Cases and Strong Masculine Nouns Overview

To recap what we have covered in the previous topics, Old English is an **inflected language** and so uses a **case system** similar to that of modern Icelandic, Russian or German. This means the ending of nouns, adjectives and demonstratives change to indicate the grammatical function of the word. For example, whether it is the subject, the direct object, indirect object, or a possessive. English began to lose its inflection after the arrival of French speaking Normans in 1066, as French is not an inflected language. Modern English is not generally considered an inflected language.

There are four main Old English cases:

The Nominative Case indicates the subject of the sentence.

The Accusative Case indicates the direct object of a sentence.

The Genitive Case indicates possession.

The Dative Case indicates the indirect object of a sentence.

Nominative and Accusative

The **nominative** is used for the *subject* of a sentence. A subject is the person, place, thing, or idea that is doing or being something. The **accusative** is used for a *direct object*, that is the person or thing which is the direct recipient of the verb. A verb which is directly acting on an object is known as a *transitive verb*.

In Old English, nouns in the **nominative** and **accusative** cases are often declined in the same way. The best way of telling the singular nominative and accusative nouns apart — if it isn't clear from context — is by using checking for a demonstrative: **se** for the nominative and **þone** for the accusative. For example, examine the below sentence. Though the word order does not match the word order of the above sentence, and there are no identifiable endings, you can see which is the subject and the direct object through examining the demonstratives.

The plural versions of the nominative and accusative are always the same, both in how they decline and in the demonstratives they use.

Nominative and Accusative Strong Masculine Nouns				
	Singular	**Plural**	**Singular Suffix**	**Plural Suffix**
Nominative	Se cyning	þa cyningas	-	-as
Accusative	þone cyning	þa cyningas	-	-as

Genitive

The **genitive** is the case of possession and can be used both subjectively — *the king's thane* — and objectively — *fear of the Lord*.

An easy way to tell if something should be in the genitive is to see if you can place 'of' in the sentence — *king of king's; one of the thanes; the children of the king; a child of five years*.

Genitive Strong Masculine Nouns				
	Singular	**Plural**	**Singular Suffix**	**Plural Suffix**
Genitive	þæs cyninges	þara cyninga	-es	-a

Dative

The **dative** is the case of the *indirect object*. This is a noun which is not the direct recipient of an action but is still affected by the verb.

In the above sentence, the *rings* are what is being directly acted upon, as they are what is being given. However, they are being given to the thane. So he is still being acted upon by the verb, but indirectly. As a result, *beag* is in the accusative and *þegen* is in the dative.

An easy way to figure out if something is in the dative is to check for the distinctive **um** ending, the demonstrative **þæm**, or to check for a preposition such as 'to' or 'fram'.

Dative Strong Masculine Nouns				
	Singular	**Plural**	**Singular Suffix**	**Plural Suffix**
Dative	þæm cyninge	þæm cyningum	-e	-um

It is important to understand how cases work, and to be able to identify which case a word is in, so as to understand the meaning of a sentence. While Old English often follows the *subject verb object* format of modern English, there can often be exceptions, especially in poetry.

The differing word order does not affect meaning, but word order can be used to affect emphasis. That being said, in Old English the subject does generally come first, or at least very early in the sentence, the same way it does in modern English.

There are some common differences in word order which should be watched out for. For example, **possessives** often come after the noun it modifies, especially in direct address:

Old English: *Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum*

Direct trans: *Father ours you who are in heaven*

Modern Eng: *Our Father who art in heaven*

Always remember that Old English has **case harmony**, so even if a word comes slightly earlier or later in a sentence than you might expect, it can generally be paired to the correct noun by comparing the case endings.

Practice Exercises

1. Se (þegen) _____ ond þa biscops — The thane and the bishops

2. Þæs cyninges (þegen) _____ ferþ to þæm tune — The king's thanes go to the town

3. Þa þegnas þara (cyning) _____ Ælfred and Æþelred — The thanes of the Kings' Alfred and Ethelred

4. Se (biscop) _____ fram þæm tune — The bishop from the town

5. Þa þegnas ond se (cyning) _____ — The thane and the king

6. On þis daeg, Æðelred cyning ferde to þæm (tun) _____ mid his broðor— On this day, King Ethelred went to the town his brother

7. He came fram þæs (þegen) _____ tune — He came from the thane's town

8. Se cyning ond þa (biscop) _____ — The king and the bishops

9. Þara (þegen) _____ menn — The thane's men

10. Menn fram þara (þegen) _____ tunum — Men from the towns of the thanes

11. Se (stan) _____ ond se þegen — The stone and the thane

12. Se biscop grete þone (cyning) _____ — The bishop greets the king

13. Wærferhþ biscop ferde to þæm (biscop) _____ in Lundene ond Wiltunscire — Bishop Warfehth went to the bishops of London and Wiltshire

14. Se cyning ond seo cwen grete þa (biscop) _____ — The king and the queen greet the bishops

15. Se cyning sloh þa (þegen) _____ — The king slew the thanes

Practice Exercises

1. Þa biscopas geaf þone (stan) _____ to þaem þegne — The bishops gave the stone to the thane

2. Þa (cyning) _____ ond þa biscopas ferþ to þæm tune — The kings and the bishops go to the town

3. Se biscop ond þara (biscop) _____ preostas — The bishops' priests

4. Se þegen geaf þa (gar) _____ to þaem cyninge — The thane gives the spears to the king

5. In þæs (cyning) _____ tune — In the town of the king

6. To þæm biscop geaf se cyning þa (beag) _____ — The king gave rings to the bishop

7. To þæm (cyning) _____ se biscop geaf beag — To the king, the bishop gives a ring

8. Se þegen ferþ to þæm (biscop) _____ mid wordum fram þæm cyning — The thane goes to the bishop with words from the king"

9. Se biscop ferde fram þæm (þegen) _____ to þæm cyning — The bishop went from the thane to the king

10. Þa (stan) _____ þæs þegnes tune — The stones from the thane's town

11. Se cyning ferþ to þæm (beorg) _____ — The king goes to the mountains

12. Se geaf þa garas to þæm (þegen) _____ — He gave the spears to the thanes

13. Þa biscopas came fram þæm (tun) _____ hetum Londenum ond Readingum — The bishops came from the towns called London and Reading

14. Se þegen sloh þone (biscop) _____ in tæm tune — the thane slew the bishop in the town

15. Se þegen geaf þone (gar) _____ to Leofric ond sloh him — The thane gave the spear to Leofric and slew him.