

Grammarian's Corner

Word Order, Part III Participles

ERRATUM: In the January 2006 installment of Grammarian's Corner, the first footnote (concerning predicate nominatives) was placed inaccurately in the text as printed. It should have been placed after the fourth sentence rather than after the third.

In the first two contributions to this series, we considered, first, general issues of word order, and then, word order as it pertains to articles, nouns, and adjectives. This essay continues the "word order and adjective" theme, examining the word order of participles, forms of verbs that have adjectival characteristics.

Participles, as do adjectives, occur in both attributive and predicate positions. Again, as with adjectives, those in attributive position will follow an article directly, while those in predicate position will not be so placed. Here are examples:

1. Attributive:

- a. ὁ λέγων τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἄνηρ ἔρχεται, or
b. ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ λέγων τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται.
- c. ὁ θεὸς εὐλογεῖ τὸν λέγοντα τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἄνδρα, or
d. ὁ θεὸς εὐλογεῖ τὸν ἄνδρα τὸν λέγοντα τὴν ἀλήθειαν.

2. Predicate:

- a. ὁ ἀνὴρ ἦν λέγων.

How are we to understand the participles in each of these two positions? In many respects, exactly the same as we understood adjectives previously, though some features are more complex.

1. Those in attributive position are parallel to attributive position adjectives that describe a noun directly. Unlike simple adjectives, however, participles contain within themselves a verbal component which must be reflected in the understanding and translation. Thus, 1.a can be translated "The speaking the truth man is coming," which may be rendered more "clearly," "The man, the one speaking the truth, is coming" (closer, literalistically, to 1.b). These are parallel to the following sentences, which contain simple adjectives:

- 1.a. ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἀνὴρ ἔρχεται, or,
 1 b. ὁ ἀνὴρ ὁ ἀγαθὸς ἔρχεται.

Such sentences would normally be rendered as “The good man is coming,” or “The man, the good one, is coming.” Likewise, sentences 1.c and 1.d, above, can be rendered “God is blessing the man speaking the truth,” with the understanding that this could also be rendered, “God is blessing the man, the one speaking the truth” (closer, literalistically, to 1.d).

2. Participles in predicate position do not modify a noun directly, even as was true with basic adjectives in predicate position. If the verb εἰμί is employed in the sentence, the participle also has a predicate nominative function and may be so translated. Thus, sentence 2.a, above, may be rendered “The man was speaking.” This is parallel to the following sentence, which contains a simple adjective as a predicate nominative:

- 2.a. ὁ ἀνὴρ ἦν ἀγαθός.

This may be rendered, “The man was good.”

Note that in all instances above, the gender, number, and case of the participle is congruent with that of the noun it modifies. (Thus, in 1.a, 1.b, and 2.a, since the participle modifies the subject of the sentence, ἀνὴρ, which is masculine, nominative, and singular, it also must be masculine, nominative, and singular [λέγων], while in 1.c and 1.d, it modifies the object, ἄνδρα, which is in the accusative case, so it, too, must be accusative [λέγοντα]).

Readers reasonably familiar with Greek will notice, however, that we have oversimplified greatly to this point. First of all, the renderings into English of the attributive position participles (1.a-d, above) were awkward and unidiomatic, to say the least. Smoother would be the following translations: “The man who is speaking the truth is coming,”¹ and “God is blessing the man who is speaking the truth.”² Second, most predicate position participles do not occur with the verb “to be” and thus are not capable of being rendered as a predicate nominative (i.e., as a predicate nominative of progressive action).³ More occur in structures such as the following:

(2. Predicate)

- b. λέγων τὴν ἀλήθειαν ὁ ἄνθρωπος ἔρχεται.
 c. ὁ ἀνὴρ λέγων τὴν ἀλήθειαν ἔρχεται.
 d. ὁ θεὸς εὐλογεῖ τὸν ἄνδρα λέγοντα τὴν ἀλήθειαν.
 e. ὁ θεὸς εὐλογεῖ λέγοντα τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὸν ἄνδρα.

¹ Or, “...who speaks the truth...”

² Or, “...who speaks the truth...”

³ This is often called a “periphrastic” construction.

Both of these observations indicate that there is more afoot with participles than meets the eye when one confines talk simply to the matter of word order. In our next installment, we will, therefore, turn to participles once again, to discuss more fully their nature and the various features of their usage.

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