Word Order and Cases

Now that you have made yourself familiar with the parts of speech and the way different types of words function in a sentence to make meaning, we are ready to move on to Old English itself.

Modern English is what is called an **analytic** language. For the most part, it uses the order of words in a sentence to indicate grammatical and logical relationships.

Thus

The dog ate the cat

means something very different from

The cat ate the dog.

Both sentences are made up of the same words, but they mean totally different things. Why? Because we have used the arrangement of words in the sentence to specify which word is the subject and which is the direct object.

In the first example, we know that "dog" is the subject of the sentence because it comes before the verb. Likewise, we know that "cat" is the object of the sentence (it receives the action) because it comes after the verb ("ate").

Things didn't work exactly this way in Old English.

Old English (like Latin, Greek, Russian and many other languages) is an **inflected** language. Instead of relying on word order to indicate relationships, Old English attaches endings to each word to indicate relationships.

Different endings mark words as subjects (the thing performing an action), direct objects (things directly receiving the action), indirect objects (things indirectly receiving the action and objects of prepositions), objects of prepositions, and genitives (things possessed by other things).

(If you aren't sure you completely understand these different word functions, go back to the previous chapter of Grammar Review and look over the explanations. If you haven't already, you can do some practice exercises).

Because word *endings* indicate grammatical relationships, word order is not nearly as important in Old English as it is in Modern English. Therefore words in a sentence can be arranged in various ways without changing the meaning of a sentence (there are of course some limits in this flexibility. The study of these rules and regularities

is the field of Old English syntax. In general, syntax in poetry is more flexible than syntax in prose).

Thus, in Old English

Dog+(subject ending) ate cat+(object ending).

means exactly the same thing as:

Cat+(object ending) ate dog+(subject ending).

and also the same thing as:

Ate dog+(subject ending) cat+(object ending).

and also the same as:

cat+(object ending) dog+(subject ending) ate.

On the other hand,

Dog+(object ending) ate cat+(subject ending)

means something entirely different.

You need not panic at this point: we do in fact use endings in Modern English to indicate grammatical function (think of "-ing", "-tion", "-ly", "-y" and others).

To understand Old English, you do not need to learn (very much) about word order. You do, however, need to learn your endings and their grammatical functions.

Endings for nouns, pronouns and adjectives in Old English are divided into five categories of grammatical function called cases. A list and brief description is given below. Click on each case for further information.

Nominative: The naming case; used for subjects.

Genitive: The possession case; used to indicate ownership.

Accusative: The direct object case; used to indicate direct receivers of an action.

Dative / Instrumental: The indirect object and prepositional case; used to indicate indirect receivers of action and objects of prepositions. Also used to indicate things that are being used ("instruments").

A list of all the possible endings for a word is called a **declension**. In Old English, nouns, pronouns and adjectives are all *declined;* that is, they change their endings based upon their grammatical function (or the grammatical function of the words they modify) in the sentence.

The Nominative Case

(words in the Nominative are marked in navy blue)

The Nominative is the **naming** case, used for the **subject** of the sentence.

Nominative nouns can be singular:

Alfred is my name.

"Alfred" is the subject of the sentence, so "Alfred" would be in the nominative.

or plural:

The brothers divided the kingdom.

"Brothers" is the subject of the sentence, so "brothers" would be in the nominative case.

In Old English, nouns, pronouns and adjectives can all take the nominative case.

If the main noun is in the nominative, the pronouns and adjectives grammatically related to that noun will also be in the nominative. (This principle is called "Case Agreement" among nouns, demonstratives and adjectives. We will discuss it in more detail below.)

That great king ruled the kingdom.

"King" is the subject of the sentence, so it is in the nominative. "That" and "great" describe "king", so they are also in the nominative.

Having "that" and "great" in the nominative as well as "king" is an example of [case agreement](#) among adjectives, pronouns and nouns.

> **Important Note:** When you look up a word in the dictionary it will be in the nominative case.

The Genitive Case

(words that would be in the genitive case in Old English are marked in green)

The Genitive is the **possession** case, used to indicate that one thing is owned by, controlled by, or connected to another.

In Modern English we indicate genitives by using apostrophe-s ('s) or the preposition "of".

Alfred's kingdom was famous.

This sentence can also be phrased:

The kingdom of Alfred was famous.

The kingdom is the subject of the sentence and is in the [nominative case](#).

Because the kingdom belongs to Alfred, "Alfred" is in the genitive case.

Genitives can be singular (as above) or plural:

The swords of the men were sharp.

This sentence can also be phrased:

The men's swords were sharp.

In Old English, [adjectives](#) and [pronouns](#) can also take the genitive case:

His sword was sharp.

(or, The sword of him was sharp.)

The power of that large kingdom was great.

"Sword" and "power" are the subjects of the sentences, so they are in the nominative case.

"His" is a genitive pronoun referring to the sword.

"Of his large kingdom" is a a phrase composed of a demonstrative pronoun ("that") an adjective ("large") and a noun in the genitive ("kingdom") all of which refer to the word "power".

Case Agreement

In Old English, [adjectives](#) and [demonstrative pronouns](#) must be the same case as the [nouns](#) they modify.

In the sentence "Alfred was the king of that large kingdom," "that," "large," and "kingdom" would all be in the same case (which, for this sentence, is the genitve case).

Having "that" and "large" in the genitive as well as "kingdom" is an example of **case agreeement** among [adjectives](#), [pronouns](#) and [nouns](#).

