

# Functions of Nouns

The following is a partial list of some of the functions that nouns can have in a sentence. When composing or analyzing sentences in German or English, it is critically important that every noun/pronoun be identified based on its function. Here are some clues to help recognize the functions of nouns/pronouns:

## Subject (das Subjekt): nominative case (Nominativ)

- The person or element that is performing the action of the verb is called the *subject*. The subject is the element in the sentence with which the verb has grammatical agreement. The do-er, perpetrator, actor, performer, or that which is responsible for carrying out the event in the sentence is the subject. To find the subject of a sentence, find the verb and then find who or what is 'verbing'.

*Sylvia is taking out the garbage.*

*Do you have any money?*

*Where are my glasses?*

*They are in Greece this summer.*

*Does this picture strike your fancy?*

*Where did Rufus leave his books?*

*Who will help me?*

*That was an interesting proposition.*

*No one explained that to me.*

*Sally always sends her friends a card on their birthday.*

- In German, the subject always takes the nominative case, but there is never a guarantee that the subject is in first position. *Einen neuen Wagen hat die Familie endlich gekauft.*
- The subject is also that element which 'exists' when used with verbs denoting 'states of being' such as be, become, remain, appear as, etc.

*The students were seldom angry.*

*Despite the glacial action many stones remained on the mountainside.*

*In her twenties, the rather ugly girl became a strikingly beautiful young woman.*

## Direct Object (das direkte Objekt): accusative case (Akkusativ)

- The element in the sentence that the subject is acting on is called the *direct object*. The direct object is the person or thing to which the action is being directed. The subject transfers the action of the verb to the direct object. The direct object is never connected into the sentence via some mitigating word such as a preposition, rather it is acted upon 'directly' hence the term 'direct' object. To discover if there is a direct object in the sentence, find the verb and then see if there is someone or something being 'verbed'.

*We washed the dog last night.*

*Did you bring me any ice cream?*

*I hate this work.*

*Where do you keep your money?*

*Sharon has a beautiful new car.*

*Why did they leave that old house?*

*You shouldn't have driven your car off the bridge.*

- In German, the direct object nearly always takes the accusative case. There are a few instances where the direct object will take the dative, but this is only with a few selected verbs called (appropriately) dative verbs. When in doubt, one should assume that the direct object takes the accusative case. It is probably best to call "dative direct objects" "object of a dative verb."

*Ich habe dem alten Mann geholfen. (helfen takes a dative object.)*

*Wir möchten dir für das teure Geschenk danken. (danken takes a dative object.)*

## Beneficiary (das indirekte Objekt): dative case (Dativ)

- The person who receives the direct object is called a *beneficiary*. Beneficiaries are found in sentences where the verb indicates an action of 'giving', 'telling', or 'showing'. To find if there is a beneficiary in the sentence, look for the verb and determine if it has the meaning of 'giving', 'telling', or 'showing'. Then find the person who is being given, told, or shown something. That person is the beneficiary.

*The committee is forwarding us the report. (forwarding has the notion of 'giving'.)*

*He often pours her a cup of coffee before she gets up. (pouring conveys 'giving'.)*

*They told their son the good news about his scholarship.*

- Beneficiaries sometimes show up after the words 'to' and 'for' when the sense of the verb means 'giving', 'telling', or 'showing'.

*Would you please write a letter to the chairperson?  
I've prepared quite a long list of names for you.*

*Don't give any more treats to that dog!  
Can you explain the results to me?*

- Notice in all of these examples of beneficiaries, there is also a direct object in each sentence. In German, the beneficiary takes the dative case. Since two of the meanings associated with the dative are 'to someone' and 'for someone,' German does not need to include the words 'to' or 'for' when expressing the beneficiary.

*Könnten Sie bitte dem Vorsitzenden einen Brief schreiben?  
Ich habe dir eine ziemlich lange Namensliste vorbereitet.*

*Gib dem Hund keine Leckerbissen mehr!  
Kannst du mir bitte die Ergebnisse erklären?*

### Predicate Noun (Predikatnomen):      nominative case (Nominativ)

- A noun that is equal to, or renames the subject, is called a *predicate noun*. The predicate noun usually appears after the verb. The predicate noun can never be the object of a preposition and will always be in the nominative case. Predicate nouns can only be used when the verb is intransitive (no direct object in the sentence). The predicate noun is also referred to as a predicate noun.

*My brother is a good businessman.*

*This seems like a good idea.*

- Predicate nouns frequently appear with 'equational' verbs such as *be*, *remain*, *become* or *look like*.  
*The old train station remained an eyesore for years.*      *You look like a million dollars.*

- Often, predicate nouns appear after the word *as*.  
*She was serving as the president of the department.*

- Predicate nouns appear after the verb *heißen* in German.  
*Mein Vater heißt Heinrich.*

- Predicate nouns that name people and are used without adjectives usually take no indefinite article in German.  
*Meine Tante ist jetzt wieder Studentin geworden.*      *Otto wurde letztes Jahr Zahnarzt.*

### Object of a Preposition:      accusative, dative, genitive (depending on the preposition)

- A noun (or pronoun) connected into a sentence via a preposition is called the *object of a preposition*. These nouns can never be a subject, direct object, predicate noun. These nouns follow their preposition and always take a case other than nominative. Prepositions in the following sentences are marked *bold face*.

