Wading into Grammar – The Dative Case

Close to the end of this school year, we are ready to and we need to start looking "under the hood" of the German language a bit more by wrestling with its grammar. Occasionally, German grammar was already needed in our communications, but we didn't go into it then. For example, when we talked about dates, we said and wrote sentences like:

Mein Geburstag ist **der** 3. April.

I chose these sentences in this way, because the male article (der) before "3. April" (remember that all days, months and seasons are male) is the same as we learned them in the beginning of the year, and because this sentence structure is similar to the English sentence structure. However, the more common way of saying this is:

Ich habe **am** 3. April Geburtstag.

Here, "am" is actually a contraction of "an dem" (on the). You notice that "the" is not "der" here, although April is certainly still a male word. What's happed is that April is in the Dative case, **which requires the article** "der" to change into its Dative case version "dem".

Why do cases matter?
Cases are used to show us the relations between subjects and objects in sentences. This is true in English and in German. English has three cases, the subjective, the possessive, and the objective case. German has four cases: the nominative, the genitive, the dative and the accusative case. These roughly correspond to the English cases in the following way:

English Case	German Case	Used to show
Subjective	Nominative	the subject
Possessive	Genitive	who something or somebody belongs to (possess), was made by (generated), descends from (Genesis?), etc., for example, Peter**s** Hut (Peter**'s** hat): the hat that Peter has or has made
Objective	Dative	the indirect object
	Accusative	the direct object

The trouble with German grammar for the English native speaker is that the cases affect the direct/indirect articles, the adjectives, and the pronouns before the nouns, and sometimes the endings of the nouns as well. In English, most of this is handled via prepositions, with little effects on the endings. In German, often the grammatical (relational) information is conveyed only in different endings. **To understand the meaning of a German sentence, knowing the grammar is often crucial.** For

example, last week we read the first sentence of a text in our textbook, page 30, under "Was meine Familie gerne isst":

Die Marzipantorte mein**er** Oma schmeckt **mir** am besten. (The marzipan cake **of my** Grandma tastes the best **to me**.)

The fact that the marzipan cake was made by my grandma is only shown through changing ending of "meine Oma" into its Genitive ending (meiner Oma).

Starting with grammar, we first will tackle the Dative case.

The Dative Case
The dative case is used in four specific ways. It identifies

1. the indirect object of a sentence (Ich kaufe mein**er** Mutter Blumen.)

2. the object of a dative verb, that is, a verb that requires the dative case (Ich danke mein**er** Mutter.)

3. the object of a dative preposition (Ich komme aus **dem** Laden.)

4. the object of an impersonal expression (Es gefällt **mir**.)

Definite Article (the)		
Fall Case	**Masc.**	**Fem.**
Nom	der	die
Dat	**dem** **dem Bleistift** **dem Mann** **dem Wagen** **dem Präsidenten*** **dem Jungen***	**der** **der Frau** **der Verkäuferin**

***Note**: Some masc. nouns add an -**en** or -**n** ending in the **dative** and in all other cases besides the **nominative**.

Fall Case	**Neu.**	**Plur.**
Nom	das	die
Dat	**dem** **dem Mädchen** dem Haus	**den** **den Leuten** **den Autos**

Note: In the dative, plural nouns add an -**en** or -**n** if the plural does not already end in -**n**, except for plurals ending in -**s**.

Indefinite Article (ein, eine, keine)		
Fall Case	**Masc.**	**Fem.**
Nom	**ein**	**eine**
Dat	**einem** einem Bleistift einem Mann einem Wagen einem Präsidenten* einem Jungen*	**einer** einer Frau einer Verkäuferin

*Note: Some masc. nouns add an -**en** or -**n** ending in the **dative** and in all other cases besides the **nominative**.

Fall Case	**Neu.**	**Plur.**
Nom	**ein**	**keine**
Dat	**einem** einem Mädchen einem Haus	**keinen** keinen Leuten keinen Autos

Note: In the dative, plural nouns add an -**en** or -**n** if the plural does not already end in -**n**, except for plurals ending in -**s**.

Using the table above, place the following words and the words before them into the dative case:

Example:

der Lehrer   dem Lehrer

das Kind

die Oma

die Marmelade

ein Zimmer

eine Blume

kein Mann (negative of indefinite article)

keine Tasse

die Leute (watch out: plural)