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35 3 Adjectives and adjective endings

Let's take a closer look at what's known as 'adjective declension'. Adjectives can appear in two positions in a sentence: following the noun they describe (predicate adjectives) or preceding the noun they describe (attributive adjectives).

Predicate adjectives are easy because they are invariable – that is, they don't take endings:

Der Hund ist süß. *The dog is cute.*
Die Katze ist süß. *The cat is cute.*
Das Baby ist süß. *The baby is cute.*

In contrast, attributive adjectives do take endings, which are determined by two main factors:

- whether or not the adjective is preceded by another qualifying word (an article, possessive pronoun, etc.)
- the gender, number and case of the noun that the adjective describes.

3.1 Preceded adjectives

In German, if an article or pronoun (*the, those, a, my, etc.*) is used with an adjective, one or the other or both have to reflect the gender, number and case of the noun they modify.

In the case of a definite article preceding an adjective, the article clearly indicates the gender and/or case of the noun, so the adjective ending doesn't need to change for each gender. In the nominative, the adjective simply takes an -e ending:

der süße Hund *the cute dog*
die süße Katze *the cute cat*
das süße Baby *the cute baby*

In the case of an indefinite article, because the masculine and neuter nominative and accusative forms don't have endings and therefore don't show the gender of the noun unequivocally, the adjective has to take on this function by adding the markers for masculine (-er) and neuter (-es):

ein süßer Hund *a cute dog*
eine süße Katze *a cute cat*
ein süßes Baby *a cute baby*

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3.2 Unpreceded adjectives

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If an adjective is not preceded by an article or pronoun, it needs to take an ending that indicates the gender, number and/or case of the noun it modifies. Let's take the adjective *gut* *good* as an example. In order to say *Good wine is expensive*, you'd need to know that *der Wein* is a masculine singular noun and that in this sentence it is in the nominative case because it is the subject. So you add the nominative masculine -er ending to the adjective: *gut* + *er* → **Guter Wein ist teuer**. Or if you wanted to say *Good chocolate is rare (selten)*, you'd have to bear in mind that *Schokolade* *chocolate* is a feminine singular noun and it is nominative in this sentence. Therefore, you have to add the feminine marker -e to the adjective: *gut* + *e* → **Gute Schokolade ist selten**.

In other words, in the absence of a preceding modifying word, the adjective ending needs to indicate the gender and case of a noun. Here's an overview for the endings of unpreceded adjectives in the nominative case:

süßer Wein *sweet wine* (masc.)
süße Marmelade *sweet jam* (fem.)
süßes Brot *sweet bread* (neuter)

Ultimately, adjective declension is actually quite handy as it gives you more opportunities to recognize – and to remember – the gender of a noun, even if it may seem complicated at first.

4 Word order in dependent (subordinate) clauses

A dependent or subordinate clause is a clause that cannot stand alone; it must be combined with a main clause to express a complete idea. In German, a dependent clause is separated from the main clause by a comma. Dependent clauses are often introduced by a subordinating conjunction such as *dass* *that* or *wenn* *if, when*, by a relative pronoun, or by a question word. The conjugated verb is in the last position in the dependent clause.

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Sie müssen ein bisschen warten, wenn Sie nicht alles verstehen.
You have to wait a little if you don't understand everything.

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