



Benet Vincent identifies the distinctive features of Nadsat, the teen argot of Anthony Burgess's *A Clockwork Orange*



Nadsat:

*the anti-language of *A Clockwork Orange**

On its publication in 1961 and then, almost 10 years later, when it was made into a film by Stanley Kubrick, Anthony Burgess's novel *A Clockwork Orange* created a stir. This was because of its graphic portrayal of the extreme violence inflicted by a gang of teenagers on a range of defenceless victims and their insolent attitude to authority.

Linguistically-speaking, however, what was interesting about the book was the language that Burgess put into the mouths of the narrator and main character, Alex, and other teenagers, in particular his group of friends, or *droogs*, who haunt

A Clockwork Orange's futuristic and dystopian landscape. Burgess was a keen linguist (see *Lives in Language*) and realised that if Alex's speech reflected youth language of his day, then it would quickly become dated. To give this teenspeak a more timeless quality and disassociate it from any specific existing culture, he instead opted to base it largely on Russian, with some other elements thrown in, such as the occasional use of rhyming slang.

The resulting art language, Nadsat, is in a tradition of anti-languages, going back at least to Elizabethan thieves' cant. 'Anti-language' is a term introduced by the linguist Michael Halliday to describe a variety used by a group that sets itself up in opposition to society. An example previously

featured in *Babel* is Polari, the gay argot described by Paul Baker in *Babel No2*. As Baker points out, anti-languages are not strictly 'languages' since they cannot be used to talk about all subjects. They are largely a lexical phenomenon, that is, words and phrases are substituted for standard English vocabulary and mainly revolve around topics frequently referred to by the group. Often an anti-language is less a language in itself, than a quite sophisticated range of lexical items that the in-group of speakers use so that others cannot understand them.

Clearly, in the case of *A Clockwork Orange*, Nadsat cannot work exactly as an anti-language otherwise readers of the book would

Nadsat: the English transliteration of the Russian suffix *-nadsat*, which is added to the numbers one to nine to create the numbers 11 to 19 and so is roughly equivalent to '-teen' in English. Nadsat is the language of teenagers.

fail to understand much of it. Consequently, Burgess has to take some care when introducing unfamiliar words. Nevertheless, it can come as quite a shock to the unsuspecting reader when they start reading the book. The extract below from the beginning of the novel gives an indication of the items and the challenge involved: nine items in this short extract are likely to be unfamiliar to readers. Decide for yourself the extent to which they are successfully introduced by guessing the meanings without looking at the glossary provided.

The study of Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange* presents an interesting problem of identification. Since Burgess's intention was to have his readers pick it up as they went along, he provided little explicit help to

readers to decipher the meanings of this new anti-language beyond in-text glosses such as 'Bog or God'. At the same time, realising that the challenge presented by Nadsat may be too much for some readers, publishers since the first US edition in 1963 have provided glossaries of Nadsat terms.

While no doubt helpful for readers who get stuck or do not have the patience to stick with it and acquire Nadsat naturally, glossaries are against Burgess's express wishes and are therefore unauthorised; this means that they are not necessarily comprehensive. They also differ in terms of coverage and accuracy, due to various factors, such as the level of Russian knowledge of the respective compilers and their aims in making the lists. Glossary makers seem to have approached their task by reading through the book and noting words that strike them as Nadsat.

These vagaries of glossary production are unlikely to exercise the reader of the book who wants to look up a word, but they do not really help us understand what Nadsat is or how it is delimited, which is a

problem for those who want to study how it works and, as in our case, how it is translated. We needed a more rigorously arrived at list for our study of the translation of the *A Clockwork Orange* into different languages, which, as an invented language without culture may provide insights into how translators approach translation.

Our solution was to adopt **keyword** analysis as a starting point for our investigation of Nadsat. This is a well-known procedure in the field of Corpus Linguistics, which is

Corpus (pl. corpora): a computer-readable collection of texts which is intended to represent a particular variety of a language and which is then used to investigate linguistic features of the variety in question.

Keyword: a word that occurs significantly more frequently in the text(s) one is interested in than in a reference corpus.

Extract from *A Clockwork Orange* (pp 7–8 of 2012 'Restored edition')

"Our pockets were full of deng, so there was no real need from the point of view of crasting any more pretty polly to tolchock some old veck in an alley and viddy him swim in his blood while we counted the takings and divided by four, nor to do the ultra-violent on some shivering starry grey-haired ptitsa in a shop and go smecking off with the till's guts."

Key to Nadsat items:

deng = money

crasting = stealing

pretty polly = lolly (i.e. money)

tolchock = beat up

veck = person, man

viddy = see, watch

starry = old

ptitsa = bird (i.e. woman)

smecking = laughing

the linguistic study of large sets of texts selected to represent a variety of a language. Keyword analysis is based on the premise that some of the distinctiveness of a text or group of texts can be revealed by identifying those words whose frequency in these texts is significantly higher than in another comparable set of texts (a **corpus**). In this case, as Nadsat is an (art) ‘anti-language’, comparison was with the standard English it attempts to subvert. With a computer-readable version of the text (made available by the Burgess Foundation) and access to the relevant software, we were able to derive a list of keywords, the top 10 of which are shown below with the number of times they appear in the book.

the list and filtering out the odd character name. In fact, the complete list included over 4500 items, of which a high proportion was not Nadsat. This list of keywords was, then, a starting point for further analysis of whether or not each item might be counted as Nadsat, on the underlying principle that such items must deviate from standard English, as defined by appearance in the Oxford English Dictionary.

An important part of this analysis was to work out what categories Nadsat words can be divided into, since these categories themselves suggest deviation from standard English. This categorisation approach is suggested by the novel itself when two doctors

words and morphology (*thou knowest*) and other creative morphology, e.g. ‘jam’ becomes *jammiwam*.

