

Making Sense of Greek Sentences

A perpetual and lurking difficulty for students of Greek at the beginning and intermediate levels (and even beyond) is Greek sentence structure. Textbook and student resources tend to address structure fitfully in its symptoms (such as word order, hypotaxis, periodic structure, κτλ.), but all these phenomena relate back to the overall difficulty of sentence structure, and students rarely have a systematic way to approach it. When pressed, many students will admit that they simply look up all the words and then try to jumble their meanings together into some kind of sense. Traditional methods to combat the problem of students' "jumbling" a sentence into a meaning, such as parsing and diagramming, too often generate much student activity but leave them short of comprehending the meaning of even a single sentence.

In this paper, I propose a new and systematic approach to teaching Greek sentence structure. The method can be used with any Greek textbook and can be taught from the first weeks of beginning Greek (I've now used it for a number of years in all my Greek classes). It begins with the idea that even before students see a sentence they should already be expecting and prioritizing certain structures. Every sentence, for example, consists of at least one clause, and every clause must have its own subject and verb (whether stated or implied). Subordinate clauses require a third element, namely a "subordinating word" (e.g. who, when, since, etc.). For any clause, the verb is structurally the most important word. It both reveals the person and number of the subject and sets up strong expectations for the predicate ("I see" expects a direct object; "I go" motivates a prepositional phrase). If students are actively looking for such structures, they are much more likely to correctly identify and understand them once they appear. In each sentence, moreover, every succeeding word sets up its own expectations (some grammatical, some lexical) that further limit, define, and articulate what a sentence can mean.

In order to decrease talk about the sentence and shift emphasis to understanding it, I use a system of markings that allows students to quickly identify word type, case, agreement, clause and phrase units and to dispense with lengthy descriptions. This system, moreover, enables the student to analyze words and sentence structures in the order in which they are presented and to anticipate many characteristics of the sentence even before they are seen. If, for example, a sentence begins with “when” or “since,” the student places a left hand parenthesis before the word and can with that one word know that the sentence has at least two clauses and two verbs. Furthermore, the student can anticipate that the next verb encountered (unless another subordinate clause intervenes) belongs within the subordinate clause. Once the subordinate clause is complete, grammatical expectations can guide the analysis of the main clause.

One of the most important aspects of this mark-up system is that it is not designed to be permanent. After students have gained the habit of anticipating and marking sentence structures, they will no longer need to physically write analytical symbols into the text. Instead, they can simply read the text with a “feel” for what words are grouped together and how clauses articulate the sentence rather than seeing a stream of isolated words and then trying to jostle them into some significance after the fact.