficulties and inconveniences of the previous alphabet, improve literacy rates, and enhance communication within Uzbek society. Her research findings emphasize the importance of a more streamlined and phonetically consistent alphabet for educational practices and the overall linguistic development of Uzbekistan (Rasulova, 2021).

Another notable study by researcher Alisher Ilkhamov, titled "Boosted Transition of Uzbek Language to Latin Alphabet", focuses on the sociocultural aspects of the reforms. Ilkhamov explores the potential impact of the changes on cultural identity, language preservation, and national heritage. His research findings highlight the concerns raised by some scholars and cultural activists regarding the potential erosion of traditional values and historical roots. However, Ilkhamov also acknowledges the proponents' arguments that the reforms are necessary for linguistic clarity, international integration, and economic development (Alkhamov, 2021).

In a different perspective, researcher Vladimir Alpatov conducted a study titled "Scripts and Politics in the USSR". Alpatov examines the cognitive and psychological implications of the alphabet changes, particularly focusing on the learning process and literacy acquisition. His research findings suggest that a more phonetically consistent alphabet could facilitate literacy development among young learners and improve overall reading and writing skills.

Overall, these studies highlight the complexity of the Uzbek language alphabet reform and present diverse viewpoints. While Rasulova emphasizes the technical advantages and educational benefits, Ilkhamov raises concerns about cultural preservation, and Alpatov focuses on the cognitive aspects. These studies contribute valuable insights into the ongoing discussions and provide a foundation for further research and policy considerations regarding the reform of the Uzbek language alphabet (Alpatov, 2017).

### **1. What is the role of the alphabet in society?**

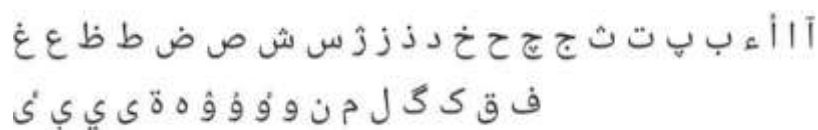
Before focusing on the alphabet changing, it would be better to provide some information about the alphabet and its features in society. The alphabet plays a crucial role in society by serving as the fundamental system for written communication. It allows people to convey thoughts, ideas, and information, fostering education, literature, and cultural exchange. The alphabet is a key tool in promoting literacy, facilitating learning, and preserving and sharing knowledge across generations. Beyond written communication, the alphabet also plays a significant role in various aspects of society. It forms the basis for coding and organizing information in databases and computer systems. Additionally, the alphabet is essential in areas like signage, helping with navigation, and creating standardized systems for sorting and categorizing items. In essence, the alphabet provides a structured framework that extends beyond written language to support various practical applications in our daily lives.

The alphabet serves as a cultural and linguistic identifier from one nation to another. Different nations often have distinct alphabets or writing systems that reflect their unique languages and cultural heritage. The diversity of alphabets contributes to the richness of global languages and allows for the expression of diverse ideas and perspectives. Additionally, the

alphabet is a tool for international communication and understanding, enabling people from different nations to share information, ideas, and knowledge across linguistic boundaries.

## **2. What changes have occurred?**

Several proposals have been put forward to reform the Uzbek alphabet or spelling rules. Between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, the ancestors of the Uzbeks utilized the ancient Uighur, Khorezm and Orhun-Enasoy scripts. After the conquest of Central Asia by the Arabs, the Arabic alphabet came into use. (These script photos are taken from Wikipedia)



**Figure 1: Arabic script**

However, at that time there were no clear standards of Uzbek writing, and different publications used various spelling rules. Arabic script was used in Uzbekistan until 1929, although a large-scale attack on this script began from mid-1920s. The Arabic script was declared to be the reason of our backwardness, illiteracy and religiosity. Therefore, from the academic year of 1929-1930, Uzbekistan embarked on using the Latin script (included 34 signs), and the public were cut off from the scientific, artistic and philosophical literature of Uzbek people, created and published over the centuries.



