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Gippius, Gender, and Textual Work in the L2 Classroom

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My comments will make a case for the value of careful philological work with literary texts—an orientation which looms large in Slavic studies—in the language classroom. Using an example from my own Russian teaching, I propose that a grammatically sensitive, close reading of literature is a valuable way to introduce students to the generative relationship between rules and originality in language use, or the way that each utterance draws on the available resources of a language to intervene into a concrete situation. In this respect, creative use of a language's literary tradition can illuminate present-day social issues.

Literature features prominently in most second language courses, perhaps especially so in Russian L2 curricula due to the immense prestige of canonical literature in Russophone culture. For most Russian teachers, myself included, there are obvious reasons for incorporating literature into our pedagogy: it provides students with cultural capital, increases their literacy, and introduces them to texts that have inherent humanistic interest and aesthetic value. Yet I find that if the canonical aspect of literature is overstated to learners, its very prestige can compound the inherent difficulties of the language to create a sense of untouchable distance, turning comprehension of literary texts into a kind of prize that can be obtained by sufficient labor in mastering the target language. This overlooks one of the defining aspects of literary expression: that it is an *original creative act*, representing the world in a way that it has never precisely been represented before. In this regard, literary expression strikingly resembles the language use of an L2 learner, who, in order to express anything, must combine previously unfamiliar words and structures in a way that is new to them. The value of literary studies in the L2 classroom comes from its ability to draw out the linguistic originality of a text, interpret the purpose and meaning of novel language use, and thereby offer students examples of how to creatively articulate their own expressive intent by working with the particular vocabulary and structure of the target language.

In my teaching, I've used poetry to address the question of non-binary gender expression in Russian. Russian grammar is highly gendered: pronouns, nouns, adjectives, and past tense verb forms are all masculine, feminine, or neuter. Students learn formidable declension tables of word endings by part of speech, case, and gender, like the following:

Table 1.
Example of Noun and Adjective Case Endings in Russian

Masculine	<i>Nominative</i>	но́вый фильм	хоро́ший писа́тель
	<i>Accusative</i>	но́вый фильм	хоро́ший (inaním.) N
		но́вого (anim.) G	хоро́шего писа́теля
	<i>Genitive</i>	но́вого филь́ма	хоро́шего писа́теля
	<i>Dative</i>	но́вому филь́му	хоро́шему писа́телю
	<i>Instrumental</i>	но́вым филь́мом	хоро́шим писа́телем
	<i>Prepositional</i>	но́вом филь́ме	хоро́шем писа́теле
Feminine	<i>Nominative</i>	но́вая рабо́та	хоро́шая ли́ния
	<i>Accusative</i>	но́вую рабо́ту	хоро́шую ли́нию
	<i>Genitive</i>	но́вой рабо́ты	хоро́шей ли́нии
	<i>Dative</i>	но́вой рабо́те	хоро́шей ли́нии
	<i>Instrumental</i>	но́вой рабо́той	хоро́шей ли́нией
	<i>Prepositional</i>	но́вой рабо́те	хоро́шей ли́нии
Neuter	<i>Nominative</i>	но́вое ме́сто	си́нее мо́ре
	<i>Accusative</i>	но́вое ме́сто	си́нее мо́ре
	<i>Genitive</i>	но́вого ме́ста	си́него мо́ря
	<i>Dative</i>	но́вому ме́сту	си́нему мо́рю
	<i>Instrumental</i>	но́вым ме́стом	си́ним мо́рем
	<i>Prepositional</i>	но́вом ме́сте	си́нем ме́сте

Note. Table adapted from Noah G (2018)

The fact that so much of Russian syntax is built upon these variable gender-dependent case endings poses a grammatical challenge for genderqueer, transgender, and non-binary speakers, going beyond the typical English question of what pronouns one identifies with. In Russian, one must propose not just three pronouns on the model of he/him/his or she/her/hers, but six personal pronouns, and six more adjective endings (one for each case), not to mention possessive pronouns and gendered past-tense verb forms.

