

# Teaching the Syntax of Classical Languages

*A report compiled by Jerker Blomqvist & Karin Blomqvist  
(Lund University)*

## 1 Introductory

**1.1** Syntax is the most complex and arguably the most important part of grammar. Elements of vocabulary and morphology can be isolated from their context and studied as independent items, syntax is about relationships and, since those relationships convey meanings that are not indicated by individual words or their morphemes, syntax actually is about semantics, i.e., the message of the text, which is the main reason why a classical philologist studies the literary monuments of antiquity. Only when understanding the nature of the relationships existing between the individual elements, it is possible to grasp the contents of a sentence or a complex of sentences.

The description of those relationships and their semantic content necessitates the use of a number of abstract concepts, which make the teaching and learning of syntax a more complex process than the teaching and learning of vocabulary and morphology. At the same time, the syntax is the most crucial element of language to someone who reads the classical texts in order to understand their message.

**1.2** If you compare Greek and Latin schools grammars with each other, you will in most cases observe that, in the Latin grammars, syntax comprises more pages, as compared to the morphology part, than in the Greek grammars. In grammars published in later decades, the difference is not that noticeable, although it is still there; in grammars of the first half of the 20th century and earlier periods, syntax was largely neglected in Greek school grammars, whereas it was an important part of Latin grammars. Conceivable reasons for this disparity are:

— Greek syntax is less regular or less regulated than Latin syntax. Many Greek texts among those that have generally been read at schools and universities, were written in the archaic and early classical periods, before there existed any methodical way of studying language: grammar had simply not been invented. The Latin texts of the school curriculum, on the other hand, were almost without

exception written by people who had attended schools where grammar was taught, and grammar as taught in schools has always tended to be more prescriptive than descriptive. The Latin texts consequently follow rules that the writers had learnt at school and that did not leave much room for divergences or individualism, whereas the early Greek writers had no grammatical tradition to rely upon. This may have created the impression that Greek is less regular syntactically and therefore syntax is of less interest to the teachers. Also, the peculiar character of New Testament Greek may have had an impact here. The texts of the New Testament were among the texts most frequently read at schools and, since the deviations of New Testament Greek were normally classified as irregularities, this may have contributed to creating the belief that Greek is an inherently more irregular language than Latin.

— Greek syntax has been less thoroughly investigated by scholars than Latin syntax. This is certainly true, and there is still a lack of balance, as a look in any relevant library catalogue or bibliography will show.

— In earlier centuries the teaching of Latin in the schools of Europe aimed at making the students competent to produce their own texts in the language, whereas Greek has been taught for other purposes, or for other purposes as well. For the producing of texts in correct Latin, it was necessary to master a set of syntactic rules; in order to translate a text from the foreign language, such rules were not equally indispensable. Therefore, Greek syntax was less important than Latin. In our time the pedagogical situation has changed, and both Greek and Latin are primarily studied as means for reading classical literature and other ancient texts in their original language.

— When learning/teaching Greek, more time must be devoted to morphology, since Greek morphology is more complex than Latin morphology. For the teaching of the language a teacher will have only so many lessons at his or her disposal and, in Greek, morphology requires more lessons than in Latin, so in Latin more time can be assigned to the teaching of syntax and a greater portion of the pages in the grammar can also be devoted to syntax.

It is highly motivated to devote a sufficient amount of time to syntax in the teaching of Greek as well. Syntax is crucial for the understanding of the texts, and Greek syntax is no less complicated than Latin syntax. In particular, since ancient Greek texts and their syntax are not homogeneous and uniform but vary with genres and periods much more than Latin, it is necessary to give the students a basis that allows them to find their way in this ever-changing linguistic landscape. Preferably, the students of Greek should not just learn a set of syntactic rules but rather strive to acquire a more general competence in linguistic matters that enables them to assess the significance of divergences from the

norm they are acquainted with; such divergences are likely to occur repeatedly in the texts they study.

**1.3** When teaching elementary Latin or Greek it is natural to combine morphology and syntax: when a morphological category is treated for the first time, its primary syntactic and semantic functions should also be presented to the students. Thus, in a textbook for the elementary level, each section contains both morphology and syntax. In a grammar that is intended to function as a reference book, on the other hand, it is motivated to separate morphology and syntax from each other. Given that many students will have little theoretical knowledge of grammar and linguistics, it is necessary, both in the elementary courses and in the reference grammar, to define and explain carefully the terms used for denoting the syntactic and semantic functions.

