



# Pāli Summer 2020

## Declensions

In English, the word order and the use of prepositions give important information about the meaning of a sentence. In Pāli, suffixes (endings) are used to accomplish this.

When we add bits to a word to change its grammatical function, we call those additions inflections. In the English word, “walked,” ‘ed’ is the inflection that indicates past tense. With the words, “book” and “books,” the final letter ‘s’ signals plural. When a noun, adjective, pronoun, or numeral is inflected, the change to the word is called a “declension.” When a verb is inflected, the change is called a “conjugation.”

Declensions can show whether a word is the subject or the object of a sentence. They also tell us how many there are of something, and the gender of a word.

Each declension has three parts: case, number, and gender. The number can be singular or plural, gender can be masculine, feminine, or neuter. Note here that gender refers to ‘grammatical gender’, not a natural gender. Cases impart important grammatical information to words, specifying their role within a sentence or clause.

In English, nouns are inflected to indicate their number. Examples are: book/books, kiss/kisses, woman/women, child/children, mouse/mice.

English, unlike many other Western languages, rarely uses gendered nouns. There is no grammatical gender assigned to them. Nouns like ‘house’, ‘book’, and ‘car’ have no gender at all. Although English has specific words to indicate natural gender, like ‘father/mother/parent’ or ‘goose/gander’, the category of grammatical gender is absent.

In Pāli, gender defines which set of endings a word receives. It does not usually indicate a natural gender. In fact, sometimes Pāli synonyms can have different genders.



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### *The Pāli Cases*

In the sentence “Jill drinks water,” ‘Jill’ is the subject and ‘water’ is the object of the verb ‘drinks’. Jill is the actor. She’s the one who does something. In English we know this because ‘Jill’ appears at the beginning of the sentence. In Pāli, the subject of a sentence takes suffixes in what is known as the nominative case. As Pāli students we might say the word ‘Jill’ is, “in the nominative case” in this sentence.

The word ‘water’ in this sentence isn’t doing anything, but something is being done to it. It is being acted upon. Words that the subject acts upon are called direct objects, and in Pāli they take suffixes in the accusative case.

In the sentence “Jill loves music,” ‘Jill’ is in the nominative case and ‘music’ is in the accusative. Music is the object of her love. Note that if the English word order of this sentence were to be reversed, “Music loves Jill,” the sentence would be meaningless. English word order is very important. In Pāli, word order is less important. Since subject and object words have their own endings affixed to them, they can be moved around within a sentence without changing their roles.

We can see nominative and accusative cases working in English with personal pronouns, which can be said to be declined. Consider, “I phoned Deborah” and, “Deborah phoned me.” Here, ‘I’ and ‘me’ refer to the same person. The words have been inflected to reflect their roles. ‘I’ functions as the subject (nominative case) and ‘me’ as the object (accusative case).

“He texted her, but she did not text him back.” Here we have he/him, and her/she functioning in the same way. Using the correct ‘case’ of a pronoun is part of good grammar.



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“Jack’s pants are red.”

In this sentence, we are talking about the pants that belong to Jack. Jack owns the pants, in this sentence they are the subject. In English we indicate this possession with either an apostrophe, as in this case, or with the word “of,” as in the example, “The leg of the table.” In Pāli, the possessive has its own set of endings which are known as the genitive case.

“Michael teaches Kevin English.” (or) “Michael teaches English to Kevin.”

In this sentence, since English is the word acted upon, it is the direct object (accusative), but what about Kevin? Michael, the subject, acted upon the object for Kevin. Kevin here is the indirect object of the verb. Another example: “Billy (subject) gave a book (direct object) to Bob (indirect object).” We define the indirect object thus: To whom or for whom something is said, shown, done, or given. In Pāli, indirect objects are usually in the dative case.

“The cat jumped on the table.”

Here we introduce prepositions, and we see that prepositions also have objects. These objects are called the object of the preposition (or prepositional object). In this sentence it is ‘table’, ‘on’ being the preposition. A preposition and its object together is called a prepositional phrase. Prepositions can show relationships such as time – in an hour, on Monday – or place – in the car, on the ground, among other relationships such as the instrument used – by phone, by car.

In Pāli, the prepositional phrase “on the table” is often expressed using the locative case. The locative case is used when the location of an object is indicated.



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“I went home by train.”

In this sentence ‘by train’ is a prepositional phrase comprised of the preposition ‘by’ and the object of the preposition, ‘train’. In Pāli this type of prepositional phrase is expressed in the instrumental case.

“I searched the house from top to bottom for my Pāli textbook.”

Here, there are two prepositional phrases describing the action of the diligent Pāli student. ‘From top’ indicates the point of origin of the search and where the student moves from. This is expressed in the ablative case in Pāli. ‘To bottom’ is the direction she is moving towards. Movement towards something or someplace is given in the dative case.

In Pāli the object of prepositional phrases can fall into either the genitive, dative, accusative, ablative, locative, or instrumental case.

When directly addressing a person or a group, the vocative case is used. When Hamlet says, “There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy”, ‘Horatio’ is in the vocative case. Note that a vocative never begins a sentence, but falls within it.

Pāli has eight cases, classically given in the following order:

Nominative-Accusative-Instrumental-Dative-Ablative-Genitive-Locative-Vocative.

However, in our textbooks they are given in different orders. Case endings for genitive/dative and ablative/instrumental are often the same, it can be helpful to group these together.

Case endings are added to what is called the ‘stem’ of a word. Words are listed in the dictionary in the ‘stem form’, which is the form of the word before the declension suffix is added.