

The declensions in German

The nominative

- The pronoun or noun is in the nominative when it is the subject of the sentence. Examples:

Der Hund sitzt im Garten.

The dog is sitting in the garden.

Der Hund is subject of the verb *sitzt* and is therefore nominative.

Wir wissen nicht, ob unsere Schwester kommen will.

We don't know if our sister wants to come.

Wir is subject of *wissen* and is therefore nominative, just as *unsere Schwester* is subject of *will* and therefore also nominative.

- The pronoun or noun is nominative if it is the subject complement with one of the four "state verbs" *sein* (to be), *bleiben* (to stay), *werden* (to become) and *scheinen* (to seem). Examples:

Er ist der beste Skifahrer.

He is the best skier.

der beste Skifahrer is the subject complement with the verb *sein* and is therefore nominative, just like *Er* who is subject of *sein*.

Er bleibt der beste Schüler in seiner Schule.

He remains the best student in his school.

der beste Schüler is a subject complement with the verb *bleiben* and is therefore nominative, just as *Er* is subject of *bleiben*.

The accusative

- The pronoun or noun is in the accusative when it follows one of the following prepositions: *bis*, *durch*, *für*, *gegen*, *ohne*, *um* and *entlang* (see chapter on prepositions for their use).

Example:

Das Auto fährt durch den Wald.

The car goes through the forest.

den Wald follows the *durch* preposition and is therefore in the accusative. This is why we have *den* and not *der*. (see "the tables of declensions").

- The pronoun or noun that is direct object complement of the sentence is in the accusative. Examples:

Siehst du das Auto neben dem Baum?

Do you see the car next to the tree?

das Auto is a direct object (you see what? The car) and therefore in the accusative.

Sie hat viele Freundinnen.

She has a lot of friends.

viele Freundinnen is a direct object (she has what? Many friends) and therefore in the accusative.

- If the pronoun or noun denotes a place or position, it is in the accusative if there is a movement towards this place or position (directive complement) .Example:

Der Bus fährt in die Schweiz.

The bus is going to Switzerland.

Die Schweiz is a location. The bus is not fixed or static in Switzerland, since it is going there. There is therefore a movement towards Switzerland which is therefore in the accusative.

- If we have an expression of time, and it is not introduced by a mixed preposition (auf, an, in etc.), then the expression of time is in the accusative. Of course, we keep the accusative behind the prepositions always followed by the accusative, the dative behind those always followed by the dative and the genitive behind those always followed by the genitive.

Examples without preposition:

Das Kind hat den ganzen Tag geschlafen.

The child slept the whole day.

den ganzen Tag is an expression of time, and here there are no prepositions to introduce it, so it is in the accusative.

- The accusative is also used for greetings and wishes. Examples

Guten Tag!

Hello!

Herzlichen Glückwunsch!

Congratulations! (for a birthday wish for example)

The dative

- The pronoun or noun is in the dative when it follows one of the following prepositions: *aus, bei, mit, nach, seit, von* and *zu* (these are the main prepositions with the dative, see the chapter on prepositions for their use and the exhaustive list of these prepositions). Example:

Die Eltern sind mit den Kindern gekommen.

The parents came with the children.

den Kindern follows the *mit* preposition and is therefore in the dative. This is why we have *den* and *Kindern* here and not *die* and *Kinder*. (see "the tables of declensions").

- The pronoun or noun that is indirect object complement of the sentence is in the dative. Example:

Der Mann gibt dem Mädchen ein Geschenk.

The man gives the girl a gift

dem Mädchen is indirect object (he gives a gift to whom? To the girl) and therefore in the dative.

- If the pronoun or noun denotes a place or position, it is in the dative if there is no movement towards this place or position.Example:

Die Blumen stehen auf dem Tisch.

The flowers are on the table.

dem Tisch indicates a location. The flowers are already on the table, there is no "movement" of the flowers towards it. The table is therefore in the dative, here marked by *dem*.

- If we have an expression of time, and it is introduced by a mixed preposition (auf, an, in etc.), then this expression is in the dative. Of course, we keep the accusative behind the prepositions always followed by the accusative, the dative behind those always followed by the dative and the genitive behind those always followed by the genitive. Examples with mixed prepositions:

Er fliegt nach Deutschland in mehreren Tagen.

He is flying to Germany in several days.

mehreren Tagen is an expression of time, and here it is introduced by the mixed preposition *in*, so we have a dative.

In zwei Stunden sind wir in Wien.

We will be in Vienna in two hours.

zwei Stunden is an expression of time introduced by *in*, which is why we have the plural dative form with *Stunden*.

Sie kam am Abend.

She came in the evening.

am Abend is an expression of time introduced by *an*, so we have the male dative form with *an dem (am) Abend*.

- When you want to express a feeling, you very often use the dative form in German.

Examples:

Es geht mir gut.

I'm doing fine.

The German literally says "it gets well to me". "me" is therefore in the dative.

Wie geht es ihm?

How is he?

ihm is here the dative form of *er*.

Ihr ist schlecht. / Es ist ihr schlecht.

She feels terrible

ihr is here the dative form of the singular female *sie*. Be careful not to confuse it with the *ihr* which expresses the "plural you" in the nominative or the possessive *ihr* ("her") when the possessor is female!

The genitive

- The genitive links two nouns together, mostly to indicate an idea of possession. It is always the second noun (the one that "owns") that is in the genitive form. Examples:

Der Ton des Radios ist furchtbar.

The sound of the radio is horrible.

Here we have "the sound" (first name) which is that of "the radio" (second name). The second name ("the possessor") is in the genitive and therefore becomes *des Radios*.

We can also replace the genitive in these contexts by *von* + *dative*. Examples:

Der Ton vom Radio ist furchtbar.

- The genitive is used after certain prepositions. Among the most common are *außerhalb*, *innerhalb*, *statt*, *trotz*, *während*, and *wegen* (see the chapter on prepositions for the complete list). Examples:

Statt eines Briefes schickte er ihr eine E-Mail.
Instead of a letter he sent her an email.

Trotz des Regens fand das Festival statt.
The festival took place despite the rain.

Be careful! In everyday speech, these prepositions are very often followed by the dative.

- The genitive is also used after a word indicating a quantity or proportion. Examples:

Einige der Verletzten

Some of the injured

der Verletzten is in the genitive because *einige* (a few) indicates a quantity of something.

Die Hälfte des Apfels

Half the apple

des Apfels is in the genitive because *die Hälfte* (half) indicates a quantity of something.