

## Inflection

As we saw in the textbook, language uses inflection to mark grammatical information of various sorts. Some of this information, such as the contrast between past and nonpast or singular and plural, is familiar to English speakers. However, as we will see in this section, inflection can also be used to mark less familiar sorts of contrasts.

## Number

**Number** is the morphological category that expresses contrasts involving countable quantities. The simplest number contrast consists of a two-way distinction between singular (one) and plural (more than one). This is the contrast found in English.

Although most languages express number, not all do. In Nancowry (spoken in India's Nicobar Islands), for example, number is not marked on nouns at all. A sentence such as 1) is therefore ambiguous since *nót* 'pig' can refer to one or more pigs.

1)  
sák    nó't    ?in    tsi?áj.  
spear pig    the    we  
'We speared the pig(s).'

In Inuktitut (spoken in northern Canada), on the other hand, there is a three-way number contrast involving singular, dual (two and only two), and plural (more than two).

2)  
iglu    'a house'  
iglu-k    'two houses'  
iglu-t    'three or more houses'

## Noun class

Some languages divide nouns into classes based on shared phonological and/or semantic properties. For example, the so-called gender system of French divides nouns into two classes—masculine and feminine. (Despite the

noun class names, the gender system of French is not based on a male–female contrast, since it applies even to nouns with inanimate referents: *monde* ‘world’ and *livre* ‘book’ are masculine, while *chaise* ‘chair’ and *lune* ‘moon’ are feminine.) Other languages have far more elaborate noun classes—Latin recognized five major classes, for instance, and the Bantu language SiSwati distinguishes among more than a dozen.

**Noun class** can be marked in a variety of ways. In some languages, the determiner (the equivalent of words such as *the* and *a*) is inflected to indicate the class of the noun. For example, singular nouns in French take the definite determiner *le* if masculine but *la* if feminine. In other languages, inflectional affixes are used to indicate the gender class of the noun. For instance, Russian employs one set of suffixes for nouns in the feminine, animate class and another set for nouns in the masculine, animate class. The examples in Table 1 show the inflection for different classes of nouns that function as the subject of a sentence.

Class	Suffix	Example	
Masculine	-Ø	dom	‘house’
Feminine	-a	ulic-a	‘street’
Neuter	-o	tjuvstv-o	‘sensation’

SiSwati makes use of prefixes to distinguish among its nouns classes. (Tone is not represented in the examples in Table 2.)

Prefix	Description of class	Example	
um(u)-	persons	um-fana	‘boy’
li-	body parts, fruit	li-dvolo	‘knee’
s(i)-	instruments	si-tja	‘plate’
in-	animals	in-ja	‘dog’
bu-	abstract properties	bu-bi	‘evil’
pha-	locations	pha-ndle	‘outside’

## Case

As noted in the book itself, another type of inflectional contrast associated with nouns in many languages involves **case**—a category that

encodes information about an element's grammatical role (subject, direct object, and so on). Some cases that are common in world languages are nominative for the subject, accusative for the direct object, genitive for a possessor, and dative for a recipient. As an illustration of this, consider the set of related nominal forms (called a **nominal paradigm** or **declension**) in Table 3 for the Turkish word *ev* 'house'. The contrasts represented in the Turkish case system are intermediate in complexity compared to Finnish, which has fifteen distinct case categories, and Rumanian, which has only two.

Table 3 Turkish case		
Case	Form	Type of element that it marks
Nominative	ev-Ø	the subject
Accusative	ev-i	the direct object
Dative	ev-e	the recipient
Genitive	ev-in	the possessor
Locative	ev-de	a place or location
Ablative	ev-den	direction away from somewhere

The following sentences illustrate the use of these case suffixes (**NOM** = nominative case; **ACC** = accusative case; **DAT** = dative case; **GEN** = genitive case; **LOC** = locative case; **ABL** = ablative case).

3)

a. Adam-Ø ev-i Ahmed-e gæster-di.  
 Man-NOM house-ACC Ahmed-DAT show-PST.  
 'The man showed the house to Ahmed.'

b. Ev-in rengi-Ø ma:vidir.  
 house-GEN color-NOM blue  
 'The house's color is blue.'

c. Adam-Ø ev-de kaldı.  
 man-NOM house-LOC stayed  
 'The man stayed in the house.'

d. Adam-Ø ev-den tşikti.  
 man-NOM house-ABL went  
 'The man went from the house.'

