The Greek Case System

In Greek, word order is not nearly so central to meaning as it is in English: the grammatical function of an individual noun or pronoun in Greek is indicated by its form rather than by its position within the sentence. (Contrast English, where "The man bit the dog" is quite a different thing from "The dog bit the man." On the other hand, modern English still retains some elements of such a system: that is why one must say, "I go to the store" rather than "Me go to the store"; "They love us" rather than "They love we.")

Each of the various functions performed by nouns or pronouns in a Greek sentence is associated with one of **five cases** (the nominative case, the genitive case, the dative case, the accusative case, and the vocative case) and, according to the nature of the particular noun or pronoun, each case takes a particular form (as in the difference between English "I" and "me," "we" and "us").

The case of the noun or pronoun, as indicated by its particular form, will tell you whether the noun is the **subject** of the sentence (the person or thing performing the action or, in more general terms, the subject under discussion: e.g., in the example above, whether the dog or the man is doing the biting), the **direct object** (the person or thing receiving the action: in the example above, just who is being bitten), the **indirect object**, etc.

Below is a brief outline of the basic grammatical functions associated with each case. Over the course of the year, you will need to develop a more nuanced sense of how each of the cases functions, but this outline should provide you with an initial general guide to the use and general logic associated with each case.[1]

1. The Nominative Case (Nom.)

   Names the subject of the sentence — i.e., the person or thing performing the action or under discussion. Tends to answer the question, "Who/what did it?" (**In English, the subject of the sentence tends to come first: the main exception are questions, where the interrogative word tends to be placed first for emphasis**.)

   Examples:

   The lions killed the gazelle.

   The crowd went wild.

   The girls are frightened.

   Jim has been sent to Paris.

   Whom did **he** kill?

   The nominative case is also used when another noun, pronoun, or adjective refers back to the subject of the sentence. A good example of this is the **complement** after the verb "to be."

   Example:

   Jim is **president** of our club. (Both "Jim" and "president" refer to the subject of the sentence, so both would be in the nominative case.)

   • As a rule of thumb, the nominative will be used whenever you are referring to the subject of the sentence.

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[1] The word case comes from the Latin word for a falling (*casus*), since each of the cases after the nominative tended to be written in an indented column underneath the nominative case and so seemed to be "falling" or cascading down from it. By the same logic, the non-nominative cases (accusative, genitive, dative) are often referred to as the **oblique cases**.

2. The Accusative Case (Acc.)

The accusative case in Greek is associated with four main functions:

a) Names the **direct object** — the person or thing towards which the action of a transitive verb is directed.

Examples:

The lions are killing **the gazelle**.

Jim assigned **homework** to the class.

• This is the most common use of the accusative. Note that, generally speaking, leaving out the direct object will leave you without a complete thought: in the second example above, the statement, "Jim assigned to the class," doesn't mean very much.

b) Names the **goal of motion** — the person or thing towards which one is moving.

Examples:

Jim went **to the store**.

She ran **toward the house**.

We approached **the girls**.

• It is perhaps useful to imagine the accusative in this sense as a wall toward which one is heading: — — —>| In a sense, this use is very like the use of the accusative to indicate the direct object: in each instance the accusative names that person or thing toward which the action is aimed.

c) Indicates the **extent** to which an action endures, in either temporal or geographical terms.

Examples:

He slept **for three days**.

We ran **six miles**.

• In each instance, the accusative indicates that the action endured without a break: i.e., for three whole days and for six continuous miles.

• It is perhaps useful to imagine the accusative in this sense as a line, indicating the space — geographical or chronological — throughout which the action endures: |<— — — — —>|

d) Indicates the **respect** in which a statement is true.

Examples:

He had a pain **in his leg**.

You are blind **in your mind** as well as **in your eyes**. (Sophocles)

• As with the accusative of the direct object, the accusative is employed here to limit the meaning of a particular statement.

3. The Genitive Case (Gen.)

a) **The genitive is best thought of as the "adjectival" case**: it is used when one wishes to employ one noun to specify something about another noun, or in some way define the significance an adjective, adverb, or verb. There are many different specific uses of the genitive, but **most of them will be translated into English through the use of the preposition "of."**

Examples:

Dorothy and the Scarecrow found a man **of tin.** (The **genitive of material**. Notice how "of tin" uses the noun "tin" to describe the man in more detail: one could just as easily have employed "tin" as an adjective instead ["a tin man"].)

A person **of great intelligence** (The **genitive of quality** or **descriptive genitive**.)

Three **of us** (The **partitive genitive**.)

The house **of Dicaeopolis** [= "Dicaeopolis' house"]. (The **possessive genitive**: a very common use.)

The city **of Troy** (The **defining or appositional genitive**.)

A mansion **of** (i.e., worth) **three million dollars** (The **genitive of value**.)

The love **of God** is not earned but is granted freely. (A **subjective genitive**: it implies the notion that "God loves," where "God" is the **subject** of the verb implied by the abstract verbal noun "love.")

