The Virtues and Drawbacks of Parsing

Parsing has its virtues and also its limitations. The main virtue of parsing is that it concentrates your mind. It allows you to dwell on grammar (forms) and syntax (how words are put together) in a way that nothing else can. If you are of a methodical nature it gives you satisfaction—to realize that everything has its category and function. It reveals to you exactly what you do not understand. It does not allow you to remain fuzzy. It is a "no place to hide" technique.

Example: Imagine you are translating the following sentence. δύο ἡμερῶν ἀκούσαςι μύθους. (Notice the σ on the stem in ἀκούσαςι; this tips you off that the verb is future.) Does this mean In two days they will hear stories (time within which) or On two days they will hear stories (time when) or "For two days they will hear stories" (duration)?

If you are fuzzy and vague, you might do some handwaving: "Oh, it's something about hearing stories and about two days." If you are careless and bold, you might guess at a translation: "They'll hear stories for two days." (Actually this would require an accusative of duration.)

If you are parsing, you cannot evade the issue. There it is: ἡμερῶν - genitive plural feminine. Fine! You've got the form. But what is the function?

You might remember the genitive of time within which. You might hunt through the book at random. You might look up genitive in the index and search until you find your answer. Or you might write, "I do not understand this genitive." No matter which of these you do, you will be better off, having either reviewed what you have learned or identified what you need to learn.

On the other hand, parsing can be frustrating. If you parse to the point where you want to scream and/or abandon Greek, you will not be better off. I confess, there are many words that stump me on parsing, even though I know how to translate the sentence perfectly. There are so many functions of the genitive—which one? And is the chart really complete? I don't like to classify ὦ as an adverb; it seems so different from all the others. Should I call it a negative and add another category? And on and on.

The trick with parsing is: Use it for the learning it can give and stop when it becomes too hard. Don't be lazy. Give every word a try. Stay with the puzzles when you have a hunch that you might solve them. But don't be compulsive. Let go when you hit a dead end. Be content to bring your questions to class. Be willing to leave some questions unanswered, being satisfied merely to have identified them as questions. Remember that this is Socratic wisdom: to know what you do not know.