Abandoning the meta-language: Teaching Latin and Greek with less terminology

Most of us who teach Latin and Greek realize that we are also teaching English, that by leading students formally through a new language we are often teaching them about their own. There is, however, a fourth language that we teach—the "meta-language" of grammatical terminology. This meta-language has changed over time, but mastery of it—the point of which is to allow us to analyze texts at a fairly deep level—has been often, if not always, held up as the sign of a "good" classics student. As such, a body of knowledge most often appropriate for *professional* students of classics is all but required of *beginning* students. We expect 100% of our first-year students to learn what the vast majority of them will never have reason to use, and as a result, I believe, we are still frightening most of these students away—no matter how much they seem to want to learn Latin and Greek at first, we lose them as soon as they finish their language requirement.

I have often reminded the language instructors in my program that "our students are not us," telling them that we need to stop teaching to just the 1% at the top and start worrying about the 90% in the middle. Accordingly, a few years ago I began experimenting with the idea of teaching without terminology, at helping students to understand what a Latin or Greek sentence says without cloaking it in phrases like "potential optative," "substantive *ut* clause," or (one of my favorites) "predicative dative." Instead, we try to determine the situation described—for example, a man sacrificing to the gods—and to recognize the markers for how it's being described—is it a statement, a wish, a conceivable event...? Given these two pieces of information, I then ask the students a very simple question: how would they express this in English? The English version of the original is judged simply on how well it communicates the student's understanding of the original—assuming, of course, that the student correctly understands the situation and how it's being described.

A practical example: teaching the Greek conditional, almost all of the several schemes of classification of which include the terms "vivid" and "contrary to fact." I teach my students that conditionals can be sorted by (a) the *time* they deal with (present, past, future) and (b) the *type* of situation they deal with (one-time, regularly occurring, hypothetical). The students learn how to distinguish the markers for the various types and then they practice that skill; afterwards they learn how to distinguish the markers for time within the three types. Only when a student can recognize a particular sentence as, say, *a hypothetical situation in the future* involving *the man sacrificing to the gods* and *the gods honoring him* do I ask, "Okay, how would you say that in English?" After just a few seconds, many students automatically produce something along the lines of *If the man were to sacrifice to the gods, they would honor him.* The students are not asked to give the "formal" name of the conditional and then to produce the "translation formula" for that conditional. What little terminology is used is designed to be easy to understand.

This method of introducing students to new constructions is not, of course, fool-proof, nor does it work all the time. It does, however, help the students to become more comfortable with the languages—a crucial step in keeping them *wanting* to learn the languages.