

Grammar 2—Introduction to Inflection and Grammatical Case

Part 1—Importance of Word Endings

In English and Russian words can end in certain letters which tell us something about their meaning or their role in the sentence.

For example, we can make a noun plural by adding the letter s:

He is a brother.

They are brothers.

But, adding an -s to a verb makes it singular:

They run.

He runs.

We can add -ed to a verb to put it in the past tense:

He cooks.

He cooked.

We can make a noun possessive by adding an apostrophe s:

This is John's pencil.

We can change an adjective into an adverb by adding -ly:

quick quickly

easy easily

red redly

The ending -tion tells us that a noun refers to an abstract thing or concept:

caution

congregation

tension

There are many endings which can be added to a noun to turn it into an adjective:

oak oaken

grammar grammatical

wolf wolfish

music musical

But in English we sometimes do not bother with endings. For example:

Here is the oak barrel.

Where is my grammar book?

A wolf face looked in at the window.

That is a music school.

But in Russian you cannot do this. You must always use the correct ending. Russian also has more endings than English does. In class you will learn to use many of these endings.

Part 2—What is Grammatical Case

In grammar the term “case” refers to the role which a noun plays in a sentence. This concept is very important in Russian. Here are a few cases which will be most familiar to English speakers:

Nominative Case—the case of the subject of a sentence. The subject of a sentence is the thing which performs the action. For example, in the sentence “John read a book.”, John in is in the nominative case. The nominative case is also used for the second noun (the predicate nominative) in an “is” sentence. For example: “John is a carpenter.” Both “John” and “carpenter” are in the nominative case.

Accusative Case—the case of the direct object of the sentence's verb. The direct object is the thing in the 'direct line of fire' of the verb's action. In the sentence “John read a book.”, book is in the accusative case.

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Dative Case—Dative means “related to giving”. This is the case of the indirect object of the verb. An indirect object is a third person or thing (third after the subject and the direct object) who is affected (often benefited) by the thing done. For example: “David gave Mary the pencil.” Here Mary is the indirect object, so the word “Mary” is in the dative case.

Genitive Case—Has approximately the same meaning as putting “of” before the noun or adding -'s. Indicates that the noun belongs to someone or something or was derived from some source. Examples: “the house of David”, “David’s house”, “a gallon of water”, “some of the milk”.

In English we change the endings of nouns for grammatical reasons. For example, we add -s to make a noun plural or -'s to show that it is in the genitive case. These changes are called “inflection”. Pronouns are inflected more dramatically:

Nominative Case	Genitive Case	All other Cases
I	my	me
thou	thy	thee
we	our	us
he	his	him
she	her	her
they	their	them

In Russian the endings of nouns and pronouns change even more than they do in English. They change to indicate number, gender, and six possible cases including the four described above.

In English we use the wrong case, and still be understood. For example, we all say “It is me.” even though formal grammar requires “It is I.” We understand “Me Tarzan!” and “Him not go!”, but the same mistakes in Russian leave listeners shaking their heads in bewilderment. This is because English speakers subconsciously infer case from word order whereas Russians recognize it by word form. Thus, the Russian will hear “Me Tarzan!” and, guided by the word forms, understand that Tarzan did something to or for the speaker and wait for a verb such as “helped”, “hit”, “saw”, or “told”. The speaker has already made it clear that he and Tarzan play different roles in the sentence and thus cannot be the same person.

In Russian case conveys such a strong and clear meaning that it wins out over common sense. For example:

Дай Маше карандаш.	Give Masha the pencil.
Дай Машу карандашу.	Give Masha to the pencil.

Some students make the mistake of not learning the case system because they do not believe it can possibly be important. They may assume that correct case use is needed only to appear educated. This could not be further from the truth. Cases are an essential part of the language learned in early childhood. Removing the cases from a Russian sentence destroys half the meaning. A Russian could no more speak without cases than we could say “We went [with] John [to] the top [of] the hill.” while leaving out the words in brackets.

Mastering the case concept and the rules for inflecting words takes effort. Choosing the correct cases on the fly does not come easily. In class we will teach it like they teach dancing. The steps (or inflection rules) are explained and then you have to practice and practice until you can do it without thinking. It is worth the effort. Case in Russian is a powerful tool which you will need to understand and to be understood.