

The Case System - Feminine Nouns

Gaelic has 4 cases (we will leave the discussion of whether the vocative is a case in Gaelic to the linguists): the nominative, the dative, the genitive and the vocative case. Hurk?

The Nominative: literally the "naming" case. The basic form of a noun, the word that a dictionary will give you or that you use when naming something, e.g. *an taigh, am balach, a' chaileag* etc. Subjects of a sentence in Gaelic are also in the nominative case. Referred to by some as the "Naming Case" or the "Nominal Case", probably because they think that latinized words cause the brain to overheat - in any case we believe grammar is difficult enough without having 5 terms for the same thing so we stick with the most established term - the nominative.

The Dative: literally the "giving" case. Never mind other languages here, in Gaelic simple prepositions are followed by the dative case, e.g. *fo, do, de, bho, le, ri, aig, ann an* etc. Referred to by some therefore as the "prepositional case" - again, we'll stick with the established word and not bother about linguists arguing that the Gaelic dative isn't really a dative anymore.

The Genitive: literally the "creating" case. Well, in Gaelic the genitive is used for various things. For one, it expresses possession (akin to the English "possessive 's"), e.g. *taigh mo mhàthar, bean an taighe* etc. It also takes the function of the English particle <of> as in <house of horror> <Queen of Scots> - *taigh an uabhais, Ban-rìghinn nan Albannach*. It also forms compound nouns in Gaelic e.g. *gloine fiona* (a wineglass) vs *gloine fion* (a glass (full) of wine). Referred to by some as the "possessive" case - do we really need yet another term??

The Vocative: literally the "calling" case - which is what it does. You use it in Gaelic when directly addressing someone or something, e.g. when shouting someone's name to get their attention, when addressing an audience or when you're drunk and talking to a lamp-post: *a Mhórag! a lampa-shràid!*

What else? Ah, number. English makes a distinction between singular (the cat) and plural (15 cats). Gaelic has a dual in addition to that, which means the noun will take on one shape for one [X], two [X] and more than two [X] - *bròg, dà bhròig, trì brògan* ...

Definite and indefinite: an indefinite noun is a noun that talks about a member of a group of things without telling you exactly which one. <a cat> for example could be any moggie on or off this planet - but if you say <the cat sat on the mat> you must have mentioned which cat you mean before, otherwise you'll get questions like <what, Frankies cat?>. Definite nouns in Gaelic are preceded by the definite article which changes its shape depending on the noun, case, gender and number: *an, a', na, nan, nam* ... Proper nouns are always considered definite as well, so *Calum* and *Dun Èideann* are proper nouns even though there are many Calums in this world and at least two Dun Èideanns (look for Dunedin in New Zealand).

Right, now lets look at our first noun: **Caileag**. It is feminine and forms its plural by means of suffigation. Actually there are no feminine nouns that slenderise in the plural, so you have one thing less to worry about. It also has an initial consonant:

Caileag Bheag - feminine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	caileag bheag a small girl lenite the adjective	caileagan beaga small girls one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural ¹
Gen.	taigh caileige bige² a house of a small girl to form the genitive, slenderise the final consonant and add -e in most cases; same applies to the adjective	taigh chaileagan beaga a house of small girls nouns followed by an indefinite noun in the plural cause lenition; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air caileig bhig on a small girl slenderise the final consonant of both the noun and the adjective	air caileagan beaga on small girls one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

A' Chaileag Bheag - feminine definite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	a' chaileag bheag the small girl the definite article is an³ and lenites following nouns and adjectives	na caileagan beaga the small girls the definite article is na ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh na caileige bige⁴ a/the house of the small girl the definite article is na ; slenderise the final consonant and add -e in most cases; same applies to the adjective	taigh nan caileagan beaga a/the house of the small girls the definite article is nan⁵ ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air a' chaileig bhig on the small girl the definite article is an³ ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	air na caileagan beaga on the small girls the definite article is na ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Voc.	a chaileag bheag! small girl! the vocative particle is a ; lenite noun and adjective	a chaileagan beaga! small girls! the vocative particle is a ; lenite the noun; the vocative plural is the same as the nominative plural; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

Oh joy, footnotes again...

