

The dative case in Greek

In English, the dative case indicates that the object receives the indirect action of the verb for the purpose of showing direction or reception:

I went TO the store; I gave the book TO the librarian;

By comparison, the English accusative case also denotes that the object receives the action of the verb, but the verb's action on the object is more direct:

I shot the thief; I threw the ball.

In Classical and Biblical Greek, however, the dative case is far more versatile. It may take on the role of other cases such as the genitive (possessive) case; or it may become prepositional by showing a relationship between things. For those unfamiliar with the subtleties of Greek, it is easy to misinterpret Scripture by leaning too heavily on an English understanding of cases. So here is a brief overview of the Greek dative case to consider.

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In addition to its main function as the *Dativus*, the dative case has different other functions in [Classical Greek](#)^[1]:

Dativus finalis: The *dativus finalis*, or the 'dative of purpose', is when the dative is used to denote *the purpose* of a certain action. For example:

"**τῷ βασιλεῖ μάχομαι**" "I fight **for the king**".

"**θνήσκω τῇ τιμῇ**" "I die **for honour**".

Dativus commodi (incommodi): The *dativus commodi sive incommodi*, or the 'dative of benefit (or harm)' is the dative that expresses the advantage or disadvantage of something *for someone*. For example:

For the benefit of: "πᾶς ἀνὴρ **αὐτῷ** πονεῖ" ([Sophocles, Ajax](#) 1366). "Every man toils **for himself**".

For the harm or disadvantage of: "ἦδε ἡ ἡμέρα **τοῖς Ἕλλησι** μεγάλων κακῶν ἄρξει." ([Thucydides](#) 2.12.4). "This day will be the beginning of great sorrows **for the Greeks** (i.e., for their disadvantage)".

Dativus possessivus: The *dativus possessivus*, or the 'dative of possession' is the dative used to denote *the possessor* of a certain object or objects. For example:

"**ἄλλοις** μὲν γὰρ χρήματα ἐστὶ πολλὰ καὶ ἵπποι, ἡμῖν δὲ ζύμμαχοι ἀγαθοί." (Thucydides 1.86.3). "For **others** **have** a lot of money and ships and horses, but we have good allies (i.e., To others there is a lot of money..)".

Dativus ethicus: The *dativus ethicus*, or the 'ethic or polite dative,' is when the dative is used to signify that the person or thing spoken of is regarded with interest by someone. This dative is mostly, if not exclusively, used in pronouns. As such, it is also called the "dative of pronouns." For example:

"τούτῳ πάνυ μοι προσέχετε τὸν νοῦν." ([Demosthenes](#) 18.178). "Pay close attention to this, **I beg you** (i.e., please pay..)".

"ὦ μῆτερ, ὡς καλὸς μοι ὁ πάππος." ([Xenophon](#), *Cyropaedia* 18.178). "Oh, mother, how handsome grandpa is (I've just realized!)"

Dativus auctoris: The *dativus auctoris*, or the 'dative of agent,' is the dative used to denote *the doer* of an action. Note, however, that in Classical Greek, the agent is usually in the [genitive](#) after ὑπό (by, at the hands of). The agent is in the dative only with the [perfect](#) and [pluperfect passive](#), and after the verbal [adjective](#) in -τέος. For example:

"πολλὰὶ θεραπείαι τοῖς ἰατροῖς εὑρίηται." ([Isocrates](#) 8.39) "Many cures have been discovered **by doctors**."

Dativus instrumenti: The *dativus instrumenti*, or the 'dative of instrument,' is when the dative is used to denote an instrument or mean of a certain action (or, more accurately, as the [instrumental case](#)). For example:

"με κτείνει δόλω." ([Homer](#), *Odyssey* 9.407) "He kills me **with a bait** (i.e., by means of a bait)."

Dativus modi: The *dativus modi*, or the 'dative of manner,' is the dative used to describe *the manner or way* by which something happened. For example:

"νόσῳ ὕστερον ἀποθανόντα." (Thucydides 8.84) "having died **of (from) a disease**."

Dativus mensurae: The *dativus mensurae*, or the 'dative of measurement,' is the dative used to denote *the measurement of difference*. For example:

"τῆ κεφαλῆ μείζονα." ([Plato](#), *Phaedo* 101a) "taller **by a head**."

"μακροῦ ἄριστος." (Plato, *Laws* 729d) "**by far** the best."