## **2 Crucial issues**

Certain syntactical phenomena require more attention than others. Which these are in a concrete educational situation depends on what the first language of the students is and what other languages they have learnt before entering the study of Greek and Latin. In the following we will point to certain sectors of syntax that, in our experience, create particular difficulties for students who are speakers of the Scandinavian languages. In many cases, the same phenomena need particular attention in the other European countries, too, and we try to identify such cases as well, in so far our knowledge of the other languages allows that, but the whole section is primarily based on the situation in Scandinavia, in particular with Swedish-speaking students involved.

In the first place we wish to comment on three phenomena of Greek and Latin syntax that are likely to create initial difficulties to speakers of the Scandinavian languages of today, viz., word order, agreement and the functions of the case forms.

*Word order:* When transferring a sentence from one Germanic language to another, it is often possible to achieve an acceptable result by translating one word after another in the order they appear in the source language. Not the sentence as a unit, but each individual word, is translated, and the resulting string of words will in many cases form an intelligible sentence in the target language. The reason for this is that the Germanic languages—and French—have a very strict word order that is approximately the same in all of them: the normal word order is subject-verb-object (SOV) or, in continental Germanic and Scandinavian languages, XVSO (in sentences where another element than the subject (here denoted by “X”) comes first). German and Dutch also place infinite verb forms differently from the other languages and have a divergent word order in subordinate clauses, but on the whole the similarities between these languages are so close that even an unreflecting translator will achieve a usable result by word-by-word translation.

Applying the same method to a Latin or Greek sentence will in most cases prove disastrous. Before a translation of a sentence is possible, not only the meanings of the individual words must be established; also their functions on the syntactic level must be

identified. Syntactic function is not indicated by the position of the word in the sentence, as in the Germanic languages, but by its termination. This is a lesson that must be taught to students of the classical languages at an initial stage of their studies: only after analyzing the syntax of the Latin or Greek sentence, it is possible to translate it, with due regard to the word order rules of the target language.

One problem met with by teachers in this context is the fact that word order is largely neglected in school grammars.<sup>1</sup> At most, grammars declare that the word order of Latin and Greek is “free” or at least freer than in the “modern languages”.<sup>2</sup> Such declarations are based on the supposition that non-free word order is always determined by the syntactic functions of the words, and they tend to equal “modern languages” with the Germanic languages which display precisely this sort of non-free word order.

If teachers of classical languages cannot expect much support from current school grammars when explaining Greek and Latin word order to their students, the authors of school grammars are also in an awkward position, for the research done on Greek and Latin word order so far is not sufficient to account for its intricacies. It is only in the last decades that research on word order in the classical languages has begun to yield reliable results.<sup>3</sup> It seems clear that syntax is not a decisive factor in Greek and Latin word order but that it is mainly pragmatic factors that decide the order of words. Also it is not possible to establish rules with the same degree of general applicability as, e.g., in the Germanic languages; we should perhaps speak of tendencies rather than rules when it comes to the classical languages.

Thus, much work remains to be done, but it is time, we think, that the results reached so far are introduced in elementary teaching. It is imperative to point out to the students that syntax does not decide word order in the classical languages and that a Latin or Greek sentence must be analyzed syntactically on its own before it can be translated into a language with syntactically determined word order. On the other hand, it should also be stressed that Greek and Latin word order is not free; only, the factors governing word order are not syntactic but pragmatic and our knowledge of how those pragmatic factors work is incomplete.

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<sup>1</sup> An illustrative example is provided by Jerker Blomqvist & Poul Ole Jastrup, *Grekisk–Græsk grammatik*. 3rd ed., København, 2006, which is used in Scandinavian universities and secondary schools. In the 448 pages of the book there are a few scattered remarks on position of clitics, postpositive particles and certain elements of nominal phrases but nothing at all on word order in complex sentences.