Once a candidate item was identified, its use in the book was checked to ensure that it occurs predominantly in the language of Alex and the *droogs*; occasionally some Nadsat items crop up in the language of other characters. This checking is made much easier by having the book in computer-readable format and thus being able to see the contexts in which words occur using corpus linguistics software. This procedure showed that some items that might be thought of as Nadsat, such as *worldcast*, are explicitly glossed as non-Nadsat by Nadsat speakers, typically using a phrase like ‘what they called’: “Tonight was what they called a worldcast”.

A further area of investigation was to check whether apparently standard English words are used in unusual ways. Perhaps the clearest examples are rhyming slang; ‘pretty’ is normal on its own but in combination with ‘polly’ we get the rhyming slang item shown in the extract above. Less obvious cases include some apparently familiar items such as *lighter* (‘woman’: “wrinkled old lighters”) or *cancer*, which is used metonymically to mean ‘cigarette’. Another example, shown in the extract above, is *ultra-violent*, which occurs in the phrase “do the *ultra-violent* on someone”, which is non-standard in a number of ways: the co-occurring verb, ‘do’ (rather than, say, ‘inflict’), the use of ‘the’, and the fact that ‘violent’ is a noun here rather than an adjective.

The categories of Nadsat we identified in the book are shown in the table above. The table also indicates the number of different words in each

	Word	Occurrences in A Clockwork Orange	Gloss
1	veck	144	<i>man</i>
2	viddy	132	<i>see, look</i>
3	horrorshow	107	<i>good</i>
4	malenky	99	<i>small, little</i>
5	Dim	130	<i>[name of character]</i>
6	viddied	76	<i>saw, looked</i>
7	goloss	65	<i>voice</i>
8	glazzies	65	<i>eyes</i>
9	gulliver	65	<i>head</i>
10	litso	64	<i>face</i>

This list gives an idea of how keyword analysis helped in identifying Nadsat words in the book; nine of the top ten ranking words are clearly Nadsat items. One might get the impression from this that identifying Nadsat merely involves going through

discussing Alex’s speech refer to its composition as “Slav” mixed with “bits of old rhyming slang”, and “a bit of gypsy talk, too”. Other previously identified groups include truncated forms of English words (e.g. *guff* for ‘guffaw’), archaic or obsolete

Category	Number of types	Example words
Core Nadsat	218	<i>bolshy, cal, itty, lighter</i>
Rhyming slang	5	<i>luscious glory, pretty polly</i>
Archaism	36	<i>ashake, canst, thou/thee/ thy/thine</i>
Babytalk	10	<i>eggweg, purplewurple</i>
Truncation	20	<i>guff, hypu</i>
Compound word	46	<i>afterlunch, in-grin</i>
Creative morphology	20	<i>appetitish, syphilised</i>

category, where ‘word’ means something like a dictionary headword; *bolshy* meaning ‘big’ also encompasses *bolshiest*. The largest group, Core Nadsat, as the examples suggest, includes foreign words and those of uncertain etymology, and hence the words most likely to be listed in existing glossaries together with rhyming slang words, which mostly appear to be Burgessian inventions (e.g. *luscious glory* is supposed to rhyme with ‘upper storey’ meaning ‘head’ and, by extension, ‘hair’). Core Nadsat is also by far the most prevalent group of items in terms of distribution throughout the book, nearly 10 times more frequent than all the other categories combined. While far less frequent and less well populated, the other categories present interesting variations to the otherwise predominantly Russian lexis, indicating a range of wordplay strategies which enrich this anti-language and extend it beyond a mere strategy of lexical substitution. At the same time, it should be noted that Burgess’s word-play is also at work in core Nadsat items, for example *horrorshow*, which is an approximate transliteration of Russian *khorocho* (‘good’), but also provides an indication of how the worldview of the

character who uses this word the most, Alex, differs quite considerably from that of most readers, who would not consider a ‘horror show’ to be ‘good’.

Our initial purpose in identifying Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange* was to produce a list of items that was arrived at using rigorous methods and to get an idea of how they typically work. Our next task is to see how words from this list are translated into other languages and whether similar categories emerge in these translations. The playfulness of Nadsat clearly poses a range of challenges for translators seeking to render *A Clockwork Orange* into other languages. Translators are challenged to find an analogue for Burgess’s use of Russian, and to re-create his multi-level wordplay making use of the resources available to the language in question. ¶

Benet Vincent is Lecturer in English Language at Coventry University, where he teaches and researches in the area of Corpus Linguistics and English for Academic Purposes. Like Jim Clarke (see *Lives in Language*), he is a member of a research project looking at Nadsat in *A Clockwork Orange* and its translations along with academics from Coventry, the University of Birmingham and Heriot Watt University. Benet and Jim are currently finalising their full-length article on the identification of Nadsat to appear in the journal *Language and Literature*.

Find out more

Books

Anthony Burgess (2012) *A Clockwork Orange: The Restored Edition*, William Heinemann. This new edition is edited by Andrew Biswell, and includes a wealth of supplementary essays, notes and reviews.

John Sinclair (1991) *Corpus, Concordance, Collocation*, Oxford University Press (a helpful text for starting to learn about Corpus Linguistics).

Articles

Michael Halliday (1976) ‘Anti-languages’, in *American Anthropologist* 78(3).

Sofia Malamatiidou (2017) ‘Creativity in translation through the lens of contact linguistics: a multilingual corpus of *A Clockwork Orange*’, in *The Translator* (an article on the translation of Nadsat into Greek by a member of the Nadsat project).

Online

Ponying the Slovos is our blog on invented languages, translation studies and corpus linguistics, and features a full list of Nadsat words – ponyingtheslovs.wordpress.com.