The use and effects of fictional argot in Anthony Burgess' *A Clockwork Orange*

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Abstract:

This extended essay explores "the reasons for and use of nadsat in Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange". Many essays have been written analysing A Clockwork Orange since its publication in 1962, but their discussion of its fictional argot "nadsat" remains largely peripheral to their main topics of discussion (for example, ethics or characterisation). I could not find an essay that discussed nadsat in its entirety, exploring the reasons for its use, effects upon the reader and place in furthering Burgess' authorial purpose, something important to future analysis of the book as a whole.

In preparation for this essay I read a number of secondary sources, not only to gain different viewpoints on the text but also to see what had been written on the topic already. I discovered something new to the topic that others seem to have missed – the archaic pronouns that all critics accept as part of nadsat, I argue should be excluded from the lexicon. In the essay I explore how nadsat is used to achieve a number of important effects: it allows readers to empathise with the protagonist, as well as attempting to dispel the notion that he is unintelligent; it exposes the extreme generational gap present in the novel and highlights the egocentricity of the teenage characters; and from a pragmatic point of view, prevents the novel from becoming dated and keeps it memorable to readers after they have finished.
What are the reasons for and effects of the use of nadsat in Anthony Burgess’ A Clockwork Orange?

Introduction

The "nadsat" argot was created by Anthony Burgess for A Clockwork Orange, a book which questions whether the denial of the individual's right to freedom of choice might "be a greater evil than the free choice of evil"¹; and the notion of what it means to be “good” through its teenage delinquent protagonist Alex. The most distinctive part of the novel is the style in which it was written – particularly nadsat, its "ebullient slang"². Nadsat isn’t a full language in the style of Tolkien’s Sindarin, nor is it an ever-changing derivative of English such as the idioglossia used in James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake, but instead is a system of slang based mostly on a combination of English and Russian. Burgess created an initially complicated yet consistent lingo, comparable to 19th century thieves’ cant or 1950s teddyboys’ slang. Nadsat takes English sentence construction and layers over it consistent replacement words derived mainly from transliterated Russian, with elements of modified English slang, archaic English, and baby-talk (for example, ‘baddiwad’ for bad). This essay explores the reasons for using and effects of nadsat and how it forms an essential technique for achieving the author’s purpose. There appears to be no published analysis which focuses solely of identifying all of them. The topic of nadsat is important to me personally because of the novel's key place in my love of wordplay – it was the first book I read that used unconventional English and since then the entire area of ergodic literature, from classics such as Finnegans Wake through to modern works such as House of Leaves, has been of constant fascination to me.

¹ Pg 2, excerpt from You’ve Had Your Time by Anthony Burgess, www.visual-memory.co.uk/amk/doc/burgess.html, accessed on 16/04/09
² Pg 58, Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias, David W. Sisk, Greenwood Press, Westport CT, 1997
The word ‘nadsat’ itself is taken from the Russian suffix for ‘-teen’, which Burgess chose because he was creating the lingo for the teens in his novel. Some words chosen contain a bilingual bonus for anyone versed in both English and Russian, such as the nadsat word ‘kopat’, which in the novel means to appreciate. Kopat is taken without change from the Russian word which means ‘to dig’ (as one would do to create a hole in the ground), a pun on the English slang ‘to dig something’, which means to be interested in or understand something. Other words taken from Russian are more heavily anglicised such as 'idti', changed into the nadsat word itty, both meaning ‘to go’. The use of nadsat, aside from making the book initially challenging to read (although taking "no more than fifteen pages to master"³, according to the original release's dust jacket), adds many layers to Burgess' authorial purpose in a way that could not be attained through the use of regular English only.

On the surface, the most obvious reason for Burgess' use of nadsat is to allow the reader to empathise more easily with Alex, described as "one of the most appallingly vicious creations in recent fiction"⁴. Throughout the novel, Alex enjoys committing shocking acts of violence upon innocent people, which would usually make it difficult for us as readers to empathise with him. The use of the fictional language protects us from the full horror of his violence by creating a buffer between the actual events and what the reader comprehends, because many of the words no longer have the same connotations as they do in regular English. Burgess himself said "to tolchock a chelloveck in the kishkas does not sound as bad as booting a man in the guts"⁵. Because these are new words in which the reader has no existing emotional investment, the reader doesn't have the same negative association with the action – leaving Burgess free to have Alex do what he wants without the reader judging him so harshly. By disconnecting the emotive response to the words from their meaning, nadsat creates a cushioning layer between the acts of violence and how the reader understands these acts. In *A Clockwork Orange* Resucked, Burgess says "nadsat, a Russified version of English, was meant to muffle the raw

