

The Case System - Masculine 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 *Dùn Èideann* are proper nouns even though there are many Calums in this world and at least two Dùn Èideanns (look for Dunedin in New Zealand).

Right, now lets look at our first noun: **Balach**. It is masculine and forms its plural by means of slenderisation (yes that is important) and has an initial consonant:

Balach Beag - masculine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	balach beag a small boy do nothing	balaich bheaga small boys after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural ¹
Gen.	taigh balaich bhig a house of a small boy lenite the adjective and slenderise it	taigh bhalach beaga a house of small boys nouns followed by an indefinite noun in the plural cause lenition; the genitive plural of nouns that slenderises for plural is like the nominative singular; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air balach beag on a small boy do nothing	air balaich bheaga on small boys after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

Am Balach Beag - masculine definite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	am balach beag the small boy the definite article is an ²	na balaich bheaga the small boys the definite article is na ; after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh a' bhalaich bhig a/the house of the small boy ³ the definite article is an ⁴ ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	taigh nam balach beaga a/the house of the small boys ³ the definite article is nam ⁵ ; the genitive plural of nouns that slenderises for plural is like the nominative singular; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air a' bhalach bheag on the small boy the definite article is an ⁴ ; lenite noun and adjective	air na balaich bheaga on the small boys the definite article is na ; after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Voc.	a bhalaich bhig! small boy! the vocative particle is a ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	a bhalachaibh beaga! small boys! the vocative particle is a ; lenite the noun; nouns that slenderise for plural add -(a)ibh ; 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. The article is **an**, except that in front of the labials **b, p, f, m** (sounds made at the lips) this assimilates to **am**.
3. 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 boy> is grammatical, you may only get **an** in front of **balaich** in Gaelic. As a result, you cannot distinguish <a house of the small boy> and <the house of the small boy> in Gaelic and have to rely on context to determine whether the first noun is definite or indefinite.
4. 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**
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** (same as in ¹).

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. 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' bhalach bheag tana mhadhail**.

Also, in a noun-adjective compound like **coileach-dubh** both elements are declined as if they were separated e.g. **taigh a' choilich-duibh**. If it is a compound where the adjective precedes the noun as in **glas-bheinn**, 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 **Clachan**. It is masculine and forms its plural by means of adding a suffix and has an initial consonant:

Clachan Beag - masculine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	clachan beag a small village do nothing	clachanan beaga ¹ small villages one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh clachain bhig a house of a small village lenite the adjective and slenderise it	taigh chlachanan beaga a house of small villages nouns followed by an indefinite noun in the plural cause lenition; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air clachan beag on a small village do nothing	air clachanan beaga on small villages one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

An Clachan Beag - masculine definite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	<p>an clachan beag the small village the definite article is an²</p>	<p>na clachanan beaga the small villages the definite article is na; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Gen.	<p>taigh a' chlachain bhig a/the house of the small village³ the definite article is an⁴; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both</p>	<p>taigh nan clachanan beaga a/the house of the small villages the definite article is nan⁵; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Dat.	<p>air a' chlachan bheag on the small village the definite article is an⁴; lenite noun and adjective</p>	<p>air na clachanan beaga on the small villages the definite article is na; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Voc.	<p>a chlachain bhig! small village! the vocative particle is a; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both</p>	<p>a chlachan beaga! the vocative particle is a; lenite the noun; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural; with nouns that form their plural with an ending, the vocative plural has the same form as the nominative plural</p>

1. **-e** if they end in a slender consonant e.g. **glic > glice**
2. The article is **an**, except that in front of the labials **b, p, f, m** (sounds made at the lips) this assimilates to **am**.
3. 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 village> is grammatical, you may only get **an** in front of **clachan** in Gaelic. As a result, you cannot distinguish <a house of the small village> and <the house of the small village> in Gaelic and have to rely on context to determine whether the first noun is definite or indefinite.
4. 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**
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** (same as in ¹).

