

Tips on translation, 1: Verbs that take unexpected cases

Translations given in these first few lessons, which are those given generally in textbooks as declension is introduced, only represent a general equivalent in the modern language in which ancient Greek is taught, in our case, English. The translation “to, for” should be used in a first interpretation of the dative in a sentence, but it does not necessarily represent the final equivalent that English calls for. In other words, “literal” translation does not always work. This is something that the student of Greek learns by the experience of reading, and with attention to a vocabulary that shows that a verb takes an unexpected case as a complement, as the vocabularies in this course attempt to do by indicating “+ genitive,” “+ accusative,” etc.

For example, some Greek verbs *take* the genitive, that is, *require* a complement in the genitive, but we cannot translate them “literally” at the risk of writing incomprehensible or unidiomatic English, such as: “I long **of wisdom**” instead of “for wisdom,” “do not neglect **of virtue**” instead of “do not neglect virtue.” Other verbs take the dative in Greek, but cannot be translated as “to or for” in English, since we would be saying, e.g., “he blames **to or for me**” instead of “he blames me.” There are innumerable instances where Greek and English differ, just as there are many instances where constructions in modern languages differ from one another.

πιστεύω takes the dative in ancient Greek, yet (as we will learn later) in Biblical Greek it is often followed by a construction that we would have to translate literally as “believe **toward** God.”

ἀκούω takes in Greek a genitive of a *person* the subject hears or listens to, but constructs as a direct object *something* heard. Yet in English we cannot translate ἀκούω τοῦ διδασκάλου as “I hear **of** the teacher,” because it does not mean that I hear about the teacher but that I hear the teacher.

This is a rule of thumb for translation of such unexpected complements: if the vocabulary, a dictionary, or a grammar book says πιστεύω + dat, or ἀκούω + genitive, try the literal translation and you will realize that English has a different construction, then *express the thought in English idiomatically*.

I am not promising that you won't make mistakes, but how else can one learn? :)