**Figure 2: Latin script**

Nevertheless, soon the Latin script was also replaced. In 1940, the Supreme Council of the Uzbek SSR approved the Uzbek alphabet based on the Cyrillic one. This Cyrillic alphabet and spelling are still used in Uzbekistan today.



**Figure 3: Cyrillic script**

After having been an independent country, Uzbekistan changed its alphabet to Latin script again.

This reform was thoroughly discussed in the mass media for a year with the participation of the general public, and on September 2, 1993, the law of the Republic of Uzbekistan [“On the introduction of the Uzbek alphabet based on the Latin script”](#) was announced. The newly adopted Uzbek alphabet was defined as consisting of 31 letters and one apostrophe. During the discussion of the alphabet introduced in 1993 and the “Basic spelling rules of the Uzbek language” prepared on this basis, a number of suggestions and recommendations were made, and critical opinions were expressed. On May 6, 1995, a law on making changes to the alphabet was adopted, and according to this document, it was determined that the new Uzbek alphabet consists of 26 letters and 3 letter combinations. The changes were made to the alphabet in 1995 (it became the form we use now) and the full transition was extended to 2005 and then to 2010. As of 2010, the transition has not been completed, and the country still uses two alphabets at the same time (Abdulkerimov, 2021).



**Figure 4:** The new Latin-Based alphabet [“Yañalif”](#)

The government recently confirmed January 2023 as a new “deadline” by which everyone must switch to the “improved” Latin Uzbek alphabet. Not long after this decision, a new reform is planned to change the four letters of Latin alphabet currently used. Because of this, many more discussions and debates are being happened (Khalilova, 2023).

### **3. Why these changes have occurred?**

The changes in alphabet in Uzbekistan was implemented as part of a language reform initiative aimed at modernizing and standardizing the Uzbek language. The decision to change the alphabet from Arabic to Latin was primarily driven by Abdurauf Fitrat who was one of the leading intellectuals of his time. He and other linguists, poets and writers divided into two periods their theoretical and practical activities: 1) Reform of the Arabic script -work on nationalization (1919-1923); 2) To create a new Uzbek alphabet based on the Latin script activity (1924-1929). Fitrat cites several reasons for reforming the Arabic script. For example, the Arabic script could not fully express the phonetic features of the Uzbek language, and there was a lack of symbols in that alphabet to represent Uzbek vowels in writing and others.<sup>4</sup>

As for changes occurred during Soviet Union, the decision to switch from the Latin to Cyrillic script was made because of political and communication factors. The Cyrillic script was seen as more suitable for accurately representing the sounds of the Uzbek language. It was believed that the Latin script used previously was not able to adequately capture the phonetic nuances of the language. The switch to Cyrillic aimed to standardize the written form of Uzbek and improve literacy rates among the population. The Cyrillic script was already widely used in Soviet Union, and its adoption in Uzbekistan aimed to facilitate communication and integration within the Soviet system. It allowed for easier exchange of written materials, education, and administrative processes within the Soviet Union.

After gaining independence, Uzbekistan changed its script to the Latin one again in 1993. There were several reasons behind these changes. Firstly, prior to the Soviet era, Uzbekistan used the Latin script for writing the Uzbek language. The switch back to the Latin

script was seen as a way to reclaim the country's cultural and historical heritage. Moreover, Uzbekistan, along with the other Central Asian countries, sought to distance itself from its Soviet past and establish stronger ties with the Turkic and Islamic world. Adopting the Latin script, which is used by many Turkic languages and is associated with the Islamic world, was seen as a way to reinforce these connections. In addition, the Cyrillic script was not well-suited for modern technologies, such as computers and the internet. The Latin script, on the other hand, is more compatible with these technologies, making it easier to adapt to the digital age and participate in the global information exchange. The transition to the Latin script was a gradual process and involved extensive efforts in education, publishing, and public awareness campaigns. The new Latin-based Uzbek alphabet, known as "[Yañalif](#)," was introduced in 1995 and has been gradually implemented in schools, official documents, and public life.

