

How Can You Tell if a Russian Judge is a Man?

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Oleg Nefedov, a judge of Russia's Supreme Court, reads a decision on a ministry of justice's request to brand the "international LGBT movement" an extremist organisation and ban its activity. **Natalia Kolesnikova / AFP**

Феминитив: feminine job title

The decision of Верховный Суд Российской Федерации (The Supreme Court of the Russian Federation) about the so-called Международное движение ЛГБТ (International LGBT Movement) that was made public without authorization last week is an extraordinary document. It is 19 pages of paragraph-long sentences, lists of violations, accusations, sins, instructions, directives and so on without any facts, citations, quotes — you know, those things that the highest court in the land might be expected to use when deciding to declare something illegal.

One of the oddest sections was parenthetical comment on the use of феминитивы, which

here refers to feminine job titles. Journalists jumped on it because it might have ramifications for their work, which is an understandable fear given the context in which the issue was presented. Forgive the long text, but it gives you sense of the style as well as why everyone got jumpy:

Международное общественное движение ЛГБТ по своей сути является деструктивным идеологическим механизмом воздействия на граждан, в том числе несовершеннолетних, угрожает демографической ситуации в стране, способствует созданию условий для саморазрушения общества, ослабления семейных связей, причиняет вред нравственному здоровью людей, навязывает представления, предполагающие отрицание человеческого достоинства и ценности человеческой жизни.

"In its essence, the International Public Movement LGBT is a destructive ideological mechanism of influence on citizens, including minors, that threatens the demographic situation in the country, facilitates the creation of conditions for the self-destruction of society and the weakening of family ties, brings harm to people's moral health, foists on them concepts that presuppose the rejection of human dignity and the value of human life."

Movement — bad. Very bad.

And then, it continues: Участников движения объединяет наличие определенных нравов, обычаев и традиций (например, гей-парады), схожий образ жизни (в частности, особенности выбора половых партнеров), общие интересы и потребности, специфический язык (использование потенциальных слов-феминитивов, таких как руководительница, директорка, авторка, психологиня).

"Participants in the movement are united by the possession of certain morals, habits and traditions (such as gay parades); similar lifestyles (including the specific features of the choice of sexual partners); common interests and needs; and specific language use (using potential female job title-words such as manageress, directress, authoress and psychologess [sic])."

It's all rather confusing, especially the bit about "potential" use of some words that have been used in Russian for decades if not centuries. The words are hard to translate since English doesn't use them in the same way, but you get the idea.

In any case, the decision appears to assert that distinguishing a male manager (руководитель) from a female manager (руководительница) according to the rules of Russian grammar is somehow a sign of being part of a (see above) morally destructive international movement.

Was this a warning? An edict? Marching orders? It seemed so when Vitaly Milonov, a Duma deputy, commented: Феминитивы, гомосексуалитивы и прочие сатанизмы должны быть признаны экстремизмом, как минимум, в сфере грамотности (Feminine job titles, homosexual job titles and other Satanisms must be recognized as extremism, at least in the sphere of literacy.)

But wait a minute — Should the press use only masculine names for professions? Does that

mean a nurse would not be медсестра (literally medical sister) but женщина-медбрат (a woman medical brother)?

And what is a homosexual job title?

To be honest, the entire issue of феминитивы is a mess in Russian. They have almost always existed because the Russian language has grammatical gender, and speakers and writers usually like it when the noun and verb agree and match the speaker. My beloved Soviet-era Russian grammar book has a chart called “Most Productive Noun-Forming Suffixes” which shows, for example, such suffixes as -тель/ница (писатель-писательница — writer); -щик/щица (барабанщик-барабанщица — drummer); -ец/ка испанец-испанка (Spaniard); -ист/ка (корреспондент-корреспондентка — correspondent).

True, there are problems. The chart has some blank spaces because it’s hard to add feminine suffixes to some masculine endings like -арь and -ик. And there are other problems, too.

One is that in the past, the ending -ша denoted “wife of.” In the 19th century генеральша was not a woman general, but the wife of a general; профессорша was the wife of a professor. So the if you want to call the librarian (библиотекарь) named Maria a библиотекарша, it is both confusing and slightly demeaning, as if she were an appendage of the librarian, not the librarian herself.

But there are exceptions to everything! Кассир – кассирша (cashier, male and female) and секретарь-секретарша (secretary, male and female) have firmly entered the language and sound fine.

Another problem like this is the -ка and -ха suffixes. Sometimes they couldn’t be added because the word that would have been formed was already taken, as it were. A male aviator is пилот (pilot), but пилотка is what American pilots wear on their heads: a flight cap (also called garrison cap or envelope cap). In the end, the word for a female pilot was formed differently: лётчица from лётчик.

Авторка and директорка sound a bit odd and are deemed Evil (see above), and yet no one minds санитарка (nurse’s aide), пианистка (woman pianist), скрипачка (woman violinist) or портниха (woman dressmaker).

A third problem is that some of the feminine endings have come to be derogatory in some way. For example, врачиха (female doctor) and especially both учителка and училка (female teacher) are dismissive and disparaging.

Sometimes Russian borrowed from French, as did English, to produce поэтесса (poetess) from поэт (poet) and актрисса (actress) from актёр (actor). But at least two of the finest poets in the Russian language, Anna Akhmatova and Marina Tsvetaeva, rejected the feminine form. They thought it made them sound insignificant and amateurish. Some people object to директриса for that reason as well.

As you see, there isn’t a lot of consistency, and much depends on personal taste or tradition.

The interesting bit is that sometimes a traditional professional title is not masculine but feminine, such as глава (head), коллега (colleague) and — wait for it — судья (judge). When

men hold these feminine gender job titles or descriptives, you simply use a masculine pronoun and masculine verb ending: Уважаемый коллега! (Respected colleague!) Увидел моего старого приятеля и коллегу Петрова (I saw my old friend and colleague, Petrov). Судья живет в этом обществе, он учитывает цели закона (The judge lives in the same society, he considers the goal of the law). Городской глава родился в семье рабочих (The head of the city was born in a working class family).

You can do the same when the job title held by a woman is masculine gender: Кондуктор трамвая мне помогла (The tram conductor helped me).

None of this sounds odd to Russian speakers. So I don't know what the судья (judge) and the депутат (deputy) are complaining about, but they clearly agree. It's a match made in heaven.

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