Translation Strategies

Translating Greek is often like doing a jigsaw puzzle, where you start with the corners [verbs] and edges [subjects and objects] because they define the design, then fill in the interlocking interior, sometimes with large chunks [prepositional phrases, parallel constructions, etc.] that you can readily recognize in the design. The first principle of translation from Greek is:

**WORD NOT ORDER RELY GREEK ON DO!!**

Now that you know not to rely on word order, what do you do?

1. **Find all the finite (main) verbs in the sentence.** If there are none, supply a finite form of ἔίμι, or less often, γίνομαι.

2. **Divide the sentence into clauses** using structural signpost words such as the conjunctions
   
   καί *and, also, even*
   
   τε *and*
   
   ἀλλά *but, but rather*
   
   δὲ *but and*
   
   μὲν . . . δὲ *one the one hand . . . on the other hand; some . . . others, etc.*
   
   γάρ *for/because*
   
   ἐὰν *if*
   
   οὔτε . . . οὔτε *neither . . . nor*

   and subordinating conjunctions such as
   
   ὅς, ὁστις *relative pronoun or indefinite relative pronoun*
   
   ὅτι or ὅς *that (after verbs introducing indirect discourse)*
   
   ὅτι εἰς or ὅς *so that; so as to (purpose clause)*

   and so on. Your editor may separate clauses with punctuation marks, but try to figure out why, because not everybody agrees on punctuation (there was none in ancient Greek) and not all editors are perfect, much less helpful when you need it. Having found the clauses, proceed to translate separately each clause which has a finite verb in it – keeping an eye for parallel or coordinated constructions which may borrow elements from previous clauses.

3. **Find the possible subject(s) of the finite verb.** Each finite verb has at least one subject. If no subject is expressed, borrow one from a preceding clause, or imply the appropriate person and number of living beings or things to agree with the finite verb. Subjects in Greek are like subjects in English – they can be nouns, pronouns, adjectives, participles, infinitives, noun phrases, prepositional phrases, relative clauses, and any other set of words which can be regarded as a unit. Subjects and finite verbs define the structure of every sentence; everything else modifies, complements or depends on those two basic elements.

4. **Identify infinitives.** They may serve as verbal complements or as nouns, and they can have their own subjects and objects. They are indeclinable neuters, but their case function can be marked with the neuter definite article ("articular infinitive"). Unlike English, infinitives in Greek prose seldom express purpose, unless marked with a genitive article.
5. **Identify prepositional phrases.** This means you need to recognize prepositions and know which case(s) they govern. Prepositional phrases usually serve as noun modifiers, adverbials, and complements of verbs, participles or adjectives. You can usually set them aside while figuring out the basic structure of the sentence, but occasionally they can serve as the subject or object of the verb.

6. **Look for possible objects** of the finite verbs and infinitives. The case of an object may be genitive, dative or accusative. In English we tend to use prepositional complements ("rule over someone," "believe in something") to express object relationships which ancient Greek authors expressed with case alone (瑷ρχειν τινός, πειθοθαί τινι). Adjectives, participles, infinitives and noun phrases can serve as nouns, and thus as objects. Not all finite verbs or infinitives have objects. Do not, however, rely on the transitive/intransitive distinction to judge whether a verb is likely to have an object.

   • In Greek as in English, transitive verbs may be "absolute," i.e. without an object expressed.
   • In Greek as in English, many verbs that are normally intransitive can be transitive and vice versa.

7. **Identify the genitives and datives.** Figure out which substantives outside of prepositional phrases may be genitive or dative, but let them float around until you need them. Between them, genitive and dative cases can serve just about every function except as the subject of a verb or infinitive (remember, the subject of an infinitive is usually accusative). Use the default translation word "of" for all genitives, unless and until you determine that "of" doesn't work.

8. **Look up the words** you don't know; carefully parse any words that don't seem to fit.

9. **Assemble the clause or sentence.** Try to comprehend the elements as far as possible in their Greek order, then start putting them into English word order. The word order of a basic English declarative sentence is SVO (subject, verb, object). We mix up that order (within strict limits) for questions, passive voice, rhetorical effect, poetry, etc. It's not entirely clear whether ancient Greek should be classified as an SVO or SOV (subject, object, verb) language. The verbs do tend to gravitate toward the ends of clauses, so SOV sentences probably outnumber SVO sentences in surviving texts. But one reason you sometimes have to go through an elaborate analytical translation process is that ancient Greek word order is far more flexible than English. We English speakers have compensated for our reduced morphology with relatively rigid word order, and it can be difficult to let go of that component of communication.

   When you have translated some Greek, if you read it over and over (preferably out loud) in Greek, trying to express the meaning which you now comprehend – just as you would when imitating phrases in a modern language – then you will be taking the best available step toward being able to read Greek rather than just decode it. But translating (i.e. decoding) accurately is the first and most important goal of studying ancient Greek, so don't worry if you can't read it like a modern language.