

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE IN RUSSIAN

Inclusive language, as a concept, perhaps hasn't attained the same level of traction in Russia and other Russian speaking countries as it has in other languages. Russian is a language with a gender system (masculine, feminine and neuter) according to which adjectives and even past tense verb conjugations agree.¹

For example,

'Он играл' (he played) and 'она играла' (she played)

As with many European languages, masculine in Russian is considered the 'default', from which feminine forms can be derived for example, студент/ка, спортсмен/ка. However, in some cases the feminine form can take on a derogatory association, as it happens with the pair 'доктор/докторша'; секретарь/секретарша. The classic example is how Anna Akhmatova rejected the title of 'поэтесса' because of its implications that her writing was not about "serious" topics and themes.

Nonetheless, in more recent times, movements have come about to promote the use of more inclusive language. One way this has been done is through the use of the neutral pronoun (оно) and all of its forms, so as to not distinguish between gender. This strategy has been adopted by a number of non-binary Russians. However, this is not at all widespread, and some feel that the 'neutral' gender can reduce those who use it to inanimate objects rather than people as grammatically neuter forms are reserved for inanimate objects and used for humans only in derogatory speech.

Similarly, there has been an emergence of the use of the plural form of verbs, not dissimilar to the use of the English 'they' in order to avoid either the masculine or feminine forms.

'Я уже сказали, что я требовательный ребёнок' - (I already said (pl) that I am a demanding child)

Other techniques to make language more inclusive include the use of passive and impersonal constructions to obscure gender, especially in the past tense:

- **passive constructions** in the past tense might be used: Моё домашнее задание сделано ('My homework is done) instead of Я сделал / сделала домашнее задание ('I've done my homework'). Although in this example it is not clear who has done the homework.

¹ This guide has been co-created by SMLC students and staff as part of the project 'Decolonising Babel: Multilingual and Inclusive Language Pedagogies at Warwick and Beyond', led by Dr Valentina Abbatelli and Dr Leticia Villamediana González and funded by IATL at Warwick University.

- **impersonal constructions:** Мне надо было купить книгу ('I had to buy a book') instead of Я купил / купила книгу ('I bought the book').
- Avoiding gendered nouns like 'мужчины и женщины' (ladies and gentlemen) in favour of 'люди' (people) and кто-то ('someone') + present tense, plural. Студенты ('students') can be used in university setting.
- "Gender gapping" is used in some languages and favoured by some speakers of the Russian language: студент_ка, журналист/ка.
- Shifting focus from one's own actions to another person:
 - У меня было увлечение – рисование ('There was my hobby – drawing') instead of Я увлекался рисованием ('I enjoyed drawing').
 - У меня была работа ('There was my job') instead of Я работал ('I worked').
 - Ужин готов ('The dinner is ready') instead of Я приготовил ужин ('I cooked dinner').

Further resources:

[neidinger_rachael_slavic.pdf \(harvard.edu\)](https://www.harvard.edu/linguistics/neidinger_rachael_slavic.pdf)

[Prospects and challenges of gender neutralization in Russian | Russian Linguistics \(springer.com\)](https://www.springer.com/journal/11267/issue/1)