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⁴ Pg 173, *Anthony Burgess: The Artist as Novelist*, Geoffrey Aggelar, University of Alabama, AL, 1979  
⁵ Pg xviii, introduction by Blake Morrison to *A Clockwork Orange*, Penguin Group (Australia), 2008
response we expect from pornography". He also points out that he was sickened by his own excitement when he was writing the rape scene. If we delve deeper into this idea, however, we reveal the possibility of more layers than at first meet the eye. In *Transformations of Language in Modern Dystopias*, David Sisk makes the claim that nadsat makes this perverse enjoyment too attractive to resist, and that it "titillates our morbid curiosity and coaxes us into multiple readings". We as readers are tempted to re-read any difficult or complex passages in order to more closely and fully comprehend the nadsat words, and could inadvertently begin to immerse ourselves in the violence of the scenes. We are then left with a choice – either we participate vicariously in the violence or we choose to avoid it by leaving the nadsat largely unknown but for its general meaning. Burgess claimed that "this strange new lingo would act like a kind of mist, half hiding the mayhem and protecting the reader from his own baser instincts", however he did not realise the full ramifications of his language: nadsat is not a buffer unless we choose it to be, and anyone who desires to secretly respond to the violence is free to do so.

Alex uses nadsat to speak directly to his readers as narrator and treats them as friends, making us feel as if we are a part of his gang and his subculture instead of condemning Alex for his terrible acts of cruelty; their language includes anyone who uses it and excludes all who don't. Our feeling of complicity with Alex is further intensified by his use of "oh my brothers" when he speaks to us, a phrase one might expect to hear between members of a union or resistance movement, "thus uniting narrator and reader in resistance to the state".

Nadsat also helps prevent the reader from thinking of Alex as unintelligent or crass, instead of as a “sufficiently intelligent young man". If written in regular English or even an existing and readily recognisable and comprehensible form of slang, the reader would have preconceived notions about the types of words used, who commonly uses them and where they are used.

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7 Pg 2, Op. Cit. *You’ve Had Your Time* by Anthony Burgess
8 Pg 62, Op. Cit. David W. Sisk
Scholars Davis and Womak claimed language "represents the internal life of the mind through external expression"\(^\text{10}\). For example, if Burgess had made Alex speak in the slang of 1950s subcultures such as the greasers, any readers who knew of the greasers' place in history would automatically assume a 1950s setting and stereotypical surrounding greaser culture. As the stereotype of the violent greaser was of an unintelligent thug, we would naturally assume that Alex too would be less intelligent than he is supposed to be, which would harm the book's overall message about the teenage thought process and contrasting intelligence with maturity. The use of nadsat also prevents Alex from appearing dull to the reader by removing the use of conventional swear words and low-level language, whilst still allowing him the expected teenage rebellion of swearing as part of his speech. Somebody whose vocabulary is limited to extremely common profanities by which they describe their environment, by their very nature does not seem as intelligent as someone with a vocabulary of uncommon expressions, and this is what Alex is provided with. Compare the following descriptions of an object or event: in English, “shitty smelly thing”; in nadsat, “cally vonny vesch”. The first sentence sounds rude and stilted, as if the speaker isn’t intelligent enough to actually describe what they see in any detail or depth. Instead of responding with a carefully considered intellectual approach to whatever they are dealing with, they are simply iterating their most base emotions using vague and commonly used pejorative adjectives. The second sentence on the other hand, whilst saying the exact same thing in terms of literal meaning, is read in a completely different way. The unfamiliarity of the words used may cause the reader to subconsciously view Alex as having some kind of unfathomable knowledge in an esoteric field, similar to the response elicited from the reader of a densely written sentence composed by an academic, and in fact the nadsat language "shows the imaginative superiority of Alex and his fellows"\(^\text{11}\). This sense of Alex knowing more is accentuated by his love of classical music – a genre associated more often with old-world academics and quiet intellectuals than with rebellious young teens. By using this association in conjunction with the nadsat Burgess causes the reader to characterise Alex as

\(^{10}\) Pg, 5, "Oh My Brothers": Reading the Anti-Ethics of the Psuedo-Family in Anthony Burgess's 'A Clockwork Orange', Todd F. Davis & Kenneth Womak, College Literature 29.2 (spring 2002)

merely naïve, instead of stupid because of his violent behaviour—by removing the connotations of the words he has left only their literal meanings, and despite his immorality we can more readily follow the desire and twisted logic that drive Alex’s actions.