1. **-e** if they end in a slender consonant e.g. **glic** > **glice**
2. Most feminine nouns slenderise their final consonant and add **-e**. However, this is by no means a reliable rule and care must be taken that the correct genitive is learnt and used as there are a lot of exceptions to this rule e.g. **màthair** > **màthar**, **cathair** > **cathrach** (see the forthcoming special chapter on forming the genitive)

3. The article is **an** but before all lenitable consonants (except **f** where it remains **an**) this is reduced to **a'**; bear in mind the **homo-organic rule** which prevents the lenition of **d, n, t, l**
4. Gaelic has a rule that states that in any given definite noun phrase, the definite article may only occur once and in front of the last noun. This means that unlike English, where <the house of the small girl> is grammatical, you may only get **na** in front of **caileige** in Gaelic. As a result, you cannot distinguish <a house of the small girl> and <the house of the small girl> in Gaelic and have to rely on context to determine whether the first noun is definite or indefinite.
5. The article is **nan**, except that in front of the labials **b, p, f, m** (sounds made at the lips) this assimilates to **nam**.
6. A general footnote: basically anything that happens to the noun, happens to the adjective, so if the noun slenderises, in most cases so will the adjective or if it adds **-e**, so will the adjective. Lenition caused by the definite article "jumps" i.e. it will affect every noun and adjective in that noun phrase until you reach the next part of the sentence, e.g. **air a' chaileig bhig tana mhodhail**.

Also, in a noun-adjective compound like **clach-dhearg** both elements are declined as if they were separated e.g. **taigh na cloiche-deirge**. If it is a compound where the adjective precedes the noun as in **glas-fhaoileag**, the adjective undergoes lenition, but no other changes while the noun is declined regularly and determines the gender of the compound, e.g. **na glas-faoileige, dhan ghlas-fhaoileig** etc.

Our next noun is **Oiteag**. It is feminine and has an initial vowel:

Oiteag Bheag - feminine indefinite noun (not forming its genitive with -e)

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	oiteag bheag a small breeze lenite the adjective	oiteagan beaga small breezes one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural ¹
Gen.	taigh oiteig bige a house of a small breeze put the noun in the genitive ² ; slenderise the final consonant of the adjective and add -e	taigh oiteagan beaga a house of small breezes one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air oiteig bhig on a small breeze lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	air oiteagan beaga on small breezes one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

An Oiteag Bheag - feminine definite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	<p>an oiteag bheag the small breeze lenite the adjective</p>	<p>na h-oiteagan beaga the small breezes the definite article is na h-³; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Gen.	<p>taigh na h-oiteig bige a/the house of the small breeze⁴ the definite article is na h-³; slenderise the adjective and add -e</p>	<p>taigh nan oiteagan beaga a/the house of the small breezes the definite article is nan; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Dat.	<p>air an oiteig bhig on the small breeze the definite article is an; slenderise the final consonant of the noun and lenite and slenderise the adjective</p>	<p>air na h-oiteagan bhiga on the small breezes the definite article is na h-; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Voc.	<p>a oiteag bheag!⁵ small breeze! the vocative particle is a; lenite the adjective</p>	<p>a oiteagan beaga! small breezes! the vocative particle is a; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>

1. **-e** if they end in a slender consonant e.g. **glic > glice**
2. Most feminine nouns slenderise their final consonant and add **-e**. However, this is by no means a reliable rule and care must be taken that the correct genitive is learnt and used as there are a lot of exceptions to this rule e.g. **màthair > màthar**, **cathair > cathrach** (see the forthcoming special chapter on forming the genitive)
3. The definite article is **na h-** before vowels. Commonly this is described as the article prefixing **h-** to nouns beginning with a vowel, but this **h-** is actually part of the definite article.
4. Gaelic has a rule that states that in any given definite noun phrase, the definite article may only occur once and in front of the last noun. This means that unlike English, where <the house of the small horse> is grammatical, you may only get **na h-** in front of **oiteige** in Gaelic. As a result, you cannot distinguish <a house of the little breeze> and <the house of the little breeze > in Gaelic and have to rely on context to determine whether the first noun is definite or indefinite.
5. Before vowels, the **a** is not pronounced, but should be written.