<sup>2</sup> Cf., e.g., Eduard Bornemann & Ernst Risch, *Griechische Grammatik*. 2. Aufl., Frankfurt am Main 1978, § 144: “Die Wortstellung ist im Griechischen (wie auch im Lateinischen) freier als in den modernen Sprachen, weil der syntaktische Zusammenhang schon weitgehend durch die Flexionsendungen bestimmt wird.”

<sup>3</sup> Two important works on Greek and Latin, respectively, are: Helma Dik, *Word Order in Ancient Greek. A Pragmatic Account of Word Order Variation in Herodotus*, Amsterdam 1995, and A.M. Devine & Laurence D. Stephens, *Latin Word Order. Structured Meaning and Information*, Oxford 2006.

*Agreement (concord)*: The rich morphology of the classical languages also has its consequences for the structuring of sentences and our methods for interpreting them. There are rules for agreement on the morphological level between subject and verb and between substantives and their adjuncts. This has consequences also for word order. In the Germanic languages the connection of a substantive with its adjuncts is mostly indicated by word order, which leads to the creation of nominal phrases where the positions of the individual elements are decided by their syntactical functions. Such nominal phrases occur also in the classical languages but, since morphology is a sufficient indicator of their coherence and the individual roles of the elements, the internal links tend to be looser than in the Germanic languages. When interpreting sentences the students must be taught to interpret the morphological agreement correctly.

The relative looseness of the nominal phrases in Greek and Latin, in combination with the possibility to indicate a syntactical link by morphological means only, may give rise to what has been labelled as “discontinuous syntax”, especially the phenomenon of *hyperbaton*, which is a well-known feature in the ancient texts. In school grammars, if mentioned at all, it is often explained as a stylistic device. However, hyperbaton is probably not motivated only by considerations of style; there may also be pragmatic factors at work here, as in the context of other word order phenomena.<sup>4</sup> Irrespective of what explanation is the correct one, it is necessary to train the students to be attentive to the fact that the ancient writers may exploit the morphological opulence of their languages to create sentences with, from our point of view, surprising word order.

*Case forms*: When it comes to the case system of substantives, the European languages of today display an almost bewildering diversity. The Finno-Ugric languages have a case system that is much richer than the Indo-European one. The old Indo-European system has been preserved fairly intact in the Baltic and Slavic languages, partially also in Greek and German, whereas the other Germanic languages retain only the genitive, and Romance languages and Semitic Maltese have no case terminations at all.

To Scandinavians the use of the case forms in the classical languages appears to be a rather strange thing initially. Scandinavian languages have a genitive, it is true, but it is used nearly only in one function, viz., as possessive genitive. The rich spectre of syntactic and semantic functions that the genitive has in Latin and, in particular, Greek is quite without parallel in the Scandinavian languages. The other case forms of Greek and Latin have no counterpart at all in the Scandinavian languages (with the exception that personal pronouns have a particular form when used in the syntactical function of object or after prepositions). What is expressed solely by case forms in the classical languages, is mostly expressed by preposition phrases in the Scandinavian languages.

When teaching Latin and Greek to Scandinavians, it is imperative to make the students attentive to the case endings and to train them in identifying the semantic functions they have. Case syntax will therefore mainly be about semantics. It is of great help if the

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<sup>4</sup> A.M. Devine, Laurence D. Stephens, *Discontinuous Syntax. Hyperbaton in Greek*, New York 1999. Cf. also the chapter on hyperbaton in Devine & Stephens, *Latin Word Order*, pp. 524–610.

students already from the beginning are given a list of what semantic functions may theoretically be expressed by case forms in the language they learn (we will return to the question of semantic functions below). It is not enough to make clear the syntactic relations in the sentence; also the meanings expressed by the syntactic relationships must be determined before the sentence can be understood.

These are in our opinion the three areas in which the speakers of the Scandinavian languages are most likely to experience difficulties when learning to interpret texts in Latin and Greek. However, there are of course other obstacles as well, some of which we list briefly here:

*Time and aspect:* Aspect is not expressed by morphological means in the Germanic languages. Scandinavian students tend to regard the Greek verb system as bewildering if they are not from the beginning taught the difference in meaning between the imperfect and the aorist indicative.

