

Adjectives

Consider a sentence in English:

The boy went to the store and bought his father a gift.

Compared with:

*The **young** boy went to the **large, crowded** store and bought his **elderly** father an **expensive** gift.*

Importance

Adjectives provide description, detail, and depth to a simple sentence in English. Adjectives may be even more important in Koine Greek:

There has never been a language which, in its use of the adjective, presented greater wealth or variety than in Greek. Hence it is highly necessary that the student of the Greek New Testament should be familiar with at least the more characteristic features of the Greek use of the adjective.¹

Mounce agrees: “Adjectives have a theological importance that is hard to rival.”²

Function

An adjective “denotes some fact which distinguishes or qualifies a noun.”³ Remember the two example sentences at the beginning of this article. Notice how much more information is provided by the simple addition of a few adjectives. Think about how the additional information affects your understanding of the situation. If you had to “interpret” or “exegete” the sentence consider how much more you would know from the second sentence and what is lost if you only had the first.

“Agreement” is a key principle in the Greek use of adjectives. When an adjective is used to modify a noun, the adjective must agree with the noun in case, gender, and number. This rule can be useful if there is any ambiguity about which noun is being modified.

Form

“The adjective is abundant in the variations of its use in Greek...”⁴ While we are not concentrating on learning the multitude of forms in various noun declensions and verb tenses, it is important to be familiar with some of the rules of syntax, or how words can be related to each other. Since Greek word order can be quite different from English, recognizing the “abundant variations” can help avoid confusion when interpreting the Greek text.

¹ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 115.

² William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 63.

³ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 117.

⁴ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 117.

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Attributive use

ὁ ἀγαθὸς λόγος “the good word”

or

ὁ λόγος ὁ ἀγαθός “the good word”

Predicate use

ὁ λόγος ἀγαθός “the word is good”

or

ἀγαθός ὁ λόγος “the word is good”

Substantive use

ὁ ἀγαθός “the good one”, or “the good man” (masculine)

ἡ ἀγαθή “the good one”, or “the good woman” (feminine)

τὸ ἀγαθόν “the good one”, or “the good thing” or just, “the good” (neuter)

At this early stage of learning Greek, the nuances between the Attributive and Predicate uses are not as important as just recognizing the variety of ways adjectives can be positioned relative to the noun being modified. However, in the interest of completeness, the differences between the three uses are summarized in Mounce. Adjectives “can modify a noun (attributive), assert something about a noun (predicate), or stand in the place of a noun (substantival).”⁵ As you use technical commentaries (that deal with the Greek text), you may encounter references to Attributive or Predicate use, so being familiar with the terms will be helpful.

Take the adjective πονηροῦ (“evil”) in Matthew 6:13, for example. The King James version (as well as more than one modern translation) translates this as “but deliver us from evil.” But the adjective has an article modifying it (του), indicating that it is to be taken substantively: “the evil one.”

And there is no little theological difference between the two. The Father does not always keep his children out of danger, disasters, or the ugliness of the world. In short, he does not always deliver us from evil. But he does deliver us from the evil *one*. The text is not teaching that God will make our life a rose garden, but that he will protect us from the evil one, the devil himself (cf. John 10:28-30; 17:15).⁶

⁵ William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 63.

⁶ Daniel B. Wallace in William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek Grammar* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 63.