Our next noun is **Each**. It is masculine and forms its plural by means of slenderising and has an initial vowel:

Each Beag - masculine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	each beag a small horse do nothing	eich bheaga small horses after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural ¹
Gen.	taigh eich bhig a house of a small horse lenite the adjective and slenderise it	taigh each beaga a house of small horses the genitive plural of nouns that slenderises for plural is like the nominative singular; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air each beag on a small horse do nothing	air eich bheaga on small horses after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

An t-Each Beag - masculine definite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	an t-each beag the small horse the definite article is an t - ²	na h-eich bheaga the small horses the definite article is na h - ³ ; after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh an eich bhig a/the house of the small horse ⁴ the definite article is an ; lenite and slenderise the adjective	taigh nan each beaga a/the house of the small horses the definite article is nan ; the genitive plural of nouns that slenderises for plural is like the nominative singular; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air an each bheag on the small horse the definite article is an ; lenite the adjective	air na h-eich bheaga on the small boys the definite article is na h -; after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Voc.	a eich bhig! ⁵ small horse! the vocative particle is a ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	a eichibh beaga! small horses! the vocative particle is a ; lenite the noun; nouns that slenderise for plural add -(a)ibh ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

1. **-e** if they end in a slender consonant e.g. **glic > glice**
2. The definite article is **an t-** before vowels. 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.
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 **an t-** in front of **each** in Gaelic. As a result, you cannot distinguish <a house of the small horse> and <the house of the small horse> 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 **eilean**. It is masculine and forms its plural by means of adding an ending and has an initial vowel:

Eilean Beag - masculine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	eilean beag a small island do nothing	eileanan beaga ¹ small islands one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh eilein bhig a house of a small island lenite the adjective and slenderise it	taigh eileanan beaga a house of small islands one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air eilean beag on a small island do nothing	air eileanan beaga on small islands one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

An t-Eilean Beag - masculine definite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	<p>an t-eilean beag the small island the definite article is an t-²</p>	<p>na h-eileanan beaga the small islands the definite article is na h-; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Gen.	<p>taigh an eilein bhig a/the house of the small island³ the definite article is an⁴; lenite and slenderise the adjective</p>	<p>taigh nan eileanan beaga a/the house of the small islands the definite article is nan⁵; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Dat.	<p>air an eilean bheag on the small island the definite article is an⁴; lenite noun and adjective</p>	<p>air na h-eileanan beaga on the small islands the definite article is na h-; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural</p>
Voc.	<p>a eilein bhig! small island! the vocative particle is a; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both</p>	<p>a eileanan beaga! the vocative particle is a; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural; with nouns that form their plural with an ending, the vocative plural has the same form as the nominative plural.</p>

1. **-e** if they end in a slender consonant e.g. **glic** > **glice**.
2. The definite article is **an t-** before vowels. 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.
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 island> is grammatical, you may only get **an t-** in front of **eilean** in Gaelic. As a result, you cannot distinguish <a house of the small island> and <the house of the small island> 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 **saor**. It is masculine and forms its plural by means of slenderisation and has an initial **s**:

Saor Beag - masculine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	saor beag a small joiner do nothing	saoir bheaga small joiners after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural ¹
Gen.	taigh saoir bhig a house of a small joiner lenite the adjective and slenderise it	taigh shaor beaga a house of small joiners nouns followed by an indefinite noun in the plural cause lenition; the genitive plural of nouns that slenderises for plural is like the nominative singular; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air saor beag on a small joiner do nothing	air saoir bheaga on small joiners after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

An Saor Beag - masculine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	an saor beag the small joiner the definite article is an	na saoir bheaga the small joiners the definite article is na ; after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh an t-saoir bhig a/the house of the small joiner ² the definite article is an t ³ ; lenite and slenderise the adjective	taigh nan saor beaga a/the house of the small joiners the definite article is nan ; the genitive plural of nouns that slenderise for plural is like the nominative singular; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air an t-saor bheag on the small joiner the definite article is an t ³ ; lenite the adjective	air na saoir bheaga on the small joiners the definite article is na ; after a noun that slenderises for plural, lenite adjectives; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Voc.	a shaoir bhig! small joiner! the vocative particle is a ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	a shaoraibh beaga! small joiners! the vocative particle is a ; lenite the noun; nouns that slenderise for plural add -(a)ibh ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

1. -e if they end in a slender consonant e.g. *glic* > *glice*
2. 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 *an t-* in front of *saoir* in Gaelic. As a result, you cannot distinguish <a house of the small joiner> and <the house of the small joiner> in Gaelic and have to rely on context to determine whether the first noun is definite or indefinite.
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 t̪u:l/. 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.