Also the concept of “mode of action” (*Aktionsart*), which we regard as essential for explaining the Greek perfect, may cause problems because students are unfamiliar with it.<sup>5</sup>

*Participle phrases and infinitive phrases:* These tend to become incomparably more complex in Greek and Latin than in the Scandinavian languages. Students should be encouraged to regard such phrases as quite comparable to clauses with finite verb forms and to analyze them in the same way.

*Pro-drop:* In the Scandinavian languages a word functioning as subject must be present in all clauses with a finite verb; similar rules apply to the other Germanic languages, even in sentences like *It rains*, where the pronoun has no reference. In Greek and Latin unstressed pronouns are not normally inserted as subjects but the termination of the verb is sufficient to indicate the subject. That phenomenon is so common that students easily learn to cope with it.

The absence of pronouns when functioning as objects is a less common manifestation of the same phenomenon. Since it occurs relatively seldom in the texts, students will be unprepared for it when it appears and may become confused, if they have not been taught to expect it.

Pronouns may be absent also when the subject changes in a pair of clauses and where a pronoun would make it clear that a change of subject has taken place. In such cases the meaning of the verb, not its termination, indicates the change of subject. E.g., in the sentence πολλάκις ἡ γυνὴ ἀπήει ... ὡς τὸ παιδίον, ἵνα τὸν τιτθὸν αὐτῷ διδῶ καὶ μὴ βοᾷ (Lysias 1.10), a word-by-word translation of which would be “the woman often went

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<sup>5</sup> When Blomqvist & Jastrup’s grammar appeared, it was claimed even by experienced Hellenists that mode of action was an unnecessary increment to the terminology; aspect was sufficient to explain everything.

to the baby to give him the breast and not cry”, it is only the meaning of βράσσει that indicates that the subject of that verb is the baby and not his mother. This phenomenon is fairly common in Greek (but uncommon in other languages?); surprisingly enough, it seldom causes difficulties.

### 3 How to teach syntax

**3.1** First of all we want to lay down a rule that we regard as evidently correct: Syntactic rules should not be learnt isolated. Syntax should be studied in combination with the reading of texts.

**3.2** Teaching or studying syntax necessitates the definition of a theoretical base that is adapted to the language that is being studied and appropriate to the purpose for which the syntax of that language is studied. Since the ultimate goal of the study of the classical languages is the correct interpretation of the ancient texts, the theory chosen for the study of syntax should be one that focuses on the concrete texts and their role as bearer of messages, whereas theories that rather direct themselves towards explaining linguistic generalities are of less interest to a classicist. A theoretical framework that seems to meet that requirement is the variety of functional grammar developed by Simon C. Dik<sup>6</sup> and successfully applied, in particular by Dutch classicists,<sup>7</sup> to Greek and Latin.

The compilers of this report are influenced by this grammatical model. This does not mean that we deny the applicability of other models or that we ourselves in every respect are faithful to the tenets of FG.

One essential feature of Dik’s model of functional grammar, of particular relevance in this context, is that it systematically distinguishes between syntactic and semantic functions. We will use that distinction in the following.

**3.3** In most Greek and Latin grammars you will find that one of the main sections bears the heading “Syntax”. However, actually, much of what is included under that heading is not syntax in the strict sense of the word, but rather semantics. In fact, the syntax sections of Greek and Latin grammars normally include three different components:

- a. syntactic relationships (Which word goes with which?)
- b. syntactic functions (subject, object, satellite, etc.)
- b. semantic functions (agent, patient, time, cause, etc.)

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. Simon C. Dik, *Functional Grammar*. Amsterdam etc. 1978 (North-Holland Linguistic Series 37); *Studies in Functional Grammar*, London & New York 1981.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., Albert Rijksbaron, *The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek. An Introduction*. 3rd edition, Amsterdam 2002 [first edition 1984].

In some grammars, also stylistics is treated in the section entitled “Syntax”, at least partially.<sup>8</sup>

Syntactic *relationships* can easily be visualized by ordinary tree diagrams and similar graphic devices, which can be generated by computers and be displayed on their screens, as long as we are concerned only to establish what word is construed with what. The complex hierarchies that may be present in Greek and Latin sentences are not always easy to depict graphically, but it should be pointed out that Nicoletta Natalucci’s *Nuovo metodo grammaticale* succeeds in doing that.