In the final sentence, *adam* 'man' bears the zero ending of the nominative to indicate that it is the subject of the sentence, while *ev* 'house' bears the ablative suffix indicating the place from which the man went.

In many languages, the morpheme carrying information about case also carries information about number and noun class as well. In Latin, for instance, the suffix *-a* is used for nominative, singular nouns in the first noun class (e.g. *filia* 'daughter'), whereas *-us* is used for nominative, singular nouns in the second class (e.g. *hortus* 'garden'). A partial declensional paradigm for Latin can be seen in Table 4. (Latin has five major cases and five gender classes.)

Table 4 Case, number, and gender in Latin				
Case	Singular		Plural	
	Class 1	Class 2	Class 1	Class 2
Nominative	-a	-us	-ae	-i
Dative	-ae	-i	-arum	-orum
Accusative	-ae	-o	-is	-is
Ablative	-am	-um	-as	-os
Genitive	-a	-o	-is	-is

Case is most often manifested as affixation on nouns and pronouns, as in Turkish. In some languages, though, it is expressed through changes in the form of the determiner. (Like Latin, German inflection simultaneously expresses number, noun class, and case.)

4)

German

*Der* Mann sieht *den* Hund.  
 The-NOM.MASC.SG man sees the-ACC.MASC.SG dog

'The man sees the dog.'

Because case provides a reliable way to distinguish between subjects and direct objects, there is no need to rely on word order for this purpose. For this reason, languages with case often have relatively free word order. (In the following example, **NOM** = nominative case, **ACC** = accusative case, PST = past.)

5)

*Japanese*

a. subject–direct object–verb order:

Yumiko–**ga** sono kodomo–**o** sikat–ta.  
 Yumiko–**NOM** that child–**ACC** scold–PST  
 ‘Yumiko scolded the child.’

b. direct object–subject–verb order:

Sono kodomo–**o** Yumiko–**ga** sikat–ta.  
 that child–**ACC** Yumiko–**NOM** scold–PST  
 ‘Yumiko scolded the child.’

**Ergative case marking**

Some languages use case marking to encode grammatical contrasts quite unlike those found in familiar European languages. In the Australian language Yidin<sup>Y</sup>, for instance, the case system groups together the subject of an **intransitive verb** and the direct object of a **transitive verb** (both of which receive a zero ending) while using a special marker (*-ngu*) for the subject of a transitive verb. (A verb is transitive if it takes a direct object; otherwise, it is intransitive. We will talk more about this in Chapter 5.)

6)

a. Yidin<sup>Y</sup> sentence with a transitive verb:

Wagudya–**ngu** dyugi–**∅** gundal.  
 man–**ERG** tree–**ABS** is cutting.  
 ‘The man is cutting the tree.’

b. Yidin<sup>Y</sup> sentence with an intransitive verb:

Wagudya–**∅** gundal  
 man–**ABS** is cutting  
 ‘The man is cutting.’

In this type of system, the case associated with the subject of the transitive verb, *wagudya* ‘man’ in *6a*), is called the **ergative**. The case associated with the direct object (*dyugi* ‘tree’ in the first sentence) and with the subject of an intransitive verb (*wagudya* in the second sentence) is called the **absolutive**.

Ergative case marking is found in a varied set of languages, including Basque (in Spain), Tagalog (in the Philippines), Tabassaran (in the Caucasus), Inuktitut (in northern Canada and Greenland), and Central Alaskan Yupik (in southwestern Alaska). Ergative case marking is far less common than the nominative–accusative pattern, which groups together the subjects of transitive and intransitive verbs, distinguishing them from direct objects. Nominative–accusative case marking is found in Turkish, German, Russian, Japanese, Korean, and many other languages.