The next noun is **sùil**. It is feminine and forms its plural by means of a suffix and has an initial **s**:

Sùil Bheag - feminine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	sùil bheag a small eye lenite the adjective	sùilean beaga small eyes one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural ¹
Gen.	taigh sùla bige a house of a small eye put the noun in the genitive ² ; slenderise the final consonant of the adjective and add -e	taigh shùilean beaga a house of small eyes nouns followed by an indefinite noun in the plural cause lenition; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air sùil bhig on a small eye lenite the adjective and slenderise both (if possible)	air sùilean beaga on small eyes one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural ¹

An t-Sùil Bheag - feminine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	an t-sùil bheag the small eye the definite article is an t- ³ ; lenite the adjective	na sùilean beaga the small eyes the definite article is na ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh na sùla bige ² a/the house of the small eye ⁴ the definite article is na ; slenderise the final consonant and add -e in most cases; same applies to the adjective	taigh nan sùilean beaga a/the house of the small eyes the definite article is nan ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air an t-sùil bhig on the small eye the definite article is an t- ³ ; lenite the adjective and slenderise both (if possible)	air na sùilean beaga on the small eyes the definite article is na ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Voc.	a shùil bheag! small eye! the vocative particle is a ; lenite noun and adjective	a shùla beaga! ⁵ small eyes! the vocative particle is a ; lenite the noun; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

1. **-e** if they end in a slender consonant e.g. **glic** > **glice**.
2. Most feminine nouns slenderise their final consonant and add **-e**. However, this is by no means a reliable rule and care must be taken that the correct genitive is learnt and used as there are a lot of exceptions to this rule e.g. **màthair** > **màthar**, **cathair** > **cathrach** (see the forthcoming special chapter on forming the genitive). In this case, the genitive is slightly irregular: **sùil** > **sùla**.
3. The definite article is **an t-** before **s-**. Commonly this is described as the article prefixing **t-** to nouns beginning with a vowel, but this **t-** is actually part of the definite article. The **s-** is

eclipsed by this **t**, i.e. the two words are pronounced as if the **s-** wasn't there at all, so **air an t-sùil** is pronounced as /ɛrʲ ən t̪uːl/. This happens in all cases except before **sp/sg/sd** - the easiest way to remember this however is to say that it happens in all cases where the resulting word is "pronouncable" and *tp/tg/td are not possible in Gaelic.

4. Gaelic has a rule that states that in any given definite noun phrase, the definite article may only occur once and in front of the last noun. This means that unlike English, where <the house of the small joiner> is grammatical, you may only get **na** in front of **sùla** in Gaelic. As a result, you cannot distinguish <a house of the small eye> and <the house of the small eye> in Gaelic and have to rely on context to determine whether the first noun is definite or indefinite.
5. The vocative plural is generally the same as the nominative plural. This plural is slightly irregular.

So what happens with compound nouns? Well, to begin with we need to try and answer the question of what constitutes a compound in Gaelic. According to Faclair nam Pàrlamaid, these are "close compounds". According to them, close compounds are hyphenated nouns, which isn't very helpful as there is a great confusion in Gaelic as to which words are and aren't hyphenated.

The distinction is relatively easy actually, well, for a native speaker. Two nouns form a close compound if there is stress shift. Consider the two nouns **gloine fion** <a glass (full) of wine> as opposed to **gloine-fiona** <a wineglass>. We start with remembering that every Gaelic word has word stress on the first syllable, which is the case both in **gloine** and **fion** in the first example. In the second example however, these two words have fused - which you can tell by listening to the stress patterns. In **gloine-fiona** there is only one word stress left, the one on **-fiona**.

You get the same thing in other languages, for example English where whirl + pool (both having word stress) come together to form whirlpool, which has only one word stress left. Similarly paper + cut > papercut, bull + shit > bullshit and minimal pairs like <a Frenchman> and <a French man>, <a rolling pin> and <a rolling-pin>, <a holiday> and <a holy day>.

