Chapter 4: Neuter Nouns and the Verb "to be," *Esse*

Chapter 4 covers the following: second-declension neuter nouns, first- and second-declension adjectives, the nature and use of substantives, the present tense of *sum, esse*, the Latin verb "to be," predicate nouns and adjectives, and at the end of the lesson we'll review the vocabulary you should memorize in this chapter.

There are four important rules to remember here: (1) neuter nominatives and accusative forms are always the same; (2) an adjective agrees with the noun it modifies in number, gender and case; (3) the base of the Latin verb "to be" is *es-* or sometimes *su-*; (4) a substantive derives its substance from its gender.

Neuter gender. Along with masculine and feminine, Latin also has a neuter gender meaning "neither," that is neither masculine nor feminine. Thus neuter gender is often applied to things which don't have a natural gender, words like: "war" *bellum*, "iron" *ferrum*, or "danger" *periculum*. But it's not as simple as that. There are many exceptions to this rule and thus in Latin things which are masculine in gender are not necessarily always male in nature. The same holds true for the other two genders. So in Latin it's not as straightforward as it is in English where "he," the masculine pronoun, almost always refers to something male or "she," the feminine pronoun, something female, or "it," the neuter pronoun, something without gender. In Latin there are many things which we English speakers see as not having natural gender and so we refer to any of these things in the singular as "it," but in Latin these same things are masculine or feminine. For instance, "penalty" *poena* is a feminine word, "meal" *cena* is also feminine, as is "memory" *memoria*; "book" *liber* is masculine, and "year" *annus* is too, as is "grief" *dolor*.

All in all, gender in Latin is arbitrary and must be memorized for each noun. Patterns do exist, however, that can aid in memorizing a word's gender. For instance, first-declension nouns which have -*a* in their nominative singular are almost always feminine. In the same way, second-declension nouns ending in -*us* in their nominative singular are almost always masculine. As we study other declensions and see patterns which can help in memorizing gender, we'll point them out.

Second-declension neuter nouns. Here are the endings for second declension neuter. Note the nominative singular ending, -*um*. In second declension singular that's the only difference between masculine and neuter forms. In the plural, there are only two differences: the -*a* ending found in the nominative and accusative of the neuter. Happily then, there is little to memorize here, assuming of course that you memorized second declension masculine endings. And there is one thing to be very careful of here: the neuter nominative and accusative plural -*a* ending looks a lot like the nominative singular feminine ending in first declension. Confusing these two endings is an easy mistake to make, but because no Latin noun is both first and second declension, these endings do not actually overlap in any way which just underscores the importance of knowing which declension a Latin noun belongs to. If a noun is first declension and has a -*a* ending it means the word is nominative singular. But if a word is second-declension neuter and has a -*a* ending, it can be either nominative or accusative plural. In that light, it's interesting to bear in mind that English derivatives like "data" and "agenda" are actually neuter plural; they are derivatives of Latin second-declension nouns. Proper grammar then demands that

one say, "the data show," not "the data shows." But enforcing niceties of that sort is often a losing battle. I suggest *you* use "data" properly but do not insist that your friends do. Otherwise you might find yourself with many data but few friends.

And there's another thing worth noting here. The nominative and accusative forms in the singular and plural respectively are the same: *-um* in the nominative and accusative singular and *-a* in the nominative and accusative plural, which brings up a rule that will apply not only to the forms you learn in Latin but across Indo-European languages as well: that neuter nominatives and accusatives are *always* the same. Now that doesn't mean that the accusative singular and the accusative plural are the same but within number, in other words, the singular of the nominative and accusative or the plural of the nominative and accusative will always be the same.

Here's an example of a second-declension neuter noun: *bellum* the word that means "war." Let's decline it together: *bellum, belli, bello, bellum, bello, bella, bellorum, bellis, bella, bellis*. And here's its translation. Note that the cases function in the same way that they did in first and second declension so there's no reason to recite them here.

Now let's change topic and address adjectives. Adjectives utilize first- and second-declension endings to create one declensional system called first/second declension. The reason for this is that, since adjectives must be able to modify any noun, they must also be able to take any number, gender, or case. So adjectives have to have a full set of first/second-declension endings in order for them to be masculine or feminine or neuter, singular or plural, or any of the case endings. In the world of Latin grammar, nouns take precedence over adjectives, hence the rule that an adjective must agree with a noun it modifies in number, gender, and case.

