



Adjectives

In the Indo-European languages, adjectives are closely related to nouns in terms of their inflection. When learning Latin adjectives, for instance, you have to memorize declensions on a word-by-word basis, just as you do with the nouns. If your Latin adjective is class 3, you will find the genitive singular form *-is* and the accusative singular ending *-em* when the governing noun is masculine or feminine, just as they are for class 3 nouns of those genders. The other class of adjectives is a mixed class 1/2: with feminine nouns its inflection overlaps with that of class 1 nouns, most of which are likewise feminine (*puella nova*, *puellae novae*), but masculine and neuter nouns force their class 1/2 adjectives into a declension pattern strongly resembling that of class 2 nouns, which are masculine or neuter (*dominus novus*, *dominī novī*). What we see at work here in the Latin is a transitional stage between the Proto-Indo-European configuration, where each adjective was associated with a particular stem and grouped with a declension accordingly, and the system as found in Germanic languages such as Old Norse and Old English, where adjective declension has merged with gender, so each adjective declines according to the gender of the associated noun rather than according to its stem vowel.

If the preceding paragraph made little sense to you, at least remember that one axis of adjective declension is gender: when supplying an adjective to an Old Norse noun, its ending will be different for a masculine noun than for a feminine or neuter noun.

Another hugely important factor of adjective declension is strength. With adjectives as with nouns and verbs, this is a somewhat arbitrarily named Germanic category. With Old Norse adjectives, a strong adjective is one that is not accompanied by a demonstrative pronoun or article, such as *inn*, *sá*, or *þessi*. In English, *large* is in strong position in the phrases “large hall” and “large halls”, but it is weak in “the large hall” and “the large halls” because the noun it modifies — *hall* or *halls* — is modified by another word — *the* — before we even get to the adjective. While the English word *large* remains identical across all four examples, the adjective would be declined differently in German, Old English, or Old Norse if a demonstrative precedes: *in stóra holl* as opposed to *stór holl*, *das große Haus* versus *großes Haus*.

Adjectives in positive grade — large, fast, yellow — are thus declined according to context as well as gender, case, and number. The same is true of superlatives, since these can be used with or without a demonstrative: *Egill var manna vænstr* “Egill was [the] most handsome of men” lacks a demonstrative, so *vænn* is declined strong; *Egill var inn vænsti maðr* “Egill was **the** most handsome man” has the article, so *vænn* is declined weak. Adjectives in comparative grade, by contrast, — larger, faster, more yellow — are always declined weak, as are present participles (*syngjandi* “singing”; only the endings for these differ somewhat from those of other weak adjectives, see below). Past participles, by contrast (*sunginn* “sung”), are declined strong.

The main formal characteristic of weak adjectives across the Germanic languages is that they are comparatively homogenous through the paradigm, making them easy to memorize but not very helpful when trying to determine the case of the governing noun. Fortunately, in these cases the demonstrative provides the information otherwise encoded in the strong adjective. In Old Norse, another difference between strong and weak adjectives is that the former ends in a consonant in most forms, though not all; the weak adjective always ends in a vowel *a/i/u* except in the dative plural.

Strong declension (monosyllables)

sg	masculine	feminine	neuter
<i>nom.</i>	djarfr	djǫrf	djarft
<i>acc.</i>	djarfan	djarfa	djarft
<i>gen.</i>	djarfs	djarfrar	djarfs
<i>dat.</i>	djǫrfum	djarfri	djǫrfu

pl	masculine	feminine	neuter
<i>nom.</i>	djarfir	djarfar	djǫrf
<i>acc.</i>	djarfa	djarfar	djǫrf
<i>gen.</i>	djarfra	djarfra	djarfra
<i>dat.</i>	djǫrfum	djǫrfum	djǫrfum

