

# 7. Nouns

(case, number & gender)

## Lesson in a Nutshell

English nouns usually change form to tell you their number (singular or plural).

Greek nouns have:

- a. **case** (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative). The case tells you the function the word performs in the sentence. In English this is accomplished by word order.

Case	Meaning	Keywords
<b>Nominative</b>	Subject of the sentence	
<b>Genitive</b>	Possession	of
<b>Dative</b>	Indirect object	in, with to, by
<b>Accusative</b>	Direct object	

- b. **number** (singular and plural) and
- c. **gender** (masculine or feminine or neuter).

Before you read on, let me beg you not to panic. What you learn in this section will apply to all substantives. When you grasp these concepts you will be well on your way to understanding Greek.

Also, don't forget that we will be encountering these ideas in a much more interesting way — in the Greek text itself. So if you read this and it confuses you, don't worry. It will become clearer as we go along.

## Noun Syntax

As we have said, nouns are verbal tags we put on the various pieces of our world.

Wall  
Woman  
Man  
Subway  
Car  
Dog  
Cat  
etc. etc.

Nouns describe the stuff of the universe. There is a lot of stuff so there are a lot of nouns. As Steve Martin once complained about the French language, “Those French have a different word for everything!” Exactly. Every language has a different word for every thing.

Greek nouns and other substantives have case, number, and gender. The easiest way to get at these ideas is to begin with English. We will begin with number, since English and Greek number are the same.

## Number

Consider two variations of the same noun:

cat  
cats

What is the difference between the two? In both cases we are describing a cute, furry critter, right?

The difference is in the **number**. “Cat” is singular — it describes one cute, furry critter. “Cats” is plural — it describes two or more.

English nouns change form to tell us whether we are talking about one (singular) or more than one (plural).

Normally, in English, we add an “s” to the end of a word to make it plural.

cat (one)  
cat**s** (two or more)

Nice and simple, right?

Sometimes English does other things. Consider these two words.

ma**n** (singular)  
me**n** (plural)

Why not just say “mans” if we want the plural form of “man?” Because no language is perfectly consistent. In this case, the number was changed by altering the vowel in the middle of the word.

And there are even some words that use the same form in the singular and plural:

deer (singular)  
deer (plural)

If you are tempted to gripe about Greek, remember that English is at least as crazy!

## Gender

Consider these three nouns:

Prince  
Princess  
Monarch

What is the difference? They all define someone lucky enough to be royalty, right?

The difference between these three lucky people is their **gender**. These nouns are by nature either masculine (prince), or feminine (princess) or neuter/undefined (monarch).

The “gender” of a noun tells us whether it is masculine, feminine or neuter.

Greek gender is much like English gender, but there is one big difference:

In English, most nouns are not gender specific. You might think of English nouns as following a “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy. They simply don’t declare their gender.

Consider the following nouns:

Lamp  
Bee  
Tree  
Sky

You would not refer to any of these nouns as “he” or “she.” You would refer to all of them as “it.” It isn’t that they are neuter. It’s just that the noun doesn’t tell us the gender so we declare it neuter by default.

A few English nouns have a trace of gender. For example, we might call the church or a ship “she,” but most English nouns are genderless.

Here is an important difference between Greek and English

*Every Greek noun, without exception, is either masculine or feminine or neuter.*

In some cases the gender is logical to us (called natural gender).

“man” (ἄνθρωπος) is a male noun.

“woman” (γύνη) is a feminine noun.

But in most cases, we can discern no rhyme or reason to it.

“word” (λόγος) is a masculine noun.

“sin” (ἁμαρτία) is a feminine noun.  
“book” (βίβλιον) is a neuter noun.

You must get used to the idea that every Greek noun, without exception, will be either masculine or feminine or neuter.

## Case

The concepts of number and gender are fairly easy. You may find it harder to grasp the idea of case. Don't worry. We will have plenty of time to let this sink in. And when you comprehend Greek case, it will do wonders for your English as well as your Greek grammar.

Venture on!

Consider two different variations of the same word:

I  
Me

Unless you have a serious mental disorder, you consider “I” and “me” to be the same person. I am me, right? If “I” am not “me” I need to see a shrink, pronto!

So here's the big question: Why do we need two words to describe I/me?

Here's the big answer: Because the two forms tell us how the word functions in a sentence. This is the **case** of the noun.

That is so important that I will say it again in red:

**Because the two forms tell us how the word functions in the sentence.  
This is the case of the noun.**

And in orange:

**Because the two forms tell us how the word functions in the sentence.  
This is the case of the noun.**

Allow me to demonstrate. Which sentence sounds correct to you:

#1 I am going to the store.

#2 Me am going to the store.

Even if you can't explain why, you will identify sentence #1 as correct. It just sounds better. But why?

Because we use "I" when we want to identify ourselves as the subject — the one doing the action of the verb. "I" is called subjective case.

Now look at these two sentences:

#1 My wife punched I!

#2 My wife punched me!

Which of those two sentences sounds correct?

Hopefully you said the second: "My wife punched me!" sounds right to the English ear. But why?

