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 be identified based on its function. Here are some clues to help recognize those functions:

**Subject (Agent):**

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.

*Sylvia* is taking out the garbage.  
*Where did Rufus* leave his books?  
*Do you* have any money?  
*Who* will help me?  
*Where are my glasses*?  
*That* was an interesting proposition.  
*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 (Patient):**

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*.

*We washed the dog last night._  
*Sharon has a beautiful new car._  
*Did you bring me any ice cream?*_  
*I hate this work._  
*Why did they leave that old house?*_  
*Where do you keep your money?*_  

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.)

**Indirect Object (Beneficiary):**

The person or animate being who receives the direct object is called an *indirect object*. Sometimes called beneficiaries, these elements are typically animate beings. The beneficiary is the element in a sentence that receives the direct object. Beneficiaries are found in sentences where the verb indicates in some way an action of giving or telling. Sentences with an indirect object usually contain a direct object as well.

_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._  
*(Note: They _informed their son of the good news. _son is a direct object, news is the object of a preposition)*

_Beneficiaries often show up after the words _to and _for when the sense of the verb means giving or telling. Some grammars of English do not allow words following _to or _for to be called _indirect objects._ Please see the discussion_
below concerning the objects of prepositions. Regardless of form, a word will be treated in German as an indirect object if it functions as such. That means, the indirect object takes the dative case without a preposition in German.

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 Nominative (Predicate Noun):

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

My brother is a good businessman. This seems like a good idea.

Predicate nominatives 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 nominatives appear after the word as.
She was serving as the president of the department.

Predicate nominatives appear after the verb heißen in German.
Mein Vater heißt Heinrich.

Predicate nominatives 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:

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 or predicate nominative. 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. I need to go to the store now.
The monks plant lilies along the river every year. Don’t spend so much time gruelling over the answer.

There is some incertitude whether the object of a preposition can also be the indirect object. Please see the discussion above concerning the indirect object and the use of the prepositions to and for.
A young man poured some coffee for the elderly woman. The IRS sent a very small check to me last year.

Unfortunately, the term Object of a Preposition is very generic and gives very little information concerning the true function of the noun. When analysing 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)

- **associative (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.
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 hinauf._

**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 neueste 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 im 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 function. The topic is determined by the context of the discourse and not the function of the noun.

_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 nominative.)  
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*.  

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