When we examine which characters speak using nadsat, it becomes readily apparent that they are of an extremely different age and social standing to those who don’t. Most of the youths we are introduced to throughout the novel are as violent and amoral as Alex; those who fit this description speak using nadsat, the "language [that] contributes to the alienation of Burgess' delinquents from the mainstream of British society". Later on in the book we meet again with two of Alex’s old droogs (friends), now supposedly reformed, and who have become millicents (police officers). Both still take as much delight in their "ultra-violence" as ever, and despite supposedly being productive members of society have not changed their ways. Despite now apparently being on the same side as the state, they still enjoy "lashing into these starry old vecks with great bolshy glee and joy"—the only reason they have switched to the side of the law is to continue their torturous enjoyments free of consequence. The telltale sign of this is in their dialogue: they still speak using nadsat like all of the lawless teenagers they are now tasked with keeping under control, and so despite their police uniforms they internally remain the same as them. Burgess goes even further to group all nadsat speakers and non-speakers into their respective groups by making the ordinary adults speak regular English. A direct contrast between these two can be found when Alex is in prison, and Dr Brodsky tells him "you can't get the better of us", to which Alex replies "grahzny bratchnies" (dirty bastards). This distances the older characters in the book from the young ones and keeping the nadsat language, "exuberant in its inventiveness", for the young.

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12 Pg 97, ibid.
14 Pg 109, ibid
15 Pg 86, ibid
16 Ibid
17 Pg viii, Op. Cit. Blake Morrison
Anthony Burgess has chosen the vocabulary of two-hundred or so words which he used to create nadsat very carefully, one of the more interesting choices being the exclusion of most abstract nouns. Concrete nouns for blood (krovvy), money (cutter) or drugs (knives) are present; however any abstract concepts to do with knowledge, philosophy or love are conspicuously absent from the nadsat lexicon. This is reflected also in the choice of verbs: there are multiple terms for sexual intercourse (in-out-in-out, sod, pol) all of which are interchangeable for "rape", but there is no word for love; the only word for understanding or thinking is the word for seeing (to viddy something is to see it). There are no words to do with empathising or being compassionate or "the kind of interrelationship that one might experience in a functional family system". The absences of these types of words mean that if Alex were to enter into a debate about anything beyond the physical world around him he would have to drop down into normal English, but in fact "he makes no attempt to explain or justify his actions in terms of abstract ideals". Alex is not unintelligent, however – when he is forced to express himself in regular English, his grasp of vocabulary is substantial – for example, he claims an event had not been "edifying, indeed it had not", and complains of "nasty insinuations". It can be determined, therefore, that he simply isn't interested in discussing anything of intellectual weight. The idea is that to do so any teen would have to stop using his usual mode of speech and speak in the language used by the adults surrounding him, which Alex prefers not to do.

As well as the choice of words translated, the actual translations play into the undertones of childishness prevalent in the nadsat lexicon. As well as using words adapted from the Russian language, Burgess selected some pieces of baby-talk to replace a number of nouns. Many of the words related to food and home were changed to baby-talk, such as steakiwake for 'steak'. This is a stark contrast to the distinctly different and exotic sounding Russian nadsat words which "grate and rumble with menace", and it is used almost exclusively by Alex when in the

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18 Pg 5, Op. Cit. Todd F. Davis & Kenneth Womak
21 Pg 11, ibid
confines of his home. The use of nadsat in this context contributes to the immaturity of its speaker – when discussing home, Alex sometimes still speaks like a small child or baby, for example he describes "crunching... toast dipped in jammiwam and eggiweg"\textsuperscript{23}. Thus nadsat is also used to convey immaturity – this is referenced more overtly in the novel's final chapter in which Alex meets Pete, one of his previous droogs, who has now matured to adulthood, with a wife and child. Pete no longer speaks using nadsat, and his wife even finds Alex's use of it amusing, exclaiming "he talks funny, doesn't he?"\textsuperscript{24} and giggling upon hearing him speak. As the novel draws to a close it even seems that Alex's use of the nadsat language is beginning to decline – as he is beginning to mature, he is also ceasing to speak in the language of youth and giving up this "form of linguistic rebellion"\textsuperscript{25}. Alex says "if I walked into the room where the fire... was burning away and my hot dinner laid on the table, there I should find what I really wanted"\textsuperscript{26}. He is speaking, in regular English, of a home, wife and child. In this way, nadsat can be seen as a representation of the teenage immaturity Alex and the others of his age display throughout the novel and by making it disappear with age, Burgess attempts to demonstrate that teenage amoralism (allegorical in the novel for real-world teenage rebellion) is something that they will grow out of with time.