For these reasons, when an intermediate Russian student asked me how to express non-binary gender in Russian, it was hard to find the right response. My initial answer was that the Russophone non-binary community, like the Anglophone, does not have a uniform preference for how to express their gender, except that the grammatically neuter forms feel dehumanizing and are avoided. But this response felt inadequate, limited to telling the student what *not* to do. I knew that some non-binary Russian speakers choose to switch back and forth between masculine and feminine grammar (Wilson, 2018) but was reluctant to tell my students to abandon the grammatical consistency which I was otherwise urging them to strictly observe. But upon further thought, it struck me that Russian poetry offered a wonderful example of

grammatical ambiguity in the service of gender fluidity, by way of the Symbolist poet Zinaida Nikolaevna Gippius (1869-1945).



Figure 1. *Photographic Portrait of Zinaida Gippius from 1897*

Gippius, who published poetry under her own (female) name while often using masculine grammatical endings to refer to herself, wrote a love poem in 1905 called “Ты” (“You”), which is built around the alternation between masculine and feminine endings in reference to both herself and the poem’s addressee. (There is a mythological background to the poem, which is addressed to the moon, playing on the Platonic myth that associates the moon with androgyny. This is facilitated in Russian by the fact that there are two words for “moon”: луна (luna), which is feminine, and the more poetic antiquated Slavic word месяц (mesyats), which is masculine and in modern Russian usually means “month”.)

Unpacking Gippius’ gender play requires close attention to grammar. Each stanza of the poem has four lines, and each line refers to the moon by a different epithet. However, the gender of these epithets changes between masculine and feminine with each new line. For most of the poem, the epithets include nouns—describing the moon as a blinding ray of light, then a dewy daisy, etc. In these lines, the alternating masculine and feminine gender seems to be dictated by the standard grammatical gender of the noun in the epithet. Take the second stanza (all translations are mine; for comprehension by non-Russian-speakers, I have highlighted grammatically **masculine words in red** and **feminine words in blue**):

<p>В облачном небе просвет просиянный — Свежих полей маргаритка росистая. Меч мой небесный, мой луч острогранный — Тайна прозрачная, ласково-чистая.</p>	<p>A blinding ray of light in a cloudy sky — The dewy daisy of fresh fields. My heavenly sword, my fine-grained ray — Transparent, tender-pure secret.</p>
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By the end of the third stanza, though, these gender-dictating nouns disappear, leaving only adjectives, which continue to switch back and forth between masculine and feminine despite clearly having the same referent (the poem's addressee):

<p>Ты — мой веселый и беспощадный — Ты — моя близкая и неизвестная.</p>	<p>You're my merry and merciless [one], You're my close and unknown [one].</p>
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The poem's last two lines, in its fourth stanza, lay bare Gippius' gender-fluid poetic device by moving back and forth not once, but twice, and ending with both masculine *and* feminine forms of the very same adjective in the same line, and in direct succession:

<p>Встань же, мой месяц серебряно-красный, Выйди, двурогая, — Милый мой — Милая...</p>	<p>Arise, my silver-red moon, Come out, two-horned [one] – My dear [one] – My dear [one]...</p>
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Though writing decades before our current discourses of genderfluidity or non-binary gender, Gippius uses poetic means, including a precise and consistent scheme of rhyme and meter (dactylic tetrameter), to break the conventions of Russian grammar and express her own androgyny. In so doing, she anticipates one of the linguistic strategies—alternatingly gendered word endings—used by contemporary non-binary Russian speakers who are not accommodated by the formal structure of “correct” Russian grammar. Her poem shows how grammar can be creatively shaped by an individual speaker to achieve a particular social and expressive goal. My students immediately grasped the purpose of Gippius' grammatical play. Moreover, it was clear to them that the effect of Gippius' gender-switching comes from the normative expectation that the linguistic convention of consistent grammar be recognized: they perceived the impact of Gippius' conscious transgression *because* they perceived the underlying grammatical norm. The value of philology in the L2 classroom comes from its ability to draw these kinds of connections between form, meaning, and context, in ways that reveal the creative and communicative stakes of the technical building blocks of language.

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