Now let's look at how to form an adjective. Just like nouns, adjectives have a base. To determine that base drop the feminine nominative singular ending, in this case *-a*, from the second form in the vocabulary. Let's say you have the word *magnus* which means "great." In the dictionary or your vocabulary list it will be cited in its nominative singular forms, in this case *magnus, magna, magnum*. Take the second form, the feminine nominative singular, drop the ending *-a*, and you have *magn-*. That's the base. Let's look at another adjective: *verus, vera, verum*. Drop the ending *-a* from the second form and you have the base *ver-*. Notice that with both of these adjectives we could have used the nominative singular masculine form, dropping its ending *-us*, and have gotten the base *magn-* or *ver-*, but the reason to use the feminine is because sometimes the masculine nominative singular is irregular. The feminine nominative singular never is. So here's the full declension of another first/second-declension adjective: *bonus, bona, bonum* meaning "good." Let's recite its forms together moving across the cases, that is, going nominative singular masculine, feminine, neuter then down to the genitive: [recite *bonus* declension].

With all these different forms it should be clear there's no way to encompass all the information in a Latin adjective in a simple, single English word. With rare exceptions like "this" and "these," "that" and "those," our adjectives do not change forms and do not contain the same kind of grammatical information that Latin adjectives do. So either, we have to write out the grammar, for instance, if you have the word *bonus*, you translate it as "good" but you need to add the grammatical information, nominative singular masculine. Or you attach the adjective to a noun with the same grammatical values, as in, "The good *boy* did his homework." *Hint hint.*

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And if you think about it, that raises another interesting possibility, namely the formation of what grammarians call "substantives." Substantives are words that are fundamentally adjectives but they function as nouns. Such as, well, the adjective "good" again. It can serve as a substantive, that is, as a noun. So, for instance, if you talk about the "goods" in the store, "goods" is a noun meaning "the good things" in the store. The adjective is serving as a noun and that's a substantive. Similarly, you can talk about a "brave," meaning a Native American warrior. Though "brave" is fundamentally an adjective, a "brave" is a person, therefore a noun. Or you can talk about a "swift," a fast-flying bird. Birds are nouns but the word "swift" is at heart an adjective. In English we often show that an adjective is functioning as a substantive by pluralizing it or putting an article in front of it, such as, "electronics," or "the young and the restless."

But Latin adjectives contain more information encoded into them than their English counterparts which makes them much more naturally easy to convert into substantives because, for instance, they have gender and gender naturally implies a gendered substance. Hence the principle that Latin substantives derive their substance from their gender. In other words, because a Latin adjective is masculine, it implies that the substance or the unstated noun lying behind the adjective is "man," or "men" if the adjective is plural. If an adjective is feminine in gender, it implies "woman," or if it's plural, "women," and if it's neuter, "thing" or "things." For an adjective to serve as a substantive it must have no noun to go with in its sentence. Otherwise, there's no need to evoke substance from its gender. In other words, if *bonus* has *liber* to go with it, it's "a good book." There's no need to add "man" to "good" if you've got "book" there.

So this is how substantives work: you're reading along in a Latin sentence and you come to an adjective. It doesn't have a noun to modify. You look at its gender. If the gender is masculine you add "man" or "men" to the translation of the adjective. If the adjective is feminine, you add "woman" or "women," and if it's neuter, "thing" or "things."

Here are some examples of substantives. Say you're reading along in a Latin sentence and you run into the word *parvus*, meaning "small," and, as you can see from the *-us* ending, it's nominative, singular and masculine. If there's a noun to attach it to, say *puer*, you do that. You attach *parvus* to *puer* and translate it as "small boy." But if there is no noun to attach it to, the Latin text implies "man," because *parvus* is masculine gender.