Weak declension (monosyllables)

sg	masculine	feminine	neuter
<i>nom.</i>	djarfi	djarfa	djarfa
<i>acc.</i>	djarfa	djǫrfu	djarfa
<i>gen.</i>	djarfa	djǫrfu	djarfa
<i>dat.</i>	djarfa	djǫrfu	djarfa

pl	masculine	feminine	neuter
<i>nom.</i>	djǫrfu	djǫrfu	djǫrfu
<i>acc.</i>	djǫrfu	djǫrfu	djǫrfu
<i>gen.</i>	djǫrfu	djǫrfu	djǫrfu
<i>dat.</i>	djǫrfum	djǫrfum	djǫrfum

A good number of adjectives are dissyllabic, meaning their root consists of two syllables. In forms whose endings start in a vowel, these dissyllabic stems are subject to syncope: the unstressed medial vowel is lost. This has consequences especially for the weak paradigm, which exclusively has endings beginning with vowels. In the strong paradigm, we find syncopated forms mixed in with unsyncopated forms, as the genitive and dative plural, as well as some genitive and dative singular positions, undergo syncope while the rest of the paradigm remains unchanged. Compare the following dissyllabic adjective with the above:

Strong declension (dissyllables)

sg	masculine	feminine	neuter
<i>nom.</i>	auðigr	auðig	auðigt
<i>acc.</i>	auðgan	auðga	auðigt
<i>gen.</i>	auðigs	auðigrar	auðigs
<i>dat.</i>	auðgum	auðigri	auðgu

pl	masculine	feminine	neuter
<i>nom.</i>	auðgir	auðgar	auðig
<i>acc.</i>	auðga	auðgar	auðig
<i>gen.</i>	auðigra	auðigra	auðigra
<i>dat.</i>	auðgum	auðgum	auðgum

Weak declension (dissyllables)

sg	masculine	feminine	neuter
<i>nom.</i>	auðgi	auðga	auðga
<i>acc.</i>	auðga	auðgu	auðga
<i>gen.</i>	auðga	auðgu	auðga
<i>dat.</i>	auðga	auðgu	auðga

pl	masculine	feminine	neuter
<i>nom.</i>	auðgu	auðgu	auðgu
<i>acc.</i>	auðgu	auðgu	auðgu
<i>gen.</i>	auðgu	auðgu	auðgu
<i>dat.</i>	auðgum	auðgum	auðgum

Comparison

positive	comparative	superlative
djarfr	djarfari	djarfastr
auðigr	auðgari	auðgastr

With most adjectives, the comparative grade is formed by adding *-ar-* plus the weak ending. The superlative is then formed by adding *-ast* plus the strong or weak ending as determined by context. In certain cases, the vowel in these endings can itself be syncopated under the influence of a following personal ending (see *lengri* below), but in cases like

auðigr, *auðgari*, it is only the dissyllabic stems themselves that are contracted before *-ar*, *-ast*, as further elision would result in undesirable consonant clusters.

positive	comparative	superlative
langr	lengri	lengstr
góðr	betri	beztr

There are, however, also verbs that modify the stem — either through front mutation or by providing an entirely new stem, as with English *good*, *better* — and suffix only *-r-* plus the weak ending. The superlative is then based on the comparative rather than the positive stem. In the table on the left, *lengri* is an example of a comparative formed by front mutation (and syncope); *betri* is a comparative formed on a new stem, the same used for English *better*. Note that the *z* in the superlative form *beztr* represents the sequence /ts/, i.e. it includes both the *t* of the stem *bet-* and the *s* added by the *-ast* superlative suffix.

Comparative and present participle declension (always weak)

The paradigm for comparatives and present participles is a further simplification of weak declension:

sg	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
<i>nom.</i>	segjandi	segjandi	segjanda	segjandi
<i>acc.</i>	segjanda	segjandi	segjanda	segjandi
<i>gen.</i>	segjanda	segjandi	segjanda	segjandi
<i>dat.</i>	segjanda	segjandi	segjanda	segjundum

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