

5. WHAT IS MEANT BY CASE?

Case is the form of a word which shows how that word functions within the sentence.

IN ENGLISH

The order of words in a sentence helps us to recognize the function of the nouns and shows us the meaning of the whole sentence. We easily recognize the difference in meaning between the following two sentences purely on the basis of word order. The nouns themselves do not change even though they serve a different function in each sentence.

The girl baked Mother a cake.

The *girl* is baking the cake and *Mother* is receiving it.

Mother baked the girl a cake.

Mother is baking the cake and the *girl* is receiving it.

The words *girl* and *Mother* do not change form, no matter what function they perform in the sentence. It is word order that shows us the meaning of the sentence.

In English there are only a few instances in which we can see changes in the spelling or endings of a word as the word assumes a new function in the sentence.

We are most aware of case in English when we use pronouns (see **What is a Pronoun?**, p. 33). Pronouns can help us to recognize different cases in English. In the two sentences below, it is not just word order, but also the form, i.e., the case, of the pronoun which affects the meaning of the sentence.

I know *them*.

They know *me*.

We cannot say "I know *they*," or "They know *I*," because the forms *they* and *I* cannot be used as objects of a verb (see **What are Objects?**, p. 24). Let us study case in English in more detail by looking at pronouns. If you can recognize the different cases in English, you will find it much easier to understand the more extensive use of case in Russian.

English pronouns have three cases.

The **subjective case** → for subjects and predicate words (see **What is a Subject?**, p. 19 and **What is a Predicate?**, p. 30).

He and *I* went to the Kremlin yesterday.

subjects → subjective case

We looked at Ivan the Terrible's bell tower.

subject → subjective case

I never heard of Ivan the Terrible. *Who* is *he*?

subject →
subjective case

subject → predicate →
subjective case subjective case

The **objective case** → for direct objects, indirect objects and objects of prepositions (see **What are Objects?**, p. 24 and **What is a Preposition?**, p. 93).

They invited *him* and *me* to the Bolshoi Theater.

subject → direct objects →
subjective case objective case

After the play, *they* made *us* a wonderful dinner.

subject → indirect object →
subjective case objective case

subject → *subject* →
subjective case subjective case

We asked about *her* when *we* saw *them*.

object of preposition → direct object →
objective case objective case

In these examples pronouns have different forms depending on how they are used in the sentence. The different cases prevent us from saying "*Us* went to the theater" or "*Him* talked about *she*."

The **possessive case** → to show ownership. The possessive pronoun can function as subject, predicate, direct object, indirect object or object of the preposition.

This book is Sacha's. *Yours* is on the table.

possessive pronoun → subject

This book about Tolstoy is *yours*.

possessive pronoun → predicate

I like your friends, but I love *mine*.

possessive pronoun → direct object

Misha called his friends, but I wrote *mine* a letter.

possessive pronoun → indirect object

Vika studied for her test, but Dima didn't study for *his*.

possessive pronoun → object of preposition

The possessive case is discussed in a separate section, **What is a Possessive Pronoun?**, p. 44.

IN RUSSIAN

Word order alone rarely identifies the function of any word in a sentence. Usually its role is indicated by the way **in** which the word ends, otherwise referred to as the **case ending**. The different endings that a Russian word may have correspond to its several possible functions in a sentence.

All the possible forms for any word that changes case are called a **declension**. When you have memorized all the case endings that a word can have, you are then able to "decline" that word.

There are three basic types of words or parts of speech which decline: nouns, pronouns and adjectives (see **What is a Noun?**, p. 4; **What is a Pronoun?**, p. 33; and **What is an Adjective?**, p. 60). There are different declension patterns for each part of speech and some variations within the same part of speech.

There are six cases in Russian. Although the order of case endings given in Russian language textbooks varies, the following sequence is common.

1. The **nominative case** → for the subject of the sentence and for many predicate words in the sentence. (See **What is a Subject?**, p. 19, and **What is a Predicate?**, p. 30.)
2. The **genitive case** → to show possession and for objects of some prepositions. (See **What is the Possessive?**, p. 22 and **What is a Preposition?**, p. 93.)
3. The **dative case** → for indirect objects and for objects of some prepositions. (See **What are Objects?**, p. 24 and **What is a Preposition?**, p. 93.)
4. The **accusative case** → for direct objects and for objects of some prepositions. (See **What are Objects?**, p. 24 and **What is a Preposition?**, p. 93.)

