

A Guide to Gender Neutral Language in Russian Language

For Instructors

The purpose of this guide is to help instructors to be supportive and respectful of students' identities and to provide the students with an awareness that gender is a culturally determined construct that changes over time. It is meant to serve as a starting point that can springboard further study on the topic of gender and how it affects students in the classroom and the approach to topics in both language courses and literature courses.

The guide is intended for instructors who do not necessarily have an extensive background in gender theory, queer linguistics, and/or related topics. It is organized into sections so that the instructor can find the information that is most useful to them.

What is a supportive instructor?

A supportive instructor does not need to know every detail or term for gender identities. A supportive instructor is one who is respectful of how the students introduce themselves, does not make assumptions about an individual student based on their gender expression, and who recognizes that gender identity is not a static condition and research on these questions is on-going. A supportive instructor also recognizes that individuals who do not identify within the gender binary of man/woman are subject to discrimination.

A supportive instructor recognizes that it is not necessary to understand what it means to question your gender identity to be respectful of this experience.

It is important to note that the answers to these questions are still in development; interest in them helps to create the language and how to engage with these things in the classroom. Therefore, no single individual can know the answers to all of these of issues.

What is non-binary identity?

- gender is different and separate from biological sex (reproductive characteristics)
- people can and do identify as a gender that does not “correspond” with their biological sex characteristics
- questions of gender identity are separate from sexuality and sexual desire (heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, etc.).

Western culture, broadly speaking, recognizes two gender identities that reflect reproductive roles—men and women. These gender identities and the reproductive roles they are attached to carry with them social roles that are culturally determined.

Non-binary individuals are part of the larger category of transgender identities, though not every non-binary individual considers themselves transgender.¹

Appearances and behavior are not conclusive of gender identity—you cannot tell someone's gender identity from how they look or dress. When it in doubt, ask politely. For example,

¹ <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/resources/article/understanding-gender-identities/>

introduce yourself and what pronouns you use, then ask if you can ask what pronouns they use for themselves.

Discrimination

-In Russia and the Russian-speaking world (as in America), discrimination against non-binary individuals remains a serious problem. Gender nonconformity is seen as a result of foreign influence, which adds a nationalist element to the discrimination.

-Russia's 2013 law "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating a Denial of Traditional Family Values" prohibits the circulation of information pertaining to trans and nonbinary identities, and has been condemned by the Human Rights Watch.²

Mental health

-stigma against non-binary individuals can contribute to mental health issues and struggles. Micro-aggressions, such as purposefully using the incorrect pronouns for a person or otherwise imposing gendered expectations or treatment, are examples of stigmatized treatment of individuals who do not identify within the gender binary of masculine/feminine.

When advising students, it is important to keep in mind the political and cultural reality that might face them, should they travel abroad, and ensure that the student understands these factors.

What does being a supportive instructor look like in the classroom?

- University documents, such as class rosters, may not match the identities your students hold. The same way a student might ask to go by their middle name or a nickname in class, a non-binary or transgender student may have a name that they use that is different from what you find on the official documentation.
 - Ask your students to introduce themselves and the pronouns they use rather than reading their names from a roster.
 - Make notes for yourself on the roster for all the students.
 - Make a commitment to accountability. Tell the students that if you make a mistake with their names or pronouns, that you would like them to correct them.
 - Tell your students that if they change their names or pronouns during the course of the semester, you will do your best to adjust how you address them.
- Use the name and pronouns your students introduce themselves with.
 - If you make a mistake, such as using the wrong pronoun, simply apologize briefly, correct yourself, and move on.
 - Making a big deal about apologizing is a bad thing; it puts all the focus on the one apologizing and forces the one who has been misgendered to be patient and understanding. A small apology and a correction is much less burdensome on the non-binary person's part.

² <https://www.hrw.org/news/2022/11/25/russia-expanded-gay-propaganda-ban-progresses-toward-law>

- Address the class as a whole with a gender-neutral expression rather than “ladies and gentlemen”
 - “students” is the most obvious example, but “everyone” is also useful
- Do not single out any non-binary or trans students to speak about their experiences as representatives of the whole LGBT+ community
- Characterize instances of gender as it arises as part of discussion of course topics as being stereotypical or a general tendency rather than a natural fact
- Do not debate the humanity of non-binary individuals or transgender people as an intellectual topic. Recognize that if historical examples of discrimination and violence arise in class, that these examples can be painful for students and should be discussed with sensitivity and compassion, not as a purely abstract topic

Even in a classroom where none of your students identify themselves as non-binary, adopting these practices and integrating critique of gender stereotypes wherever they may appear benefits everyone in the classroom by allowing students to think critically about the assumptions that culture makes about gender. It allows all students to see that they are valued and respected, regardless of their gender.