Syntactic *functions* are often indicated in tree diagrams and the like and can easily be included in computer displays, as shown by the *Nuovo metodo* as well. When it comes to terminology, there are differences between different grammatical models. In the following we will use the terminology adopted by FG (subject, object, etc.), where others may use designations like “A(rgument)1”, “A2”), etc.

*Semantic functions* are more difficult to handle with computer technique, but a text could probably be “tagged” with semantic functions (as with morphological and lexical information).

A requirement is that there exists agreement on what and how many the semantic functions are. On their number it will be difficult to arrive at an agreement, since semantic functions are likely to be an open class. Some of them are more frequently occurring than others, and some of the infrequent ones are possibly missing in certain cultures. However, for practical purposes, it is probably possible to achieve agreement on a number of semantic functions that are relevant when interpreting texts in the classical languages. The following list is an attempt at recording the most relevant ones. It is inspired by Dik’s and Rijksbaron’s works mentioned in two preceding footnotes but also influenced by the list of “thematic roles” in Devine & Stephens.<sup>9</sup>

- agent
- experiencer
- patient/goal
- beneficiary
- place (sub-divisions: location, source, direction, path)
- time (sub-divisions: moment, duration, time-span, frequency)
- circumstances

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<sup>8</sup> E.g., vol. 2 of Schwyzer & Debrunner’s *Griechische Grammatik* (München 1950) has the subtitle *Syntax und syntaktische Stilistik*.

<sup>9</sup> Devine & Stephens, *Latin Word Order*, pp. 10–11. For a different list, cf. Blomqvist & Jastrup, *Grekisk–Græsk grammatik*, pp. 166–167. Blomqvist & Jastrup do not distinguish “agent” from “experiencer”. On the other hand, their list includes “restriction of validity of affirmation” exemplified, e.g., by traditional grammar’s *dativus iudicantis* as in Ἐπιδαμνός ἐστι πόλις ἐν δεξιᾷ εἰσπλέουτι τὸ Ἴόνιον κόλπον (Thucydides 1.24.1).

manner  
instrument  
cause  
purpose  
result

To conclude, we add two examples of how sentences could be analyzed according to the method suggested above. They are two sentences from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*:

πολλάκις ἐθαύμασα τίσι ποτὲ λόγοις Ἀθηναίους ἔπεισαν οἱ γραψάμενοι Σωκράτην ὡς ἄξιός εἴη θανάτου τῇ πόλει (*Mem.* 1.1.1)

I have many times wondered by what arguments those who accused Socrates could persuade the Athenians that his life was forfeit to the state

Σωκράτης δὲ ἐπηγγείλατο μὲν οὐδενὶ πώποτε τοιοῦτον οὐδέν, ἐπίστευε δέ .... (*Mem.* 1.2.8)

Socrates never promised such a thing to anybody, but he was confident ...

The analysis is to great extent inspired by Natalucci's *Nuovo metodo* but we use the terminology of Functional Grammar and add information on semantic functions.

Green quadrangles frame units containing a finite verb, i.e. sentences and subordinate clauses embedded in the sentences. Yellow ovals contain nominal phrases. Subjects not expressed in the text have been added within ovals with dotted borders.

Black arrows indicate syntactic relations; they have, when possible, been supplemented with indications of syntactic function in blue print and of semantic functions in red.

Subordinators appear in green circles (ὡς).

In our analysis of the second of the two sentences we have tried to find a method for indicating the coordinators (connective particles) and their syntactic function. They are also put in green circles, but an arrow (also green) is added to make their function clear. Thus, postpositive δέ (after Σωκράτης) is supplied with an arrow pointing to the left hand margin, i.e., to the preceding sentence (not quoted here). The preparatory μὲν (after ἐπηγγείλατο) is supplied with an arrow leading to the δέ of the following sentence (of which only the two first words (ἐπίστευε δέ) are quoted). Since these particles convey relevant information on how the successive sentences relate to each other, we think it important to indicate at least their syntactic functions.

In the first sentence we have left the semantic function of θανάτου (which, syntactically, is construed with ἄξιός) undefined. This demonstrates a deficiency of our model; the semantic functions listed above primarily concern the relationship between verbs and their adjuncts, whereas the functions of such elements as are construed with substantives and other nominal elements are not accounted for.



