

Ancient Greek as an Inflected Language

GRAEME BIRD: Greek as an inflected language.

This is not inflection as in when you raise or lower your voice — not that kind of inflection — but inflection meaning that the ends of the words change depending on what the function is. For instance, if you look up the dictionary for the very first word in the *Iliad*, **μῆνις** [*mēnis*] meaning ‘wrath’, you’ll find in the dictionary that it’s **μῆνις** but then when you read the first word of the *Iliad* in Greek it’s **μῆνιν** [*mēnin*] with a different ending. And when you first start learning Greek this might be a little disconcerting because the word’s not in my dictionary, but it’s like looking up the word ‘book’. ‘Book’ in the dictionary is there, but what about ‘books’ — is that in the dictionary? No, because ‘books’ is just an inflection of ‘book’.

But English only has a very few inflections — it’s rather boring actually! — because if you go back and read *Beowulf* a thousand years ago, English had lots more inflections, but it seems like over time languages tend to drop their inflections. But they compensate by their word order becoming more rigid. Similarly with Greek. And it goes even further back: Greek is part of the Indo-European family of languages, and if you go back and look at the oldest languages like Greek, and Latin, and Sanskrit, and Hittite, their words had lots of different possible endings or inflections.

And what do these inflections do? They change the function of the word. So if you look in Robert Fagles’ translation of the *Iliad*, he starts with the word “Rage” and it’s something like “Rage, sing the rage of Peleus’ son Achilles” or something

like that, and if you know your English grammar, the word ‘rage’ is the direct object of the verb, “sing the rage”. In English, normally the direct object has to go after the verb. In poetry, you can put it before the verb for special cases, so “Rage, sing the rage”. We know it’s the direct object because of the structure of the sentence, and the placement of the words.

But in Greek we know it’s the direct object because it changed its ending, its inflection. So one inflection is used for the direct object, another is for the possessor — the genitive or possessive case — in English we usually use apostrophe **s** in the singular, or **s** apostrophe in the plural. Then there’s another case, the dative, used for the indirect object — if you’re giving something **to** someone, or doing something **for** someone. So that’s three: that’s the accusative for direct object, genitive for possession, and dative for indirect object. And of course the subject, the nominative, is the sort of base case that when you look up the word in the dictionary it’ll be in the nominative singular — like ‘book’. And then Greek even has a fifth case, the vocative: if you’re addressing someone, or something, talking to them in the second person, so, “O book!” — I don’t know if you talk to your books, but....

SARAH SCOTT: Oh, yeah — all the time!

GRAEME BIRD: All the time! Yes. We’re very close to our books. So in English we would maybe put the word ‘O’ before a noun if we’re addressing it, but in Greek lots of Greek nouns have a way of changing the ending to show that it’s in the vocative case. So that’s five cases. And they’re all in the singular. And then for the plural there’s another set of endings for the plural. So that’s up to ten case endings, inflections. And in Homeric Greek there was something else called the dual. So if you specifically wanted to refer to two things, not just one, and not a bunch, but just two, there were some special endings or inflections for the dual.

So two eyes, or two hands — and there's some famous cases in Homer's *Iliad* where there's two people, and Homer specifically says there were two people, and it gets kind of interesting: this is in Book IX of the *Iliad*. At one point there are two people, and later it's the plural, so there's this shifting, and people have argued about that: it's a kind of interesting story.

So... Greek, as I said, Greek being one of the Indo-European family of languages — Indo-European languages, especially the old ones, tend to share this propensity for inflections. And the further back you go, the more of them they'll have. So Sanskrit has eight cases. But Sanskrit has evolved into modern Hindi, and it has — I forget how many, but nowhere near eight. Modern Greek has three, so it's lost two of the five. English has, like none, or maybe a fraction of a case with the apostrophe, whereas Old English had four, or possibly five inflections or cases. So as the case endings drop away how do you compensate? How do you show that a word is in the direct object function? In modern English it comes after the verb, and that's a good clue that that's the function of the word. So no inflection but the word placement shows the function of the word.

Going back to Greek, if you have all these case endings you don't need to put words in a fixed order. So the word in the direct object, in the accusative, could go anywhere in the sentence, because it's **μήνιν** [*mēnin*] ending with the **ν** [*nu*] we know it's the accusative singular: no ambiguity, no way. It could be the first word, second, last, it'll always be the direct object. So when you're learning ancient Greek word order's very flexible. And so when you're first translating you want to beware of doing a word-for-word translation because it would be in the wrong order if you translate them. So that's why you have to look at each word and its endings separately, decide what its function is, and then kind of rearrange the pieces, like a little jigsaw puzzle.

SARAH SCOTT: Right, so that first line of the *Iliad* that you were talking about, if you weren't paying attention to the cases, it would sound as if it's the anger singing the goddess, which doesn't make any sense at all.

GRAEME BIRD: No, that would be a little unusual: anger singing! But yes, that's right. And as students we all sometimes start off by forgetting that, and we come out with a rather strange-looking translation. And then we say, "well, that can't be right: let me look at the grammar again and make this make better sense." But it's kind of an adventure. I remember I started Greek at high school — there's another thing about inflections: in Greek sometimes the beginning of the word changes, so verbs, when they go into the past tense, they often change: they put a vowel on the front — and I remember in high school looking up a word and because words are in the dictionary based on their first letter, if that first letter changes then what are you looking up? I remember taking forty-five minutes once to find the word I was trying to look up in the dictionary! But when I found it, what a feeling of success and triumph. So: it's an adventure. It's a wonderful adventure, learning Greek.