Language classrooms specifically

In a Russian language classroom, grammatical gender is among the first topics that a beginning language learner encounters. It then remains a prevalent topic throughout an ongoing study of the language. While teaching the difference between grammatical gender that has no real-world indication (such as in the case of common nouns) and those that apply to people, it can be helpful to introduce the ideas around gender as a cultural practice that people experience and the different inflections gendered forms of words for peoples (namely, professions) can have. Here are a few examples:

- Teach gendered pronouns in Slavic language classrooms as simply a grammatical necessity, not always a natural fact
 - Be prepared to explain that neuter pronouns are not usually used for people, though sometimes there are efforts by Slavic-speaking non-binary people to reclaim them
- Explain the generic masculine: Masculine forms are usually the default form, with feminine forms created from the masculine stems. This may not always be the case of course; it’s just an overwhelming tendency.
 - The Prague School of Linguistics and the idea of marked/unmarked forms, how the masculine form is typically the default unmarked form
 - Early Soviet initiatives to add the feminine forms to documents dates back to the early 20th century

- Explain -ка endings for professions for women with derogatory associations versus -ка endings that have neutral associations
 - -ка endings for women that are not feminine equivalents to masculine words. Ex: машинист (driver) / машинистка (typist), the gendered associations with these two professions
- Explain how professional titles with gendered variations, particularly поэт / поэтесса, and how sometimes women reject the feminine form because of its associations with less serious themes for writing
 - The classic example to bring up is how Anna Akhmatova rejected the title of поэтесса because of its implications that her writing was not about “serious” (read: masculine) topics and themes
- In example sentences or scenarios for activities, be cognizant of the potential stereotypes they reinforce and rework examples or activities to either avoid these stereotypes or point them out to the students for discussion

Approaches to expressing non-binary language in Russian

Here is a brief list of some of the approaches that non-binary Russian speakers have been experimenting with. Many are drawn from practices pioneered in other languages, particularly French, English, and German, so their application in Russian is often imperfect. Solutions that are drawn from the Russian grammatical structure would be the preference but so far have yet to come into common practice. Here are some examples:³

- Favoring gender neutral terms, despite their grammatical gender. Люди rather than женщины и мужчины
- “Gender gapping”³: in written texts, sometimes a hyphen or an underscore is used between the word and its feminine counterpart. For example, журналист_ка or журналист/ка.
 - This approach is limited because it is not possible to use gender gapping with pairs of words such as учитель and учительница, though учитель_ница is a possibility.
- Using passive constructions in the past tense or rephrasing ideas to avoid gendered endings on verbs
 - Rather than Я делал / делала домашнее задание, a formulation like Моё домашнее задание сделано might be used.
 - An objection to this approach might be that it removes agency from the non-binary individual, since they are either absent from the sentence entirely or they are not the grammatical subject.

³ Kirey-Sitnikova, Yana. “Prospects and Challenges of Gender Neutralization in Russian.” *Russian Linguistics*, vol. 45, 2021, pp. 143–158

- Reclaiming the grammatical neuter
 - The resistance to this approach to what might seem like an obvious solution, especially to an English speaker who is unaccustomed to grammatical gender is the dehumanizing element of using neuter to refer to a human being.
- Singular “они”: using они to refer to a single person
 - The use of singular они usually involves mixing singular and plural forms but does not follow a set pattern, making it difficult to use in the classroom
- Deliberately mispronouncing the endings of words
 - This is not a good option for language students, but it can be helpful to share with the students that this practice exists

Possible solution for non-binary students learning Russian

Learning a language is demanding for students of any gender identity but particularly for non-binary students since Russian does not yet have a good, established approach to using language to represent the non-binary individual. In order for a non-binary student to get the most out of the language class, it might be most productive to discuss with them one-o-one the necessity of choosing one of the binary genders (masculine or feminine) for the sake of learning the endings, with the understanding that as the student progresses and learns more advanced grammatical constructions, more options for expressing their non-binary identity will become available to them. Ensuring that the student feels that they are using language in order to learn rather than as an act of erasing their identity may be helpful to them and give them the chance to see that there is a place for them in a Russian language classroom.

Conclusion

Our job as language instructors is to help students master the grammar and vocabulary of the target language along with cultural knowledge and awareness so that students can successfully and productively engage with the language and people who speak it. In this position, we must balance prescriptivist tendencies against ways that speakers actually use the language. Of course, students must master the grammatical endings that apply to gender, but they can also learn how gender as a cultural practice functions in the target culture.

Gender neutral language, as a very new phenomenon globally, is a particularly sensitive example of how language changes to adapt to new expressive needs but also resists experimentation due to a host of reasons: ideas about grammatical correctness, history, long-held cultural attitudes, legal and political conditions, to name a few. Queer linguistics as a field is in its infancy and the answers to these questions will continue to develop. At this point, it is not possible to offer a student a single correct answer, and instead language instructors can help students appreciate all the elements at play in how speakers of the target language are working to find meaningful and workable solutions to this question.

The most important element of this complex issue is the need to be respectful to the students' identities while demonstrating to them that this question is far from solved. Taking an open-minded approach to gender and a critical approach to gender stereotypes, wherever they may appear, is an approach that benefits everyone.

Bibliography

Along with literature, the internet has a wealth of information about gender identity, including on-binary individuals and transgender individuals. Included here are a variety of sources.

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