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
<i>mac ministèir</i> the son of a minister	<i>MacDhòmhnail</i> MacDonald
<i>latha nigheadaireachd</i> washing day	<i>DiLuain</i> Monday
<i>dùn cloiche</i> a fortress made of stone (<i>sgian arain</i> would be a knife made of bread!)	<i>sgian-arain</i> a breadknife
<i>làrach taighe</i> the ruins of a house	<i>larach-lin</i> 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 lenition after the article when appropriate and masculine nouns which have slenderised for plural 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:

Muileann-Gaoithe Beag - masculine indefinite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	muileann-gaoithe beag a small windmill do nothing	muilnean-gaoithe beaga small windmills one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh muilinn-gaoithe bhig a house of a small windmill slenderise the adjective and the first noun	taigh mhuilnean-gaoithe beaga a house of small windmills nouns followed by an indefinite noun in the plural cause lenition; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air muileann-gaoithe beag on a small windmill do nothing	air muilnean-gaoithe beaga on small windmills one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural

Am Muileann-Gaoithe Beag - masculine definite noun

	Singular	Plural
Nom.	am muileann-gaoithe beag the small windmill the definite article is an	na muilnean-gaoithe beaga the small windmills the definite article is na ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Gen.	taigh a' mhuilinn-ghaoithe bhig a/the house of the small windmill the definite article is an ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	taigh nam muilnean-gaoithe beaga a/the house of the small windmills the definite article is nam ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Dat.	air a' mhuileann-ghaoithe bheag on the small windmill the definite article is an ; lenite noun and adjective	air na muilnean-gaoithe beaga on the small windmills the definite article is na ; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural
Voc.	a mhuilinn-ghaoithe bhig! small windmill! the vocative particle is a ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both	a mhuilnean-gaoithe beaga! the vocative particle is a ; lenite the noun; one syllable adjectives add -a in the plural; with nouns that form their plural with an ending, the vocative plural has the same form as the nominative plural

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

Pàdraig Bàn MacDhòmhnaill

Nom.	Pàdraig Bàn MacDhòmhnaill Fair Patrick MacDonald
Gen.	taigh Phàdraig Bhàn MhicDhòmhnaill Fair Patrick MacDonalds House lenite and slenderise all words
Dat.	air Pàdraig Bàn MacDhòmhnaill on fair Patrick MacDonald nothing
Voc.	a Phàdraig Bhàn MhicDhòmhnaill Fair Patrick MacDonald! the vocative particle is a ; lenite noun and adjective and slenderise both

Footnotes? Just a few. If you get a double name like **Pàdraig Aonghas**, both of them slenderise and lenite in the vocative e.g. **a Phàdraig Aonghais!** or **a Dhonnchaidh Mhurchaidh!**

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 **Dùn Éideann, Machair Aonghais, Dùn Bheagan, Meall nan Caorach** - and of course semi-opaque ones like **an t-Eilean Sgiathanach** but one thing at a time.

Nom.	Tarabost	Dùn Bheagan	An t-Òban
Gen.	muintir Tharabost	Muintir Dhùn Bheagain	Muintir an Òbain
Dat.	ann an Tarabost	ann an Dùn Bheagan	anns an Òban
Voc.	a Tharabost!	a Dhùn Bheagain!	a Òbain!

For the most part, proper names such as place names behave like normal nouns. Here's a few pointers though:

In the genitive placenames behave just like string of common nouns - they slenderise the last element in names like **Dùn Bheagan > Dhùn Bheagain, An t-Eilean Sgiathanach > an Eilein Sgiathanaich**; they also show genitive markings only on the last noun. Unlike common nouns, they also lenite their initials.

In the vocative (should one need it) placenames behave as if they were common nouns. Opaque placenames obey the rules of lenition, but generally not slenderisation, i.e. **muintir Tharabost**, not ***Tharabuist**.