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The Case for Cases: Easy as One, Two, Three

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In trying to devise a better teaching method to clarify case usage for students I recently produced a simple learning device which draws upon the students' knowledge of and interest in football and its heroes, enhances their visualization of the action conveyed by case usage (both in real life and in language), and also involves them kinesthetically.

By folding a sheet of 8" × 11" paper into three rather equal segments, we can form a simple though very useful teaching aid. We will start with basic sentence structure.

Each of you hold your sheet by the shorter sides and fold the right side under about one third (3½ inches) and crease it flat. Now fold the left side under the same amount and flatten the edges so the resultant piece is approximately 1/3 the original width. Turn the sheet over to the right and at the bottom center write "the", then 2/3 up toward the top write "the thrower throws", and directly above that draw a stick figure with right arm cocked back to throw, left arm extended ahead of him and legs spread apart and firmly planted. This is Ty Detmer, the all-American passer--write his name in parentheses below "the thrower" and write the number "1" at the top center of this part. (This will be the left-hand "wing" of the paper when it is spread out flat--see examples 1 & 2.)

Now turn the sheet over to the right and at the bottom center write "big" and 2/3 up the words "the wide receiver" and above this a stick man running forward with hands outstretched. This is Jeff Frandsen; write his name just below "the wide receiver". (No number here yet.) (See examples 1 & 2.)

Next fold the two sides of this sheet inward together so the picture of the wide receiver is hidden and the new fold is pointing away from you. Flatten this edge with your fingers. You realize, of course, that you can't really flatten a wide receiver this easily in real life. Turn the paper over to the left and at the bottom center write "picture", and 2/3 up write "the ball" and right above that draw a one-inch long football. At the top center write the number "2". Keeping the center folded, open the two wings so you see 1 and 2 only. Our sentence reads: "The thrower throws the ball", a very important action for scoring. We can also close the right wing behind and we have the shorter sentence "The thrower throws". And by opening the sheet completely we produce our three-part sentence, the big
picture, "The thrower throws the wide receiver the ball". While this is excellent grammar and syntax it has no relevance to life as you can see by looking at your picture. You've all seen an activity like that--the wide receiver running eagerly after the ball that is ahead of him. Does the play click? Of course not. But if we were to rearrange the sentence into the "real-life" sequence of 1, 2, 3, we get "The thrower throws the ball the wide receiver" and we have a very humorous sentence--unless we add "to" after ball. This now reveals two very important linguistic facts that are crucial to our understanding:

1) The short form of the sentence doesn't match the real-life sequence.
2) The "real-life" sequence requires an extra word (to) in order to make sense.

Thus we see we are dealing with a sort of time warp in normal word order, or a codified sentence. As long as we recognize this shorthand arrangement we are all right, however, and to note this aspect we will put a number three at the top of the center section resulting in 1 3 2.

With this final notation we are ready to discuss the role of case and syntax in language. #1 indicates the mover of the sentence, the subject (called nominative or "naming" case). "This is the thrower, Ty Detmer", we can record in the lower third of section one and recognize that the words "this", "the thrower", and "Ty Detmer" are all nominative since each word refers to our one stick figure. This tells us also that some verbs can only be used with one case, the nominative, and that the verb choice limits the case possibilities, a very helpful realization. Thus the sentence "He is my friend." (due to "is") also only has one case since friend and he are the same person.

If we open the right wing as well (still keeping the folded center closed) we find we have added a second separate picture and therefore a second "case"; the object case that receives the action and is referred to as "accusative". This is the second most likely case to be used, thus the second one we learn. It is also helpful to know that having two cases in a sentence is the most common structure, thus most verbs are accusative or transitive (meaning they transfer action to an object).

Opening the sheet to its full 11-inch width now reveals a third case, the "receiver" case, the indirect object or dative, the person indirectly receiving the action. We also see that some transitive verbs can extend into third case involvement. Other verbs, such as "give", "donate", "send" and a few others fit in the "dative" verb category. Thus our knowledge of football helps us "see" grammar more readily and more clearly.

Now, everyone knows a football game is incomplete without a cheer, so let's create one for our "game". Here it is:
Verbs cause case 1, verbs cause case 2, verbs cause case 3. Yeh!
Let us now apply this to a foreign language, German, and see how useful the 1, 2, 3 numbering can be.

For case 1 German uses a one-stroke letter "r" to form the word "der", (the: the thrower = der Werfer). For case 2 it uses a two-stroke letter "n". Thus "der Ball" changes to "den Ball" so we can recognize the object role vs. the subject role of "der Werfer". This two-stroke letter also enables us to change word order (thus greater flexibility) without losing sight of roles: "Den Ball wirft der Werfer."

And would you care to guess how many strokes the letter has that shows third case usage? Three, of course!--"m", "dem". So "dem Fänger" is our resultant form. This is especially helpful when we read or hear German because the nominative, dative sequence "der Werfer wirft dem Fänger" warns us the writer or speaker has more to share so we continue reading or listening to "catch" the object promised--"den Ball".

Now we can also rearrange the sentence to read "Dem Fänger wirft der Werfer den Ball" and by noting the strokes of the final letter of each determiner or article "the", we know the real-life sequence, despite altered linguistic sequence.

To be sure this becomes more complex when we add two more genders and plural forms, yet this "logical" basis covers the largest group and gives us a solid basis to work with.

The three-part sheet can also be applied to: 1) the three basic genders of German and their respective plurals; 2) the difference between a) active, b) true passive and c) false passive--the latter fitting between the two extremes; 3) indicative, subjunctive II and the more restricted written form, subjunctive I--again the "odd" one in the middle where it can be "folded" away, and 4) even the awesome participial or long attribute construction. All of these can more readily be "seen" and thus understood faster by this method.

Try it, you'll like it!

(See example charts for details on following pages.)
Example 1 - The Folded Sheet

Example 2 - The Open Sheet

The thrower throws
the wide receiver
the ball

the big picture

Example 3 - Plurals

1 der
plural adds "e"

2 das
plural adds "er"

Group 4
with "el - en - er"
adds nothing for plural

Group 5
(foreign words & "odd" forms from above)
Example 4 - Active/Passive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cause</strong> (process)</td>
<td><strong>Effect</strong> (result)</td>
<td><strong>Oblique cause</strong> (process - )</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>He conquers the mountain.</td>
<td>The mountain is conquered.</td>
<td>The mountain is being conquered.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Active

Passive

Example 5 - Indicative/Subjunctive

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normal (Indicative)</th>
<th>Special Subjunctive</th>
<th>General Subjunctive</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>He says, &quot;God is with you.&quot;</td>
<td>He says, &quot;God be with you.&quot;</td>
<td>He says, &quot;If only God were with you.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Er sagt: &quot;Gott ist mit euch.&quot;</td>
<td>Er sagt: &quot;Gott sei mit euch.&quot;</td>
<td>Er sagt: &quot;Wenn Gott nur mit euch.&quot;</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example 6

1. der Herr
2. von uns
3. besucht

(This is the codified, shorthand form - 1 3 2)

1. der Herr, [der] von uns besucht [wurde]

(This is the real-life conversational form - 1 2 3)