Because we use "me" when we want to identify ourselves as the object — the one receiving the action of the verb. "Me" is called objective case.

We learn to make these shifts intuitively, just from listening to people talk, even if we cannot explain the grammar. If you are an English speaker, the logic of the following sentences is probably self-evident.

Me don't do things. I do things.

I do things to me. I don't do things to I.

You don't give things to I. You give them to me.

Do you see how "I" and "me" change form depending on whether they are giving or receiving the action of the verb?

"I" and "me" are examples of **case**.

What is case? Three more times to make sure you never forget:

Case is the **form** a word takes to tell us how it **functions in a sentence**.

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Now strap on your seat belts for a loop-the-loop. Here is why English students find Greek baffling.

*English nouns don't change form very much.*

They rely instead on their  
order in a sentence  
to tell us what role they play.

*Greek nouns change form like crazy.*

They change form  
to tell us what role  
they play in the sentence.

As we get into the Greek text we will see examples and this will become clearer. But to get us started, consider an example. Here are two very different events:

The **dog** is biting the **man**.

The **man** is biting the **dog**.

Notice that the words “man” and “dog” do not change form at all. How do we know who is biting whom?

By the word order.

English puts the subject before the verb and the object after it. But Greek doesn't depend on word order to tell us what role each word is playing in a sentence.

In Greek, these two sentences mean the same thing.

ὁ κυων δακνει τον ανθρωπον.  
The dog is biting the man.

τον ανθρωπον δακνει ο κυων.  
The man ← is biting←the dog.

The translation of both of these sentences is

“The dog is biting the man.”



It looks like the dog is doing the biting in the first sentence but in the second sentence it looks to an English speaker as if the man is the one doing the biting. We assume this because of the word order.

In the second sentence, “the man” comes before the verb so we assume he is doing the biting.

But Greek tells the subject by changing the form of the word, not by putting it before the verb.

I highlighted the ways the Greek nouns changed in red. Don't worry that you can't recognize these changes yet. You will soon.

### One More Time

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to tell us what role they play.

*But Greek nouns change form like crazy.*

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The good news is that the patterns of change are consistent and easy to spot. In many ways, Greek is easier than English. Once you learn the patterns, it's a piece of cake.

Remember:

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There are four<sup>1</sup> primary cases in Greek that correspond with the four main roles the nouns play in the sentence: <sup>2</sup>

1. Nominative (subject)
2. Genitive (possession)
3. Dative (indirect object)
4. Accusative (object)

### *Nominative Case (Subject)*

If a noun is in the **nominative case** it serves as the subject of the sentence.

ὁ ἄνθρωπος γράφει.  
The man is writing.

“The man” is in the nominative case since it is the subject of the sentence.

### *Accusative Case (Object)*

If a noun is in the **accusative case**, it serves as the direct object of the verb.

ὁ ἄνθρωπος γράφει τὴν ἐπίστολην.  
The man is writing the letter.

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<sup>1</sup> The fifth case is the vocative case. It is used for direct address, as in the prayer, “Lord, grant us peace.” “Lord,” in this example, would be in the vocative case. The vocative case is not very common and it is easy to spot from the context so we will not worry about it right now.

<sup>2</sup> As we become more skilled at Greek we will see that there are many more possibilities than are listed here, especially in the genitive and dative case. This is just to get us started.