The love **of fine wines** killed him. (An **objective genitive:** it implies the notion that "he loved fine wines," where "fine wines" is the **object** of the verb implied by the abstract verbal noun "love.")

He accuses me **of theft**. (The **genitive of the charge**.)

b) The genitive is also employed to indicate **separation or origin** (the **ablatival genitive**: a function that originally belonged to a completely distinct form in Indo-European). It is **commonly translated via the English "from" or "of."**

To cease **from toil**.

They deprived us **of our freedom**.

We are in need **of cash**.

4. The Dative Case (Dat.)

a) The dative case is in some ways the most abstract of the cases and one of the hardest for English speakers to conceptualize. In its most common use, **the dative indicates a person or thing who is somehow interested in or affected by the action in some immediate way. Consistently, the dative will be translated via the English "to" or "for**."

The most concrete (and most common) use of the dative is to indicate the **indirect object**.

Example:

He gave the pot **to Dicaeopolis**. (Here, "he" is the subject and "pot" is the direct object; "to Dicaeopolis" indicates the person in whose interest the action was conducted.)

I pray **to the gods.**

Warning: English speakers, hearing the word "to" (especially in the first example above), will immediately make an association with the idea of motion. But motion toward something, as we have seen, is the province of the accusative case: strictly speaking, **the dative is never used to indicate the goal of motion** (although in some contexts it will appear to do so). In Greek, the sentence in the first example above indicates that the action was undertaken **in Dicaeopolis' interest or to his advantage or in some way that affected him**.

The dative will also be used to specify the person or thing in respect to which something is true (a use similar to that of the accusative of respect, discussed above):

This is difficult **for me** (i.e., so far as I am concerned).

He seemed **to me** to be a fool.

He is young **in years**.

The most abstract use of this dative is the so-called **ethical dative**, which indicates that the statement is offered for someone's consideration (often, but not always, with an implication of irony or indignation) or as something that concerns him/her. Modern English readers would perhaps be most likely to run into this dative in the works of Shakespeare or other Elizabethan authors.[2]

Examples:

I am not yet of Percy's mind, the Hotspur of the North; he that kills **me** some six or seven dozen of Scots at a breakfast, washes his hands, and says to his wife, 'Fie upon this quiet life! I want work.' (*I Henry IV* II.iv.113-15)

I was sent to deliver him as a present to Mistress Silvia from my master; and I came no sooner into the dining-chamber, but he steps **me** to her trencher and steals her capon's leg. … He thrusts **me** himself into the company of three or four gentleman-like dogs under the Duke's table; he had not been there, bless the mark, a pissing while but all the chamber smelt him. 'Out with the dog' says one; 'What cur is that?' says another; 'Whip him out' says the third; 'Hang him up' says the Duke. I, having been acquainted with the smell before, knew it was Crab, and goes **me** to the fellow that whips the dogs. … He makes **me** no more ado, but whips me out of the chamber.   • *Two Gentlemen of Verona* IV.iv

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[2] See P.J. Gillett, "Me, U, and Non-U: Class Connotations of Two Shakespearean Idioms," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 25.3 (Summer, 1974) 297-309.

LENNOX. Sent he to Macduff?

LORD. He did, and with an absolute "Sir, not I," the cloudy messenger turns **me** his back, and hums, as who should say, "You'll rue the time that clogs me with this answer."　• *Hamlet* III.vi

But this new governor awakes **me** all the enrolled penalties which have, like unscour'd armour, hung by th' wall so long that nineteen zodiacs have gone round and none of them been worn. • *Measure for Measure* I.ii

b) The dative is also employed to indicate location, either geographic or temporal (the **locative dative**: a function that originally belonged to a completely distinct form in Indo-European):

There are many owls **in Athens**.

At that time he did not have many friends.

c) The dative is also employed to indicate the instrument or means employed to effect an action (the **instrumental dative**: a function that originally belonged to a completely distinct form in Indo-European):

They pelted me **with rocks**.

We were filled **with hope**.

They summoned us **with** (i.e., by means of) **gestures**.

In a similar fashion, the dative can indicate the **cause** by which something occurs or is true:

He was overconfident **by reason of his great wealth**.

It can also be used to indicate the **manner** in which something is done:

They performed their duties **with great gusto**.

d) The dative is also employed to indicate accompaniment (the **dative of accompaniment**: a function that originally belonged to a completely distinct form in Indo-European):

Odysseus wandered **with his ships and his companions**.

5. The Vocative Case (Voc.)

The vocative case is used to address someone or something directly. Such addresses stand outside of the construction of the sentence and are really a type of interjection. The vocative is easily recognized: it often looks like either the nominative or the bare stem of the noun, and is always separated from the rest of the sentence by commas.

Examples:

Get over here, **Jim**!

Jim, you have got to be the laziest person on the planet.

Jim, they're over here! (Here "Jim" is quite clearly a cry to get Jim's attention, since "Jim" plays no role in the sentence proper.)

Have you seen the neighbor's cat, **Jim**? (where it is assumed that the neighbor's cat is not named Jim)