In 1995, the Uzbek alphabet, originally configured with 31 letters and accompanying separation marks, underwent a transformative revision, reducing its composition to 29 letters. This significant alteration, which transpired in 1993, intricately entailed the substitution of the letters sh, ch, o', and g' with their respective counterparts ş, ç, Ö, and ğ, thereby adapting the script to Latin characters. In a subsequent development, a new proposal emerged to amend the "[Law on the implementation of the Uzbek alphabet adapted to Latin letters](#)." President Shavkat Mirziyoyev signed this amendment, ushering in changes to the Latin alphabet established in 1995. However, in 2019, a reform was introduced to revert the previous changes. The digraphs sh, ch, o', and g' were once again replaced, this time with diacritical signs. The new letters ş, ç, ğ, upper-dashed o (ō), and ng were adopted, akin to the Turkish language. Upon presenting the updated alphabet draft to the public for discussion, it was decided that the country would transition to the Latin alphabet on January 1, 2023. In the first days, there are various heated debates and discussions about the alphabet change and many officials criticizing the idea. Recently, Saida Mirziyoyeva, assistant to the President of Uzbekistan, pointed out a big problem - the name of the country, "[O'zbekiston](#)" is spelled incorrectly in different places. She stressed the urgent need to settle the debates about changing the alphabet once and for all. Mirziyoyeva highlighted that this is not just about language; it's about our national identity and the name of our country. She strongly urged for a clear resolution to these discussions, emphasizing how important it is to protect the integrity of our nation and its name. (This photo is taken from official website of [www.gazeta.uz](http://www.gazeta.uz)). (Mirziyoyeva, 2023)



**Figure 5: O'zbekiston**

#### **4. What are the positive and negative effects of alphabet changing on generation gap?**

The effects of alphabet changing on the generation gap can vary and may have both positive and negative implications. Focusing on merits of alphabet changing, the younger generation tends to adapt to changes more easily, including changes in the alphabet. They may quickly learn and adapt to the new alphabet, leading to increased literacy rates and better communication



skills. Additionally, new alphabet is likely to be designed to be more compatible with modern technology, such as computers, smart phones, and digital platforms. This can enhance digital literacy and ease of communication for the younger generation. Changing the alphabet aimed at reclaiming or preserving cultural heritage. This can lead to a renewed interest in cultural traditions and language among the younger generation, fostering a sense of cultural identity and pride. However, alphabet changing may create difficulties for older generation mostly who are accustomed to the previous alphabet. This could result in difficulty in reading, writing, and communicating effectively, leading to a generation gap in terms of literacy and communication skills. Furthermore, changing the alphabet results in a loss of historical and linguistic continuity for an older generation that grew up with and has a deep connection to the previous alphabet. It may lead to a sense of disconnection from their cultural and linguistic heritage. The effects of alphabet changing on the generation gap can be complex and multifaceted. While it may bring positive benefits such as adaptability and cultural preservation for the younger generation, it can also create challenges and communication barriers for the older generation. Successful management of the alphabet transition, inclusive education, and intergenerational dialogue can help mitigate potential negative effects and bridge the generation gap.