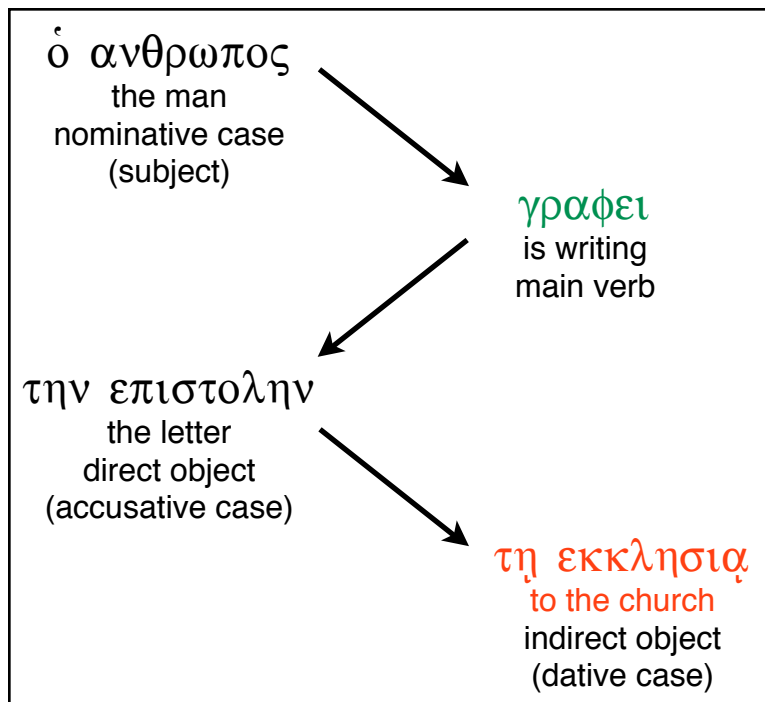


### Dative Case (Indirect Object)

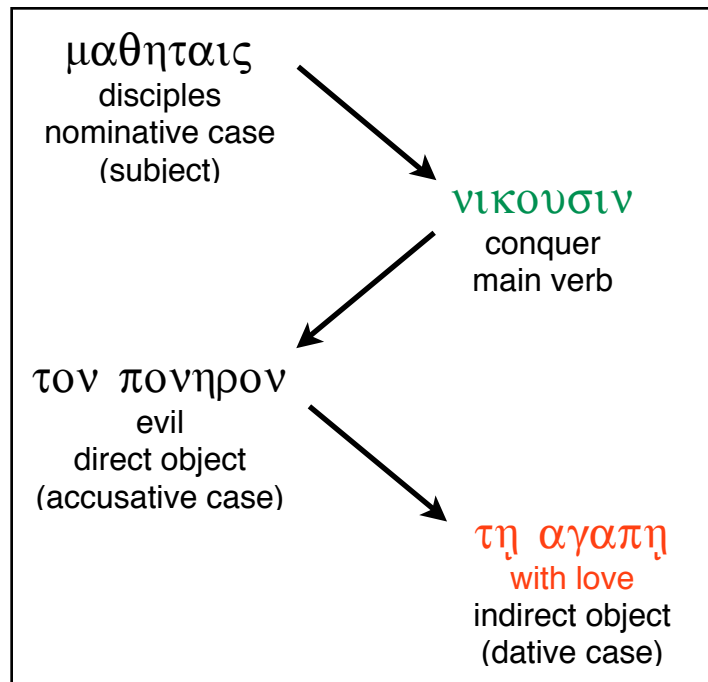
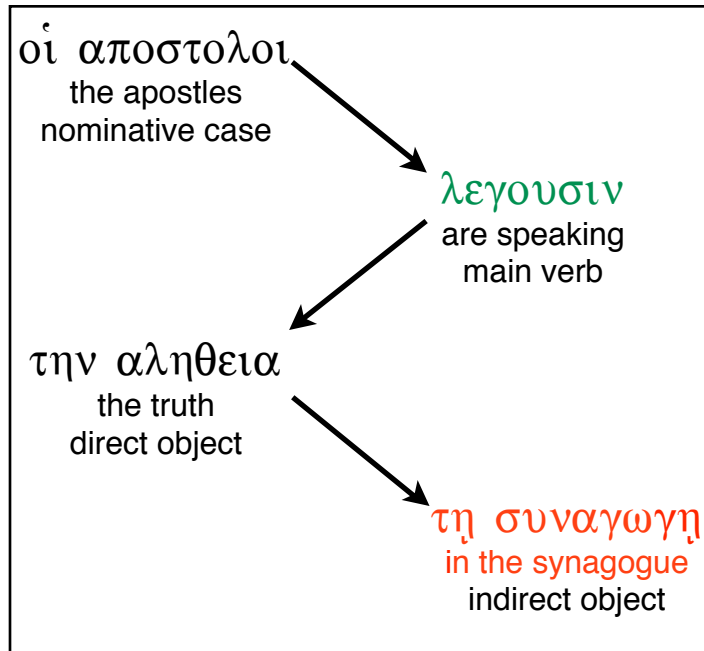
If a noun is in the **dative case** it identifies it as the indirect object.

ὁ ἄνθρωπος γράφει τὴν ἐπιστολὴν **τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ.**  
The man is writing the letter **to the church.**

I think of it as a ricochet. The subject (nominative case) initiates the action which is directed at the direct object (accusative case). The action bounces off the direct object and hits the indirect object (dative case).



Language is much more nuanced than the ricochet of a bullet. Here are some other examples.



To get us going, we will use the following prepositions with the dative.

**“to” “in” “with” “by”**

## Genitive Case (Possession)

If a noun is in the **genitive case** it shows possession.

ὁ λογος θεου  
the word of God  
(= God's Word)

We will use the keyword

**“of”**

with the genitive case.

The keyword “of” is just to get us off the runway. The genitive is capable of great feats. It can do much more than show possession. We will explore this when we get into the Greek text.

### **Don't Forget The Big Picture**

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Here is a summary of the four primary Greek cases.

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Remember: every noun will have:

**Case** (which tells us how it functions in the sentence)

**Number** (which tells us if it is singular or plural)

**Gender** (which tells us if it is masculine, feminine or neuter.)

The possible variations of case, number and gender are as follows:

Case	Number	Gender
<b>N</b> ominative	<b>S</b> ingular	<b>M</b> asculine
<b>G</b> enitive		<b>F</b> eminine
<b>D</b> ative	<b>P</b> lural	<b>N</b> euter
<b>A</b> ccusative		

The main differences between Greek and English are summarized in the chart below.

Comparison of Greek and English

	Case	Number	Gender
English	depends on word order	much like Greek	only a few nouns declare their gender
Greek	depends on morphology (changed forms)	much like English	all nouns declare their gender

That's it for noun syntax. On to noun morphology!