Another reason that Anthony Burgess used nadsat was to prevent\textit{A Clockwork Orange} from falling into obscurity. While Burgess considered many different styles of slang from the time (or even from the past), he decided not to use any of them because if he did, the novel would have been severely dated after a short time. In his autobiography he says that the current slang at time of writing "was ephemeral like all slang, and might have a lavender smell by the time the manuscript got to the printer's"\textsuperscript{27}. This also had the effect of creating an alternate timeline for the setting of the novel. If Burgess had set it deliberately at a stated date in the future without providing any context of the fictional universe within the novel's past, then his vision of the future would have become dated once that date passed – however Burgess avoids this trap by

\textsuperscript{23} Pg 32, Op. Cit. \textit{A Clockwork Orange}, Anthony Burgess
\textsuperscript{24} Pg 138, ibid
\textsuperscript{25} Pg 95, Op. Cit. M. Keith Booker
\textsuperscript{26} Pg 140, Op. Cit. \textit{A Clockwork Orange}, Anthony Burgess
\textsuperscript{27} Pg 2, Op. Cit. \textit{You've Had Your Time}, Anthony Burgess
using nadsat subtly and indirectly to create a political background to his world, thus turning his "future" into an alternate one rather than a possible prediction. The use of nadsat does this simply through the fact that it is used: as it takes its roots from the Russian language, it implies that at some point in the past Russian culture began infiltrating the British – as Dr. Branom (one of the scientists in the novel) puts it, "a subliminal penetration". The characters' names also add to this sense of political influence: Alex could be short for the English Alexander or the Russian Aleksei, and the nicknames of his "droogs" (nadsat for friends, from the Russian meaning "friend in violence") are similarly ambiguous as to their country of origin. In a similar vein, a location mentioned in passing is "Gagarin Street" – a street it is safe to assume that has been named after Russian cosmonaut Yuri Gagarin, which demonstrates further the casual Russian influence on the British society of the novel. By implying that nadsat has entered the minds of British teenagers sometime during the 1960s, Burgess has created a link to the Cold War and its concerns "over the potential influence of Communist infiltration on the hearts and minds of Capitalist youths". This adds to the political background from which has grown Burgess' version of the future. Since we now feel that the novel has its own history in a slightly different past to our own, an alternate version of the future seems much more believable to us.

Russian was chosen over other European languages for a number of reasons. First of all, languages more closely related to English such as German or French would have been too similar to English for the full distancing influence of the language to take effect. Many German and French words have been borrowed into English, and the sounds and rhythms of the languages would have been familiar and easily decipherable. Secondly, Burgess had seen for himself that the Russian stilyagi (literally "style hunters"), gangs that roamed the streets of Russia in the 1950s, were as violent and out of control as the London gangs of teddyboys - and the "murderous teenaged hooligans ... in A Clockwork Orange are composite creations". Furthermore, Burgess says in his autobiography that "there was a fine irony in the notion of a

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29 Pg 136, ibid
30 Pg 95, Op. Cit. M. Keith Booker
teenage race untouchable by politics ... equipped with a dialect which drew on the two chief political languages of the age"\textsuperscript{32}. This bringing together of two seemingly incompatible nations makes the youths of \emph{A Clockwork Orange} seem more universal – furthering the idea that all the violence and slang are things that, in some form or another, all teenagers will go through. Because the Ludovico Technique used in the book to correct Alex's sociopathic misanthropy was a form of brainwashing, Burgess wanted the reader to be brainwashed into learning minimal Russian with the novel being "an exercise in linguistic programming"\textsuperscript{33}. When we have read the word \textit{glazzies} (eyes) several times, we can easily understand the meaning of the phrase "blinking my smarting glazzies"\textsuperscript{34} – we have surreptitiously been taught the Russian word for 'eye', glaz.