Here's another example: *mala*. It means "bad" and as you can see from the *-a* ending, it's nominative singular feminine. If *mala* is in a sentence where it doesn't have another noun to modify, the implication is "a bad woman" and that, because it is nominative, it functions as the subject of the sentence. However, the *-a* on the end of *mala* allows for another possibility: that *mala* is functioning as a neuter nominative or accusative plural. In that case, *mala* means "bad things" and most likely serves as either the direct object or the subject of the sentence.

Here's another example of a substantive: *verorum*. *Verus* means "true" and the *-orum* on the end of the base shows that the adjective is genitive plural, masculine or neuter. Thus as a substantive it would mean "of" (because it's genitive), "true men" if it's masculine or "things" if it's neuter:

"of true men," or "of true things." The context of the sentence will dictate which makes better sense.

And here's one more final example of a substantive. If people ever ask you to say something in Latin, say this: *stulti*. It means "stupid," and because you are not among the *stulti*, you know that it's second-declension genitive singular masculine or neuter. So if it doesn't have a noun to modify in its sentence and is functioning as a substantive, it means "of (genitive) a stupid man (masculine) or thing (neuter)." But the *-i* ending can also indicate that it's nominative plural masculine, in which case it would mean "stupid men" and most likely would function as the subject of the sentence.

Finally, let's look at one of the most important verbs in Latin, or any language, the verb, "to be." Like many verbs that are very commonly used, the verb "to be" in Latin is irregular. Its forms are: first person singular *sum*, second person *es,* third person *est*, and in the plural, *sumus, estis, sunt*, and the infinitive is *esse.* These forms translate as follows: *sum* "I am," *es* "you are," *est* "he/she/it is," or "there is," as in, "There is a book you should read," *sumus* "we are," *estis* "y'all are," *sunt* "they are." "To be" is the translation of the infinitive *esse*.

If you look at this verb linguistically, the base of *sum* is *es-*. You can see this base in the forms *es, est, estis* and *esse*. However, there is a rule in Latin that, if *-s-* is followed by a nasal sound -- that is *-m* or *-n* -- it becomes *su-*; thus, *sum, sumus,* and *sunt*. The verb "to be" is not only unusual in its formation but also in what grammarians call its "expectation," in other words, the forms that accompany it or that it predicates.

The verb "to be" does not expect a direct object because direct objects receive action and there's no action in the verb "to be." The technical term for a verb that does not expect a direct object is "intransitive," meaning *in-* "not," *trans-* "across," *it-* "go"; that is, the verb does not carry action across from a subject to a direct object. Instead, with the verb "to be" two things are equated. For instance, when you say, "The man is a teacher," you're essentially saying "Man equals teacher." So in place of an accusative direct object Latin *sum* expects a nominative predicate. In this case the predicate is nominative because it is being equated with the subject which is nominative. This is the same general principle we've seen being used with adjectives and appositives, that things which are connected to each other should be in the same case. So to go back to our example, "The man is a teacher," "man" is the subject and "teacher" is the predicate. In Latin this sentence would be *vir est magister*, where *vir* is the nominative subject and *magister* is the nominative predicate.

Predicates can be adjectives as well as nouns but in either instance the predicate is nominative. So one can say, *puer est parvus* "the boy is small," or *otium est malum*, "leisure is evil," or *estis boni* "y'all are good," or if you translate the predicate as a substantive, what we studied before, an adjective functioning as a noun, you could translate it as, "y'all are good men," or "good people" since masculine gender functions as common gender in Latin. Please note that predicate adjectives agree with the subject in number and gender as well as case whereas predicate nouns agree with the subject only in case because nouns have to maintain their own number and gender. Conversely, adjectives must agree with the noun they go with in number, gender and case.

Finally, let's look at the vocabulary for Chapter 4.

The first word is *bellum, belli, n.,* meaning "war." It's a second-declension neuter noun. The abbreviation *n.* stands for neuter. The genitive singular of neuter nouns in second declension is often abbreviated *-i.* Thus *bellum, -i, n.* What is the nominative plural of this word? That's right, *bella.*

The next word is *cura, curae, f.,* meaning "care," "attention," "caution," "anxiety." It's a first-declension feminine noun. Be careful, not all the words in this vocabulary list are second-declension neuter. There are words belonging to all sorts of different grammatical categories here as there will be in all vocabulary lists in Mr. Wheelock's book. Also be careful to note that *cura* does not mean "cure" but "care." The Latin word for "cure" is *remedium, remedii n.,* from which we get the word "remedy."

