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A Phonemic Greek Pronunciation for Roman Period Koine

If students would like to attain a fluent control of the language, to be able to think in the language or speak with it, they must come to grips with the need to include audio and oral material in a program. When a person wants to use living language methods to learn a language, one is required to make some choices about what kind of pronunciation system to use.

More particularly, there is a rather large student population on the edge of classical studies. Every year tens of thousands of students begin the study of "New Testament Greek" Koine. Some of them will continue with their studies and aspire to reach high levels of language control. What will they want to sound like at the end of the day?

Several considerations would go into designing an authentic Koine pronunciation that is also practical for speakers of West European languages. A first consideration might be a phonemic pronunciation system that fits the language use of that time. The pronunciation should preserve the same significant sound distinctions that were used in the Roman period. [NB: preserving phonemes not graphemes.]

Already in the 2nd--1st centuries BCE there was a relatively stable 7-vowel system that became entrenched around the Mediterranean [I=EI, Ý H, ÝE=AI, ÝA, ÝW=O, ÝOU, U=OI] and by the 2nd - 4th centuries CE there was a 6-vowel system [I=EI=H, ÝE=AI, ÝA, ÝW=O, ÝOU, Ý U=Ý™] after HTA merged with high front vowel [i]. Cf. G. Horrocks, *Greek, a History of the Language and its Speakers* (Longman 1997) and F. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods* (Milan 1976). This is relatively close to the 5-vowel system post 1000 CE [=Modern Greek I, E, A, O, OU]. Modern Greek ears "hear" the six vowel system within their own 5-vowel framework.

Consonants present a curious irony. The Erasmian system got the stops exactly inverted from the Roman period. Roman period voiced stops became fricatives, and shortly afterwards the voiceless stops also became fricatives. A practical and historical compromise is to use the Roman period voiced fricatives and the post-Roman voiceless fricatives. This results in fricatives throughout, like in Modern Greek. When these consonants are combined with either the 7 or 6 vowel system above, the pronunciation sounds remarkably like Modern Greek and is pleasing enough to modern speakers as to be accepted as a Greek-like dialect.

There are several historical and aesthetic advantages for using such a system when learning Koine Greek. First of all, the phonemic system is perceived in the way that ancient audiences would hear the words of a speaker. For example, GRAPSH "he would write" is distinguished from GRAPSEI "he will write" while LOIPH "remaining" and LUPH "grief" provide assonance with OI/U. Secondly, manuscripts and epigraphic texts from the period are read correctly. The 1st century father who wrote a letter TW OIEIW can be read smoothly as writing "to the son". Thirdly, the system is historically viable and

was used in live speech for hundreds of years. With the extra vowels OI and H the fuller ancient morphological system is easier to maintain and perceive than with the five vowel modern system so words like UMEIS "you" and HMEIS "we" remain distinct. Fourthly, and not to be taken lightly, a student is able to branch into the modern language relatively smoothly. The only sound that will be misaligned phonemically for modern ears is the -α' in the 7-vowel system. A student who becomes fluent in Modern Greek may ameliorate this problem by shifting to the ancient 6-vowel system for reading ancient texts.

Finally, the production of all of this with prose texts requires careful control of word order in order to distinguish focal items in a sentence from relational, topical spans. A demonstration will be given from two extended texts. As will be perceived, such a reading is complementary to a technical metalinguistic analysis.

The incentive of learning a language within an oral environment heightens the pronunciation issue. Finding a sound system that is both historically fitting to the period of interest and that is reasonably acceptable to modern ears is an added bonus. Using the language in a spoken environment further enhances the ability of an audience to follow the main points and structure of a text.