This is a bit tricky for a learner, but it is the only foolproof way of telling a loose compound from a close compound. Consider a few more examples before progressing. As you can see, where Gaelic has a close compound, English often has a single word itself, rather than two. Also, you get lenition in close compounds whereas you don't in loose compounds (the stressed syllables are underlined>):

loose compound	close compound
mac ministèir the son of a minister	MacDhòmhnail MacDonald
latha nigheadaireachd washing day	DiLuain Monday
dùn cloiche a fortress made of stone (sgian arain would be a knife made of bread!)	sgian-arain a breadknife
làrach taighe the ruins of a house	larach-lin a website

So how DO you decline a close compound? The general rule is that the second noun is always in the genitive and undergoes article lenition when appropriate while the first noun is regularly declined. And, if the second noun is in the plural, it is always aspirated, following the general rule that a noun in the plural following another noun is aspirated. All the footnotes given above still apply to compound nouns but haven't been stated again:

Cearc-Fhraoich Bheag - feminine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	cearc-fhraoich bheag a small grouse lenite the adjective	cearcan-fraoich beaga small grouse one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh circe-fraoich bige a house of a small grouse put the noun in the genitive; slenderise the final consonant of the adjective and add -e	taigh chearcan-fraoich beaga a house of small grouse nouns followed by an indefinite noun in the plural cause lenition; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air circ-fhraoich bhig on a small grouse lenite the adjective and slenderise both (if possible)	air cearcan-fraoich beaga on small grouse one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

A' Chearc-Fraoich Bheag - feminine definite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	a' chearc-fhraoich bheag the small grouse the definite article is an and lenites following nouns and adjectives	na cearcan-fraoich beaga the small grouse the definite article is na ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh na circe-fraoich bige a/the house of the small grouse the definite article is na ; put the noun in the genitive; slenderise the final consonant of the adjective and add -e	taigh nan cearcan-fraoich beaga a/the house of the small grouse the definite article is nan ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air a' chirc-fhraoich bhig on the small grouse the definite article is an ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	air na cearcan-fraoich beaga on the small grouse the definite article is na ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Voc.	a chearc-fhraoich bheag! small grouse! the vocative particle is a ; lenite noun and adjective	a chearcan-fraoich beaga! the vocative particle is a ; lenite the noun; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

One of the things to bear in mind is that in a close compound, the second noun behaves much like an adjective, so after a feminine noun, there is lenition in the nominative and dative.

Still more? Yes, but hang in there, we've almost got it. What's still left is the treatment of proper nouns.

Mórag Mhór NicDhòmhnaill

Nom.	Mórag Mhór NicDhòmhnaill Great Mórag MacDonald lenite the adjective
Gen.	taigh Móraig Móire NicDhòmhnaill Great Mórag MacDonalds House slenderise the noun; slenderise the final consonant of the adjective and add -e
Dat.	air Móraig Mhóir NicDhòmhnaill on Great Mórag MacDonald slenderise the noun; slenderise the final consonant of the adjective
Voc.	a Mhórag Mhór NicDhòmhnaill Great Mórag MacDonald! the vocative particle is a; lenite noun, adjective and surname

Footnotes? Just a few. If you get a double name like Màiri Cèit, you only lenite the first one in the vocative e.g. a Mhàiri Cèit!

Down to the last item - proper names a in place names. There are two kinds of place name you can get - opaque ones and transparent ones. Opaque placenames are placenames that don't have any "obvious" meaning e.g. Leódhas, na Hearadh, Glaschu whereas transparent ones "make sense" such as Dun Éideann, Machair Aonghais, Dun Bheagan, Meall nan Caorach - and of course semi-opaque ones like an t-Eilean Sgiathanach but one thing at a time.

Nom.	Sròn Mhór	Beinn Ailginn	Glaschu
Gen.	muinntir Sròine Móire	Muinntir Bheinn Ailginn	Muinntir Ghlaschu
Dat.	ann an Sròn Mhóir	ann am Beinn Ailginn	ann an Glaschu
Voc.	a Shròn Mhór!	a Bheinn Ailginn!	a Ghlaschu!

1. For the most part, proper names such as place names behave like normal nouns. Here's a few pointers though:
2. In the genitive placenames behave just like string of common nouns - slenderising and adding -e, such as Sròn Mhór > Sròine Móire, A' Chreag > Na Creige. Unlike common and proper (names of people) nouns, they also lenite their initials.
3. In the vocative (should one need it) placenames behave as if they were common nouns.

It is very difficult to determine the gender of opaque placenames and we haven't been able to identify the rule yet. Glaschu and Steòrnabhagh (cf. Glaschu Mhór nam Bùithtean) appear to be feminine, but this doesn't seem to apply to all opaque placenames. Watch this space for further developments though.

That's it really, easy peasy ...