The next word is *mora, morae, f.,* meaning "delay." It's another first-declension feminine noun. Be careful with this word. Even though it resembles English words like "mortal" and "mortify" it doesn't mean "death." It means "delay." If you know the word "moratorium" meaning delay usually in practices such as "a moratorium on whale hunting," that will help you remember that *mora* means "delay." If you don't know the word "moratorium," well, learn it.

The next word is *nihil*, meaning "nothing." It is neuter. We can tell that from the adjectives that are attached to it occasionally but it is an unusual word because it normally does not decline, that is, it doesn't change its form as it changes its function in the sentence. However, some Roman authors do decline this word and when they do it goes: *nihil, nihili, nihilo, nihilum, nihilo*. But even those authors do not make a plural. Zero plus zero is never anything more than zero.

The next word is *oculus, oculi, m.,* meaning "eye." It's a second-declension masculine noun. What would the nominative plural of this word be? That's right: *oculi*.

The next word is *periculum, periculi, n.,* meaning "danger." It's a second-declension neuter noun. What would the nominative plural of this word be? That's right: *pericula*.

The next five words in your vocabulary are all adjectives. First is *bonus, bona, bonum* meaning "good," or "kind." It's a first/second-declension adjective. (1/2) is the abbreviation that's used to indicate that the adjective belongs to that category. This designation applies to all adjectives that we have studied so far. Later in the class we'll learn there's another type of adjective but that's it; there are only two categories of adjectives in Latin.

The next word is *malus, mala, malum* meaning "bad," "evil," "wicked." It's also first/second declension. The abbreviation *-us, -a, -um* is the way vocabulary lists and Latin dictionaries will indicate that an adjective belongs to this particular declensional system, the first/second.

The next word *parvus, -a, -um* means "small" or "little." It's also a first/second-declension adjective.

The next word is *stultus, -a, -um* meaning "foolish" or "stupid." It also belongs to first/second declension.

And finally, *verus, -a, -um* means "true" or "real." It is also first/second declension.

The next item in the vocabulary is the verb *sum, esse*, the Latin verb meaning "to be." It is irregular as we discussed above.

The word after that, *magister, magistri, m.,* means "teacher." It's second-declension masculine. The *-tri* after the nominative singular in the vocabulary indicates that the base of this word contracts. That base is spelled *magistr-*. Unlike the nominative singular it has no *-e-*. You should note also that there's a feminine form of this base, *magistra, magistrate, f.,* a first-declension feminine noun. It means "a teacher who is a woman."

The next word is *otium, otii, n.,* meaning "leisure" or "peace." This word means "peace" in the sense of "peace and quiet," not "peace" as in "peace and war." Later in the class we'll learn the word that means "peace" as opposed to "war." The letters *-ii* cited in the vocabulary after the nominative singular signal two things: the second *-i* represents the genitive singular indicating that the word is second declension and the first *-i-* is a reminder that the base of this word ends with *-i-*. So the *-ii* in the vocabulary is really just a reminder that the genitive singular of this word will have *-ii*. In that light, what is the dative or ablative plural form of this word? That's right: *otiis*.

And the last word in this vocabulary is one more adjective: *bellus, -a, -um* meaning "pretty," "handsome," "charming." It's a first/second-declension adjective. Please note that this is an adjective, not a noun. Although this adjective has the same base as the noun *bellum, -i, n.,* meaning "war," they are completely different words, homonyms in fact, words that by chance have come to look like each other but do not come from the same root or origin. So let's translate a sentence using both of these words: *Bellum non est bellum*. What does that sentence mean? That's right: "War is not pretty," or if you interpret the predicate adjective as a substantive, "War is not a pretty thing."

So, do the rules that were cited at the beginning of this chapter now make sense to you? If not, please review this presentation. If so, please proceed to the next slide.

For the next class exercise please print out a copy of the practice and review sentences for Chapter 4 on page 21 of Wheelock.

And that's it for Chapter 4. Study hard, *O discipuli*! As we said before, *Otium est malum*.