

DECLENSION OF NOUNS

In English, the relationship between words in a sentence depends primarily on word order. The difference between *the god desires the girl* and *the girl desires the god* is immediately apparent to us. Latin does not depend on word order for basic meaning, but on inflections (changes in the endings of words) to indicate the function of words within a sentence.

Thus *the god desires the girl* can be expressed in Latin *deus puellam desiderat, puellam deus desiderat, or desiderat puellam deus* without any change in basic meaning. The accusative ending of *puellam* shows that the girl is being acted upon (i.e., is the object of the verb) and is not the actor (i.e., the subject of the verb). Similarly, the nominative form of *deus* shows that the god is the actor (agent) in the sentence, not the object of the verb.

The inflection of nouns is called **declension**. The individual declensions are called **cases**, and together they form the case system. Nouns, pronouns, adjectives and participles are declined in six Cases: *nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, and vocative* and two Numbers (*singular* and *plural*). (The *locative*, an archaic case, existed in the classical period only for a few words).

- . **Nominative** Indicates the *subject* of a sentence. (The *boy* loves the book).
- . **Genitive** Indicates *possession*. (The boy loves *the girl's* book).
- . **Dative** Indicates *indirect object*. (The boy gave the book *to the girl*).
- . **Accusative** Indicates *direct object*. (The boy loves *the book*).
- . **Ablative** Answers the questions *from where? by what means? how? from what cause? in what manner? when? or where?*
 The ablative is used to show separation (from), instrumentality or means (by, with), accompaniment (with), or locality (at). It is often used with a preposition: *The boy went to the store with the girl.*
- . **Vocative** Used for direct address: *Son, pick up the book.*
- . **Locative** Also answers the question *where? in what place?*
 In classical Latin the locative was nearly obsolete, replaced by the ablative of location, and was confined to cities, small islands, and a few others words (*Romae*, at Rome; *domi*, at home; *ruri*, in the country; *humi*, on the ground).

Because the possible relationships between words far exceed six or seven cases, Latin uses other devices to vary meaning:

- . Prepositions are common with the accusative and ablative cases, with special meanings (*trans flumen*, across the river; *coram populo*, in the presence of the people).

The cases themselves serve different functions, the genitive, dative, and ablative being particularly rich in meaning.

For example, even in English the phrase "man of steel" does not imply literal possession (i.e., it doesn't mean "the steel's man"), but is a genitive of description. Similarly *puella magnae sapientiae* ("a girl of great wisdom") is a genitive of description, not of possession.

- . Verbs sometimes "govern" or require the use of a particular case, often with idiomatic meaning. These must be learned as they are encountered.