

The Nature of Language and How That Affects Study Methodology

by Dan Trygg

A language is a complex system of symbols, rules and conventions created to communicate meaning between people. Different languages use a variety of methods to build a system of speaking/writing that will effectively transfer meaning from one person to another. To learn to understand any language, a newcomer must begin to recognize the *codes of meaning* in the words, as well as the *functional structure signals* in the words and grammatical patterns used to build sentences. Greek, like Latin, is a highly **inflectional** language, which means that the Greeks relied heavily on word prefixes (additions to the beginning of words), infixes (additions in the middle of the word), and suffixes (additions to the end of words) to signal the function of the words in a given sentence. The study of these *word form changes* is called **morphology**.

In addition to the basic structure signals involved in some of the word forms, Greeks also used other methods to combine thoughts together into more complex sentences. These include the use of prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, adverbs, infinitives, and participles as ways to tie other clauses into a sentence. These additional phrases or thoughts **modify**, or *further define*, aspects of the word-picture that the speaker/writer wishes to communicate. The study of these *relationships between words and clauses* has to do with the area of language study known as **syntax**.

Semantics is the study of *meaning* in a language. This can include all of the above, but begins most simply and directly with the meaning of words, or **vocabulary**. Without a working knowledge of vocabulary, you can recognize the structure and relationship between words and clauses, but still not know what is being said.

In order to read and understand NT Greek, all of these areas need to be addressed. First, comes **orthography**, the *correct writing and reading of the letters*, and the ability to reproduce the sounds represented by the Greek letters. Second, comes a learning and mastery of the **morphology** of the noun/adjective and verbal systems. Third, along with these two areas, it is necessary to develop a **working vocabulary**. Finally, a growing awareness of **syntax** begins to come into view. Eventually, this should grow into a more specific study of these grammatical language techniques and their significance. First and second year Greek students tend to focus most of their time and attention on the first three areas. Third and fourth year students focus more on syntax and proper methods of exegesis and interpretation. A student needs to develop a significant level of mastery in the first three areas before he or she is able to begin to grasp enough of the larger picture to effectively see what is going on in the relationship between clauses.

One of the benefits of learning Greek inductively is that you end up doing all of it all at once, rather than in stages. It is exciting to work with actual Biblical texts to see the difference your Greek studies can make in your understanding of the Scriptures. It is rewarding to translate something that you can see has some real relevance to your life now. As your awareness of Greek language fundamentals grows, your appreciation for “why” things are laid out as they are will also develop. Good habits of study and interpretation will be modeled from the beginning. The steps taken are all important, though some of them may seem redundant. As with any area of endeavor, mastery of basic skills is essential, since they are the foundation for higher level skills. Since language study is about developing skills, having a careful, thorough, but holistic, modeling of methodology is invaluable for the eventual goal of accurate understanding and translation.