### English nouns and pronouns

At one time, English nouns and determiners (words such as *the*) were inflected for case (see discussion in Chapter 7). In modern English, however, the only remnant of this case system is the genitive (possessive) suffix –’s, used to mark possessors (*the man’s book*). There is some reason to think though that –’s is more of a clitic than a suffix in contemporary English. Unlike suffixes, which must attach to the head with which they are associated, –’s can be separated from the head. This happens in *the Queen of England’s crown*, for instance, where the possessor is *Queen* but the genitive shows up at the end of the phrase of which it is the head.

Neither nouns nor determiners are inflected to mark grammatical relations such as subject and direct object in English.

7)

- a. *the man* in subject position  
The man left. The man read the book.
- b. *the man* in direct object position  
A noise frightened the man.

However, English pronouns do exhibit case contrasts, distinguishing a nominative (for subjects), an accusative (for direct objects), and a genitive (for possessors), as shown in Table 5.

8)

- Nominative: He left. He read the book.
- Accusative: A noise frightened him.
- Genitive: Sam took his car.

These contrasts follow the nominative–accusative pattern: the same form of the pronoun is used for the subject of an intransitive verb (*leave*) and the subject of a transitive verb (*read*), and this form differs from the one used for direct objects.

Nominative	Genitive	Accusative
I	me	my
you	you	your
he	him	his
she	her	her
it	it	its
we	us	our
they	them	their

For more on case, go to the advanced material on [case].

### Person and number agreement

A widely attested type of verbal inflection in human language involves **person**—a category that typically distinguishes among the first person (the speaker), the second person (the addressee), and the third person (anyone else). In many languages, the verb is marked for both the person and number (singular or plural) of the subject. When one category is inflected for properties (such as person and number) of another, the first category is said to exhibit agreement with the second.

A quite rich system of **agreement** is found in Italian, where the verb agrees with the subject. The contrasts shown in Table 6 are found in the present tense. (The set of inflected forms associated with a verb is called a **verbal paradigm** or a **conjugation**.)

	Singular		Plural	
1 <sup>st</sup> person	parl- <u>o</u>	'I speak'	parl- <u>ano</u>	'we speak'
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	parl- <u>i</u>	'you speak'	parl- <u>iamo</u>	'you speak'
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	parl- <u>a</u>	'she, he speaks'	parl- <u>ate</u>	'they speak'

Because inflectional affixes in languages such as Italian provide so much information about the person and number of the subject phrase, this element

need not be overtly present. Thus, *parla italiano* 'speaks Italian' can make up a complete sentence with the meaning 'He/she speaks Italian'.

Modern English has a much more impoverished system of person and number agreement in the verb, and an inflectional affix is used only for the third person singular in the nonpast tense (see Table 7).

Table 7 The English verbal paradigm (nonpast forms)		
	Singular	Plural
1 <sup>st</sup> person	I speak	we speak
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	you speak	you speak
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	she, he or it speaks	they speak

Except for commands, formal English differs from Italian and many other languages with rich verbal inflection in requiring an overtly expressed subject in a complete sentence. Thus, the sentence in 9), which would be acceptable in Italian, is ungrammatical in English.

9)

\*Speaks English.

Different again is French, in which the written language shows a quite rich system of agreement, but the spoken language makes far fewer contrasts, as shown in Table 8.

Table 8 The French verbal paradigm (nonpast forms)			
	Singular		Plural
1 <sup>st</sup> person	Je parl-	e [paʁl]	Nous parl-ons [paʁlɔ̃]
2 <sup>nd</sup> person	Tu parl-	es [paʁl]	Vous parl-ez [paʁle]
3 <sup>rd</sup> person	Il/elle parl-	e [paʁl]	Ils/elles parl-ent [paʁl]

Notice that in the spoken language there are only two audible suffixes (first person plural *-ons* and second person plural *-ez*), which makes French more like English than Italian in terms of the poverty of its verbal inflection. And, like English and unlike Italian, French verbs require an overt subject.

In some languages, such as Swahili, the verb agrees not just with the subject but also with the direct object.

10)

Juma a- li- wa- piga watoto.



Juma 3SG.PST-3PL hit children  
 'Juma hit the children.'

In another Bantu language, Kinyarwanda, the verb can agree with up to four elements.

11)

Umugóre a- ra- bi- yí- mu- he -er -a.  
 woman 3SG.PRS 3SG[dog] 3SG[food] 3SG give for PROGRESSIVE  
 'The woman is giving it (food) to it (the dog) for him.'