*She rode her bike with him.*

*The monks plant lilies along the river every year.*

*The cat is lying on the bed.*

*Don't spend so much time grumbling over the answer.*

*I need to go to the store now.*

*She is thinking about her new boyfriend.*

- Unfortunately, the term Object of a Preposition is very generic and gives very little information concerning the true function of the noun. When analyzing the function of a noun, it is more accurate to include the specific function that the object of that preposition indicates:

**temporal** (time)

*The merchandise will arrive in a week.*

*(on Thursday, within a month)*

**locative** (location)

*She wants to repair the tile over the bathtub.*

*(under the counter, in her kitchen)*

**comitative** (accompaniment)

*The children visited the zoo with their father.*

*(along with a friend)*

**destinative** (destination)

*The Martians sent their messages to Earth.*

*(toward Andromeda)*

**instrumental** (tool)

*We sent a signal with a mirror.*

*(by means of telepathy)*

**causative** (reason)

*They became frightened because of the lightning.*

*(due to the wind)*

**figurative** (abstract)

*He's waiting for his wife.*

*She's thinking about her husband.*

- The case of the object of a preposition is dependent on the preposition. The student of German must simply memorize which case each preposition governs. There is no logic or predictable pattern to this. For example, the preposition 'mit' (with) governs dative, however the preposition 'ohne' (without) governs accusative.

## Other Functions of Nouns:

- This is by no means an exhaustive list of the functions of nouns. There are many more functions that are not as evident as the subject, direct object, object of a preposition, etc. For the student of German, it is important to know also that there are functions of nouns which have no exact equivalent in English. Some examples of these are listed below:

### Accusative of Span

(shows distance travelled)

*Er fuhr die Straße hinunter.*

*Sie lief die Treppe herauf.*

### Accusative of Goal

(shows destination with certain prepositions)

*Der Zug ist gerade in den Tunnel gefahren.*

*Jemand ist in das Haus hereingekommen.*

*Die Kinder sind in den See gesprungen.*

### Accusative of Duration and Repetition

(shows length of time or repeated action)

*Wir müssen den ganzen Tag arbeiten.*

*Ich habe eine Stunde auf dich gewartet.*

*Jeden Montag erscheint die neuste Ausgabe.*

*Sie hat alle zwei Wochen ihre Mutter besucht.*

### Dative Experiencer

(shows perception detected by animate beings)

*Es geht uns jetzt sehr gut.*

*Der Fuß tut mir weh.*

*Das Bier schmeckt den Ausländern nicht.*

### Dative of Place

(shows location with certain prepositions)

*Die Bergleute arbeiten im Tunnel.*

*Jemand bleibt in dem Haus.*

*Die Kinder spielen in dem See.*

### Dative Locator

(shows ownership of body parts and clothing)

*Wir müssen uns die Hände waschen.*

*Warum kämmst du dir die Haare so oft.*

*Er hat sich die Haare schneiden lassen.*

### Dative Possessor (with verb 'gehören')

(shows ownership)

*Diese Bücher gehören mir nicht.*

*Wem gehört das Zeug hier?*

- In German and English, every noun (and pronoun) used within the context of a sentence has a function. The function of each noun determines the case of that noun. Student of grammar who analyze German or English sentences must be able to name the function of every noun and pronoun in every sentence. Student who compose written material in German must be aware of the function of each noun and pronoun that they write. Students must then apply the appropriate case to each noun and pronoun in written (and spoken) German.

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## Topic (this is *not* a noun function):

- A word of caution is extended to those who wish to focus on the informational focus of a sentence. This is a semantic question rather than a grammatical one. What the sentence is about is called the *topic* and does not offer much help in determining the function of nouns. The topic can be nearly any element in the sentence and does not govern a noun's grammatical function. The topic is determined by the context of the discourse regardless of grammatical function.

*Did you guys take care of the food? - Yes, we ordered a pizza.*

The topics are 'food' (object of a preposition) and 'pizza' (direct object).

*What about Ralph? - Don't worry. I already gave him the money.*

The topic is 'Ralph.' 'Ralph' is a predicate noun, and 'him' is a beneficiary.

*Let's go swimming! - I hate swimming. it clogs my ears!*

The topic is 'swimming' which is the verb in the first sentence, the direct object in the next and the subject in the last.

*I thought you got rid of your old furniture. - No, you're sitting on it.*

The topic is 'furniture,' a direct object in one sentence and a location (object of a preposition) in the other.

- In German, the topic is sometimes marked with an adverb such as 'nämlich.'
- Wir sind nämlich nach Basel gefahren. (Basel is the topic and functions as the object of preposition.)*
- Dieser Mensch, den du meinst, ist nämlich mein Freund. (Freund is the topic and functions as a predicate noun.)*
- The topic, whether in German or English, has no bearing on case grammar.
- The topic is not inherently related to the subject or direct object, etc. Do not confuse the notion of *topic* with *subject*.