5. The **instrumental case** → expresses the means, manner, or agent by which an action is performed. It is also used for objects of some prepositions and in some instances for objects which require the use of a predicate word. (See **What is a Predicate?**, p. 30 and **What is a Preposition?**, p. 93.)
6. The **prepositional case**, sometimes called the **locative case** → commonly used in phrases preceded by prepositions which define a space or location. It is the only case which is always used with a preposition. Many, but not all, prepositions take objects in the prepositional case. (See **What is a Preposition?**, p. 93.)

Let us see how declension works in Russian by looking at the word **газета** (*newspaper*), a feminine noun, in all its cases. Although case endings may differ for nouns of different gender, the principle is the same for all nouns.

A noun is always listed in the dictionary or in the vocabulary section of your textbook in the nominative case.

газета newspaper

To form the other cases, remove the nominative case ending, if there is one, and add the ending given in your textbook.

Case	Singular	Plural
nominative	газет-а	газет-ы
genitive	газет-ы	газет-
dative	газет-е	газет-ам
accusative	газет-у	газет-ы
instrumental	газет-ой	газет-ами
prepositional	газет-е	газет-ах

Now let us see how the word **газета** changes its case ending as it assumes different functions in the three sentences below.

The newspaper is on the table.

Газета на столе.

Newspaper is the subject of the sentence; therefore we use the nominative case, **газета**.

I read about the fire in the newspaper.

Я читала о пожаре в газете.

Newspaper is the object of the preposition *in*, which here takes the prepositional case; therefore we use the prepositional case, **газете**, after the preposition.

Have you read today's *newspaper*?

Вы читали сегодняшнюю газету?

Newspaper is the direct object of the verb; therefore we use the accusative case, газету.

As you can see in the sentences above, you must determine how a noun functions in a sentence before you can choose the correct form of the word. Here are steps that you should follow.

The boy gave the girl the newspapers.

1. GENDER—Identify the gender and number of each noun.

boy → мальчик is masculine singular.

girl → девушка is feminine singular.

newspapers → газеты is feminine plural.

2. FUNCTION—Determine how each noun functions in the sentence.

boy → subject

girl → indirect object

newspapers → direct object

3. CASE—Determine what case in Russian corresponds to the function you have identified in step 2.

boy → subject → nominative case

girl → indirect object → dative case

newspapers → direct object → accusative case

4. SELECTION—Choose the proper case ending for each of the nouns from the endings you have memorized.

The boy gave the girl the newspapers.

Мальчик дал девушке газеты.

the boy	gave	the girl	the newspapers
nominative		dative	accusative
masc.		fem.	fem.
sing.		sing.	pl.

6. WHAT IS A SUBJECT?

The **subject** of a sentence is the person or thing that performs the action of the verb (see **What is a Verb?**, p. 68).

IN ENGLISH

When you wish to find the subject of a sentence, always look for the verb first; then ask *who?* or *what?* before the verb. The answer will be the subject.

The landowner talks to the serf.

Who talks to the serf? Answer: the landowner.

Landowner is the singular subject.

The children of the Count are at the door.

Who is at the door? Answer: the children.

Children is the plural subject.

The tears rolled slowly down Princess Mary's face.

What rolled? Answer: the tears.

Tears is the plural subject.

Never assume that a word is the subject simply because it comes first in the sentence. A subject need not be first in the sentence, as you can see in the following examples in which the subjects are in **boldface** and the verbs are *italicized*.

With eager haste the **Rostovs** *began* the hunt.

Barking to her master, **Milka** *jumped up* in anticipation.

Some sentences have more than one subject and verb; you must be able to find the subject of each verb.

The **author** *wrote* that all happy **families** *were* alike.

Author is the singular subject of *wrote*, and *families* is the plural subject of *were*.

In English and in Russian it is very important to find the subject of each verb and to make sure that the subject and the verb agree. You must choose the form of the verb which agrees with the subject: if the subject is singular, the verb must be singular; if the subject is plural, the verb must be plural. (See **What is a Verb Conjugation?**, p. 72.)