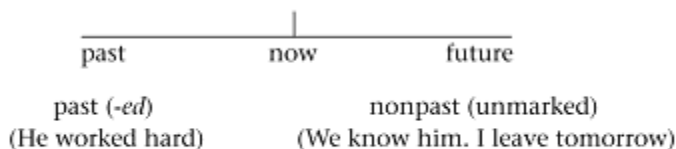
A second type of agreement, sometimes called **concord**, affects determiners and adjectives rather than verbs. A familiar example of concord comes from French, in which determiners and adjectives agree with the noun in number and gender.

12)

le garçon la fille les professeurs  
 the-MASC.SG boy the-FEM.SG girl the-PL teachers

## Tense

**Tense** is the category that encodes the time of an event with reference to the moment of speaking. It is useful to distinguish between semantic tense, which makes the usual three-way distinction among past, present, and future, and grammatical tense, which is concerned with how these semantic contrasts are morphologically expressed. Here there are many options. For example, Figure 1 shows that grammatical tense in English makes just a two-way inflectional contrast between past (for before the moment of speaking) and the nonpast, which can be used for both present and future events.



**Figure 1** Tense in English

The future is expressed noninflectionally with the help of a separate word (*will*).

In the Australian language Dyirbal, in contrast, there is a two-way inflectional distinction between future and nonfuture. As the following examples show, the nonfuture form can be used for both present and past events.

13)

- |           |             |           |                   |
|-----------|-------------|-----------|-------------------|
| <i>a.</i> | Future:     | <i>b.</i> | Nonfuture:        |
|           | bani-n      |           | bani-nu           |
|           | 'will come' |           | 'came, is coming' |

In Spanish and Lithuanian, in contrast, inflectional endings are used to express a three-way contrast involving past, present, and future.

14)

- |           | <i>Spanish</i>                                  | <i>Lithuanian</i>           |
|-----------|---|-----------------------------|
| <i>a.</i> | Juan habl-ó bien.<br>'John spoke well.'         | Dirb-au.<br>'I worked.'     |
| <i>b.</i> | Juan habl-a bien.<br>'John speaks well.'        | Dirb-u.<br>'I work.'        |
| <i>c.</i> | Juan habl-ar-á bien.<br>'John will speak well.' | Dirb-siu.<br>'I will work.' |

A still richer system of contrasts is found in the Bantu language ChiBemba, which uses its inflectional system to distinguish degrees of pastness and futurity. (In the examples in Table 9, the diacritics mark tone; affixes expressing tense contrasts are underlined.)

Table 9 Tense in ChiBemba	
Past	Future
Remote past (before yesterday) ba- <u>àl</u> i-bomb-ele 'They worked.'	Remote future (after tomorrow) ba- <u>ká</u> -bomba 'They'll work.'
Removed past (yesterday) ba- <u>àl</u> í-bomba 'They worked.'	Removed future (tomorrow) ba- <u>kà</u> -bomba 'They'll work.'
Near past (earlier today) ba- <u>àc</u> í-bomba 'They worked.'	Near future (later today) ba- <u>léé</u> -bomba 'They'll work.'
Immediate past(just happened) ba- <u>á</u> -bomba 'They worked.'	Immediate future (very soon) ba- <u>áláá</u> -bomba 'They'll work.'

## Aspect

**Aspect** is a category that provides information about an event with respect to contrasts such as complete versus ongoing. The auxiliary verbs *be* and *have* (see Chapter 5) are used to express aspect in English. The combination of *have* with the past participle of the verb (e.g. *She has written a book*) expresses the so-called perfective aspect, indicating that the event is complete. In contrast, *be* with the present participle of the verb (e.g. *She is writing a book*) indicates an ongoing event.

The combination of these aspects with tense and with each other gives the contrasts shown in Table 10.

Table 10 Some aspect contrasts in English	
Present (nonpast) perfective:	She has written a book.
Past perfective:	She had written a book.
Present (nonpast) progressive:	She is writing a book.
Past progressive:	She was writing a book.
Present (nonpast) perfective progressive:	She has been writing a book.
Past perfective progressive:	She had been writing a book.