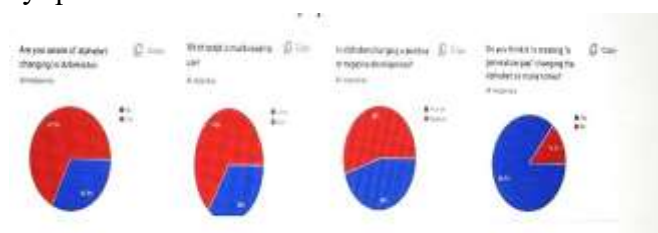
## Methods

A piece of research was conducted in which 40 participants were involved, with half falling within the 15-35 age range and the remaining individuals aged approximately between 35 and 60. The research aimed to investigate participants' attitudes towards frequent changes in the alphabet. The chosen research methodology was an online questionnaire, consisting of a total of six questions:

1. Are you aware of alphabet changing in Uzbekistan?
2. Can you read and write in both Cyrillic and Latin scripts?
3. Which script is much easier to use?
4. Which script is more advantageous for improvements in different areas?
5. Is alphabet changing a positive or negative development?
6. Do you think it is creating “a generation gap” to change the alphabet so many times?

## Results and Discussions

In accordance with this online questionnaire we gathered answers into pie charts to show specific results of every question:



**Figure 6:** Online questionnaire answer results

Based on the outcomes of the initial inquiry, it is evident that 67.5% of respondents were cognizant of the alterations to the alphabet in Uzbekistan, while 32.5% exhibited a lack of awareness. Regarding the second query, a majority of participants, specifically 72.5%, demonstrated proficiency in both Cyrillic and Latin scripts, whereas 22.5% and 5% exclusively favored Cyrillic and Latin scripts, respectively. Notably, 65% of respondents found the Latin script more facile to employ, while 35% expressed a preference for the Cyrillic script. However,

only a quarter of the participants identified advantages in favor of Cyrillic, with the prevailing sentiment asserting the Latin script's superior utility across various domains. With regard to the ramifications of these linguistic modifications, 55% of participants perceived the changes as detrimental, contrasting with the 45% who held a contrary perspective. The final inquiry delved into the potential generational impact stemming from the alphabet adjustments. A mere 14.3% of respondents believed that there were no discernible effects on subsequent generations, while a substantial 85.7% contended that such effects were indeed present. These findings collectively suggest a nuanced public perception, acknowledging both proficiency in adapting to the dual-script system and diverse views on the desirability and impact of the alphabet change in Uzbekistan.

## **Conclusion**

There forms of the Uzbek language alphabet represent significant milestone in the linguistic and cultural development of Uzbekistan. This article has provided a comprehensive overview of the changes, their motivations, and their potential impact on society. By examining the technical improvements, educational implications, cultural preservation concerns, and socioeconomic considerations, we have gained insights into the complexities surrounding the changes.

The results of the research indicate that the new alphabet system brings technical advancements, improving the phonetic accuracy and consistency of the Uzbek language. This has the potential to enhance literacy rates, facilitate language learning, and improve communication within the Uzbek society. The educational impact of the changes is expected to be positive, simplifying the learning process and making the teaching of Uzbek as a second language more accessible.

However, the discussions and debates surrounding the reform have also highlighted concerns related to the preservation of cultural heritage and traditional values. It is crucial for policymakers and stakeholders to address these concerns and ensure that the reform does not undermine the historical roots and unique cultural identity associated with the previous alphabet system. Balancing linguistic clarity and cultural preservation is essential for fostering a sense of pride and identity among the Uzbek population.

Moreover, the reform has potential socioeconomic implications, with a more accessible alphabet system contributing to economic growth, improved educational outcomes, and increased global integration. Standardizing the Uzbek language can open doors for international trade, cooperation, and the development of a knowledge-based economy.

By embracing the changes with a balanced approach, Uzbekistan can chart a path towards a modern, accessible, and culturally rich language system that meets the needs of its people while preserving the essence of its cultural heritage. The reform of the Uzbek language alphabet represents a significant step towards linguistic progress and societal development, and its success will depend on the continued engagement and collaboration of all stakeholders involved.

### **Originality Statement**

The author[s] declare that this article is their own work and to the best of their knowledge it contains no materials previously published or written by another person, or substantial proportions of material which have been accepted for the published of any other published materials, except where due acknowledgement is made in the article. Any contribution made to the research by others, with whom author[s] have work, is explicitly acknowledged in the article.

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