There is a basic human connection between how someone views the world and the words they choose to describe it. "Nadsat is the primary narrative structure through which we come to know Alex's personality"\textsuperscript{35} and by providing a unique argot through which Alex can relate his story, Burgess has managed to characterise Alex before we even begin to understand most of the things that he is recounting to us. His relaxed tone of speech, talking to the reader as if he were a personal friend, endears him to us from the start, for example in the first paragraph of the book he says "and you may, oh my brothers, have forgotten what these mestos were like"\textsuperscript{36}. This allows us to empathise more easily with him despite the fact that he feels very little empathy for anyone else. We also get a sense of Alex's childishness through nadsat that we would not experience were it written in regular English. His use of the baby-talk words of nadsat such as "skolliwoll" (school) implies that like a baby or small child he still needs his parents' support and hospitality, and foreshadows his sadness and anger upon return from prison to find them unable to provide him with a place to stay. Nadsat conveys his "feelings of insecurity, his lack of sophistication, and his naivety"\textsuperscript{37}. We also empathise more easily with

\textsuperscript{32} Pg 2, Op. Cit. \textit{You've Had Your Time}, Anthony Burgess
\textsuperscript{31} Pg 2, ibid
\textsuperscript{34} Pg 51, Op. Cit. \textit{A Clockwork Orange}, Anthony Burgess
\textsuperscript{35} Pg 38, Op. Cit. David W. Sisk
\textsuperscript{36} Pg 3, Op. Cit. \textit{A Clockwork Orange}, Anthony Burgess
\textsuperscript{37} Pg 5, Op. Cit. Todd F. Davis & Kenneth Womack
Alex during his stay in prison because of his use of nadsat – he is the only inmate in the prison to speak using it, and as such we get a strong sense of isolation and loneliness during his stay, a "solitary self in conflict with the demands of a domineering state"\textsuperscript{38}.

An aspect of nadsat that has not been exhaustively examined by scholars is its pronominalisation. At certain points throughout the novel, Alex uses “thee” and “thou” in place of the more common “you” and “your”. The general feeling is that Alex's use of thee and thou signifies how he "perceives the balance of power between himself and others"\textsuperscript{39}. The majority of readers accept this use as a part of the standard nadsat lexicon; however this is not necessarily the case. These pronouns are not spoken by any characters other than Alex, because their use is unique to Alex’s speech. The novel is written in-universe as though Alex had written it shortly after the events it details, and it is important to remember that therefore he is writing it as a slightly different character than he was at the time the events took place. Although he has written “thee” and “thou” into his speech, it could be argued that Alex would not have actually used those words at the time. During his prison term, he became "very interested in the big book"\textsuperscript{40} and this is most likely where he learned of the pronouns and began using them himself – Burgess stated that he had "resurrected old [rhythms] chiefly from the King James Bible"\textsuperscript{41}, and this is reflected in his protagonist. Alex could only start using these words after he had learned them. As he is writing his story from a later date, it is likely he would have afterwards included them in earlier parts of narration as if they were then part of his register because the Biblical way of speaking impressed him greatly. Therefore, while the archaic pronominalisation is an important part of Alex’s narrative voice, it is superimposed on his nadsat-speech and unique to him alone – differentiating his voice from those of the other teenagers who speak in nadsat. This makes him appear even more of an individual and free thinker to the reader, thus rendering his brainwashing and loss of free will – the pivotal event in the novel – all the more poignant.

\textsuperscript{38} Pg 98, Op. Cit. M. Keith Booker
\textsuperscript{39} Pg 69, Op. Cit. David W. Sisk
\textsuperscript{40} Pg 60, Op. Cit. A Clockwork Orange, Anthony Burgess
\textsuperscript{41} Pg 2, Op. Cit. You've Had Your Time, Anthony Burgess
The final reason for Burgess’ choice to create the evocative nadsat lexicon for his novel was the same force that also drove Joyce and Tolkien to create their linguistic innovations: a simple love of language. Nadsat bubbles with “rich onomatopoeic suggestiveness” and is full of “rhythms, textures and syncopations” which Burgess said were a pleasure to devise. He was a skilled linguist and the idea of creating a new system of speech specifically tailored for his means must have enthralled him, as he himself said that “all art springs from delight in the raw material; to play with the raw material of literature is a natural pleasure.”

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42 Pg 172, Op. Cit. Geoffrey Aggelar
44 Pg 89, Op. Cit. David W. Sisk
Conclusion

It is readily apparent that nadsat is absolutely essential in the writing of *A Clockwork Orange*. It allows readers to connect with Alex, a protagonist who would otherwise remain loathsome; it also characterises him just as much as any of the events in the novel and arguably more so, conveying his intelligence and thought processes. Nadsat also lends plausibility to the setting of the work as a whole; gives readers the option of distancing themselves from the violence in the novel; and prevents the novel from becoming dated. It expresses the universality of teenage delinquency and their alienation from society. This essay draws together all of the reasons for the use of nadsat, as well as dispel the idea that the archaic pronouns are a part of the standard nadsat lexicon. As well as all the above reasons however, nadsat simply makes the book just as enjoyable to read as it must have been for Burgess to create the language.
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