

The Russian Case System

What is grammatical case? (Indo-European) languages can be divided into those with rigid word order and those which have relatively free word order. Take the English:

John sees the dog.

We know that the subject of the sentence is *John* and what he sees is *the dog* (the direct object). If I rearranged the sentence (as in *The dog sees John*) the meaning has changed. The *dog* has become the subject, and *John*, the direct object. In English therefore, we understand the function of the word in a sentence by means of a pretty inflexible word order. In Russian, we understand the particular function of a word NOT by means of word order, but rather by means of various endings added to the end of the word. These unique endings convey the grammatical function of the word in a given sentence. This is case. In Russian all of the following sentences are correct.

1. Ива́н ви́дит соба́ку.
2. Соба́ку ви́дит Ива́н.
3. Ива́н соба́ку ви́дит.

The word order is irrelevant to the syntactic roles of the participants. All of these could be translated as John sees the dog. (We'll talk more about when options 2 and 3 happen later.)

In Russian there are six cases. They are:

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|------------------|------------------------|
| 1. Nominative | (Име́нный паде́ж) |
| 2. Accusative | (Ви́ный паде́ж) |
| 3. Genitive | (Роди́тельный паде́ж) |
| 4. Dative | (Да́тельный паде́ж) |
| 5. Instrumental | (Твори́тельный паде́ж) |
| 6. Prepositional | (Предло́жный паде́ж) |

Below is a brief description of the functions of the Russian cases.

1. The Nominative case expresses the subject or predicate nominative of the sentence:
A **friend** lives here. This is a **friend**. = Друг живёт здесь. Это – друг.

2. The Accusative case expresses the direct object:
He is reading a book. = Он чита́ет кнѳгу.

3. The Genitive case has many functions.
It expresses possession. It is the 'of' case:
He is a friend **of our family**. = Он – друг на́шей семьи́.

It is also used in counting and quantification:
There are 50 states in the USA. = В США 50 штатов.

To indicate the absence or lack of something.
He doesn't have a **car**. = У него́ нет маши́ны.

4. The Dative case expresses the indirect object.
I wrote a letter **to my parents**. = Я написа́л письмо́ моѳм роди́телям.

5. The Instrumental case expresses the means/instruments by which an action is performed:

A friend wrote me a letter with a pen.¹ = Друг написал мне письмо ручкой.

6. The Prepositional case expresses the object of certain prepositions²:

He always talks about a car. = Он всегда говорит о машине.

Olga lives in a big city. = Ольга живёт в большом городе.

We are having a meeting at work today. = У нас будет собрание сегодня на работе..

Identify the case of the underlined words below:

1. I said a few words to him before he left.
2. He gave a puppy last Saturday to my niece.
3. The dog's leash is broken.
4. Janek used to be my best friend.
5. I was talking about him for two hours.
6. He gave her flowers and a new watch.
7. We are going to Moscow by train.
8. Whom did you see at the marketplace?
9. My friend's car is very nice.
10. We bought new computers at the store.
11. Did you see that new car at the dealership?
12. At the pet store I bought Joe's sister a hamster with my credit card.
13. Where is the guy whom you saw at the factory last weekend.
14. Do you know that guy sitting in the corner of the bar?
15. Where is the first guy that you saw at the pub?
16. I poured him a glass of wine and we talked about politics.
17. He was sitting on the curb and whistling a song to himself.
18. The mother was sitting in her child's room and reading him a fairytale.
19. He was speaking in a low voice to his girlfriend about their future plans to elope.
20. The story about the colony of giraffes in Africa was written by a very clever chap.

¹ Note that this is much different than other *with* constructions in English, where we are not talking about the mean/instrument by which something is performed, but rather accompaniment, e.g. – I am going to the store with John is not an example of means/instruments.

² The prepositional is not the only case that can follow prepositions, but it is the only one that cannot stand without them. All cases may occur after prepositions. You must memorize the case or cases a preposition requires along with the preposition itself.