The Accusative Case

(words in the accusative are marked in red)

The Accusative is the direct object case, used to indicate the receiver of an action.

Alfred praised Wulfstan.

The accusative can be singular (as above) or plural:

Alfred rewarded the warriors.

Alfred is the subject of the sentences because he is performing the action.

"Wulfstan" and "the warriors" are the direct objects of the sentences because they are receiving the action.

In Old English, adjectives and pronouns can also take the accusative case:

Alfred rewarded those brave warriors.

Alfred is the subject of the sentence because he is performing the action.

The warriors are the direct object of the sentence because they are receiving the action (the reward).

"Those" is a demonstrative pronoun the refers to the warriors, so it is in the accusative case.

"Brave" is an adjective that, because it refers to the warriors (who are receiving the action) is also in the accusative case.

Having "those" and "brave" in the accusative as well as "warriors" is an example of [case agreement](#) among adjectives, pronouns and nouns.

The accusative case can also be used to indicate "motion towards" something.

The Viking ships came into the harbor. .

The Viking ships are moving towards the harbor, so "into the harbor" is in the accusative case.

> **Note:** If the ships were staying in the harbor, the phrase "in the harbor" would be in the dative case (see below).

The Dative and [Instrumental](#) Cases

(words in the dative and instrumental are marked in purple)

The Dative Case

The dative case can be used for both Indirect Objects and [Objects of Prepositions](#).

Dative for Indirect Objects

The Dative is the indirect object case, used to indicate the secondary receiver of an action.

Alfred praised Wulfstan to Edward.

The dative can be singular (as above) or plural:

Alfred praised Wulfstan to the warriors.

Alfred is the subject of the sentences because he is performing the action.

"Wulfstan" is the **direct** object of the sentence because he is receiving the action.

"Edward" and "the warriors" are the **indirect** objects because they secondarily receive the action.

In Old English, [adjectives](#), and [pronouns](#) can also take the dative case:

Alfred praised Wulfstan to those brave warriors.

Alfred is the subject of the sentence because he is performing the action.

"Wulfstan" is the **direct** object of the sentence because he is receiving the action.

"Wulfstan"would be in the [accusative case](#).

"Warriors" are the **indirect** objects because they secondarily receive the action.

"Those warriors" would be in the dative case.

"Those" is a demonstrative pronoun that refers to the warriors, so it is also in the dative case.

"Brave" is an adjective that, because it refers to the warriors (who are secondarily receiving the action), is also in the dative case.

Having "those" and "brave" in the dative as well as "warriors" is an example of [case agreement](#) among adjectives, pronouns and nouns.

Dative with [Prepositions](#)

In Old English the objects of most prepositions ("of", which takes the genitive, and "to", which can take the accusative, are the more common exceptions) take the Dative Case.

Alfred struggled with illness.

Alfred hid in Æthelny.

Alfred prayed for victory.

"Alfred" is the subject of each sentence because he is performing the actions.

"Illness," "Æthelny," and "victory" are the objects of the prepositions "with", "by", and "for", so they are in the dative case.

In old English, [adjectives](#) and [pronouns](#) also can take the dative case if they are linked to the object of a [preposition](#).

Alfred struggled with that horrible illness.

Alfred is the subject of the sentence because he is performing the action.

"Illness"is the object of the preposition "with," so it is in the dative case.

"That" is a [demonstrative pronoun](#) that refers to "illness," so it is in dative case.

"Horrible" is an [adjective](#) that refers to "illness," so it is in the dative case.

Having "that" and "horrible" in the dative case as well as "illness" is an example of [case agreement](#) among adjectives, nouns, and pronouns.

The Instrumental Case

Even though many books of Old English grammar separate the dative and instrumental cases, it is easier to think of the instrumental as just another use of the dative (the endings are the same for nouns; there are some pronouns that have different instrumental forms).

An instrumental noun is one that is used to accomplish something (as the instrument of the action).

In Old English instrumentals can be recognized as nouns in the dative case that are not indirect objects and are not preceeded by a preposition.

Alfred killed a Viking with a sword.

"Sword" is in the instrumental case because it is the instrument Alfred used to kill the Viking.

However, it is just as easy to think of "sword" being the object of "with," and thus in the dative.

Old English gives a writer the option of leaving out "with" and simply saying

Alfred killed a Viking sword(+dative ending). (<== note that "sword" is in the dative / instrumental case)

You could translate this sentence as: Alfred killed a Viking by means of a sword.

In Old English, adjectives and pronouns also can take the Instrumental Case if they are linked to an instrumental noun (or, if they are stand-alone pronouns, if they are being used as an instrument).

Alfred killed the Viking with <u>that trusty sword</u>

"Alfred" is the subject of the sentence because he is performing the action.

"Sword" is the means by which the action was accomplished, so it is in the instrumental case.

"that" is a demonstrative pronoun the refers to the sword, so it is in the instrumental case.

"Trusty" is an adjective that, because it refers to the sword (which is the means by which the action is accomplished) is also in the instrumental case.

Having "that" and "trusty" in the instrumental case as well as "sword" is an example of [case agreement](#) among adjectives, pronouns and nouns.

Review: the endings on a word indicate which *case* it belongs to. In turn, the *case* indicates what function the word is performing in the sentence, whether it is the subject (nominative), the direct object (accusative), the indirect object or object of a preposition (dative), or if it is a possessive (genitive) form.

[Click here](#) for some exercises to practice recognizing cases.