INTRODUCTION TO RUSSIAN

Whichever your native language, you didn’t learn to speak it by studying its grammar. You learned it by its sounds, and the relations of its sounds to each other. For example, a native English speaker knows that I done that, or give that to I are not correct, because they just sound wrong. But the average native English speaker doesn’t know which rules of English grammar are being broken in those sentences. Because a native English speaker doesn’t need to know the rules of English grammar in order to speak grammatically perfect English. They simply have to know how to put together the right sounds in the right order.

But learning to speak a new language is a completely different process. Sounds are still important, but now the sounds are for correct pronunciation rather than for correct grammar. Learning a new language is a matter of discovering and memorising its rules of grammar.

Со. Нам нужно выучить русскую грамматику. So. We need to learn Russian grammar. (Those marks above the Russian text indicate which syllable is stressed.)

но, во-первых, конечно, нам нужно выучить русский алфавит. But firstly, of course, we need to learn the Russian alphabet. (For help with that, see the Russian Alphabet sheet.)

Now here is the first lesson:

Notice above, the words русскую and русский. They are both adjectives, and they both mean Russian. (An adjective is a word that describes something about a noun.) Why are there two different words with exactly the same meaning? Because of the nouns they describe - grammar and alphabet. In Russian, grammar is a feminine noun, while alphabet is a masculine noun. And in Russian, adjectives change to match the gender of their noun. Русскую is a feminine adjective, while русский is a masculine adjective. Actually, there are four words for the adjective Russian. As well as the two above, there is русское for neuter nouns, and русские for plural nouns.

So. You have just learned one of the foundations of the Russian language - that nouns have gender and number (singular or plural). And words which are connected to nouns (pronouns and adjectives), have to match the gender and number of their noun.

Now a mini lesson: Notice that the four words above all have the same first part: русс. That first part is called the stem. When changing the form of an adjective to match a noun, the stem normally doesn’t change, only the ending changes: русс-ую русс-ий русс-ое русс-ие

Those changed endings are called inflections. When the different inflections of an adjective are put together into a list, they are called its declension. A declension is just a list of endings, or inflections.

Now another mini lesson: How do you know the gender of a particular noun? Easy:

Masculine nouns end in either a consonant, й or ь
Feminine nouns end in either а, я or ь
Neuter nouns end in either о, е, ё or мя

Some problems: How do you know whether a noun ending in ь is masculine or feminine? You don’t. You have to look up a dictionary to know which is which. But there aren’t that many and it won’t take long to learn them.

Some masculine nouns have the feminine endings а or я, but they are easily identified by their masculine association - дедушка grandfather, дядя uncle, папа father, etc.

And what about plurals? Easy. Take the singular noun, and if it:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>masculine</th>
<th>feminine</th>
<th>neuter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ends in:</td>
<td>Ends in:</td>
<td>Ends in:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>consonant add</td>
<td>a replace with</td>
<td>o replace with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ь or й replace</td>
<td>ь or я replace</td>
<td>e or ё replace with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>н replace with</td>
<td>with Ь (or І)*</td>
<td>мя replace with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ь</td>
<td>Ь (or І)*</td>
<td>мен</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

So far, we have been talking only about the nominative case. Nominative case…? Case…? Yes. Russian has cases. Six of them - they are another foundation of the Russian language. You’ll meet them over the page.

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What is case?

Case is when words change according to their function in a sentence. We’ll use English grammar to explain it. A simple English sentence consists of a subject, a verb, and an object. The subject is who or what the sentence is about, the verb tells us what the subject is doing, and the object is the receiver of whatever the subject is doing:

- **subject**: the boy
- **verb**: loves
- **object**: the dog

Now change the sentence around:

- **subject**: he
- **verb**: loves
- **object**: her

The boy and the dog swapped functions in the sentence, from being subjects to objects. But *boy* and *dog* didn’t change their form, because in English, nouns do not have case. Because unlike Russian, English makes very little use of case - it is encountered only with some pronouns:

- **subject**: he
- **verb**: loves
- **object**: her

- **subject**: she
- **verb**: loves
- **object**: him

When *he* and *she*, the subjects of the sentences, became the objects of the sentences, they changed form. *He* became *him*, and *she* became *her*. This is case. *He* and *she* are in the subjective case, and *her* and *him* are in the objective case. So we can’t say *her loves he*, because in an English sentence *her* can’t be a subject and *he* can’t be an object. *Her* can only be in the objective case, and *he* can only be in the subjective case.

And that’s all there is to knowing what case is - it’s just words changing according to their function in a sentence.

Now let’s look again at the first two sentences above. Because English nouns don’t have case, *boy* and *dog* don’t change when they swap from being subjects to objects. But when they swap, the meaning of the sentence completely changes. The words are exactly the same, but their position in the sentence - whether before or after the verb - is what gives the sentence its meaning. In an English sentence, the words can’t be changed around, because changing the order of the words also changes the meaning of the sentence. Not so in Russian.

Since Russian nouns have case, the order of words in a Russian sentence doesn’t matter. Because the endings of nouns indicate their function in the sentence, no matter what their position:

- **subject**: мальчик
- **verb**: любит
- **object**: собаку

The endings of the nouns changed according to their function:

- **subject**: собака
- **verb**: любит
- **object**: мальчика

But in Russian, changing the order of words doesn’t change the meaning of sentences, because it is not the order of words that give a sentence its meaning. It is the endings of the words that give a sentence its meaning:

So, собака любит мальчика and мальчика любит собака mean the exact same thing: the dog loves the boy.

And мальчик любит собаку and собаку любит мальчика both mean the same thing: the boy loves the dog.

In Russian, the subject of a sentence is in the nominative case, and the object of a sentence is in the accusative case.

Is that it? No, there’s more. We promised you six cases.

So far we’ve found something for the Nominative and Accusative cases to do, but we have to find something to occupy the other four - the Dative, Genitive, Instrumental and Prepositional. So allow us to introduce them:

The Dative is the to case: дайте что-нибудь собаке give the dog something to the dog

The Genitive is the of case: дайте собаке миску молока give the dog a bowl of milk

The Instrumental is the means by which something is done: собака ест с вилкой the dog is eating with a fork

The Prepositional is the location case: собака живёт в Москве the dog lives in Moscow

Is that it? Not quite. A caution. The usage of cases is not limited to those listed above - each of the different cases has more than one use. You can find out much more detail in the Cases booklet.

Is that it? Yes. You now know more about Russian nouns, declensions and cases than anybody else in your street.