Greek Accentuation 101

John Lindsay Orr

Remember the 90-10 Rule: A few simple rules will explain almost all the accents you ever see. It takes 90% of the work to cover the remaining 10% of cases. We won't go there in this.

Basics :: Contonation and Mora

Every word in Greek has exactly one accent. (OK, that's not quite true, but let's go with it for now.) The accent always stands on one of the last three syllables (called *ultima* (U), pentultima (P), and antepentultima (A)). The following **Fundamental Rule** controls which accents may stand on which syllables:

> There can be at most one beat (*mora)* after the completion (*contonation*) of the accent.

Vowels and dipthongs are either one-mora or two-mora in length. The following are **one mora** long:

> ᾰ ε ῐ ο ῠ together with the dipthongs αι and οι *<u>when</u> they come at word's end*

The following are **two-mora** long:

> ᾱ η ῑ ῡ ω αι ει οι ῃ ῳ ευ

The accent represents a change in **pitch** of the voice:

- An **acute** accent represents a *rise* in pitch, and the voice returns to normal on the next syllable of the word (or the inter-word space). Thus the *contonation* of an acute consists of the syllable on which it stands, *together with* the following syllable. E.g., <u>ἄνθρωπος</u>
- A **circumflex** represents a rise and fall in pitch on a single *long* vowel or dipthong. Thus the *contonation* consists of that syllable only. E.g., <u>ἦλθον</u>
- The **grave** accent is written in place of the acute when the acute stands on U (unless the word is at a break in the text). E.g., τὸ αὐτὸν ἱερόν.

The Fundamental Rule implies some restrictions on which accents can stand on which syllables:

- An acute accent can stand on A-P-U
- The only accent that can stand on A is the acute. E.g., ἄνθρωπος
- A circumflex can only stand on a long syllable.
- A circumflex cannot stand on A. It can stand on U, and it can stand on P *only* if U is short.

(But don't bother to memorize these rules, because they all follow from the Fundamental Rule.) One other useful rule (which you *do* need to remember because it's independent of these) is:

- If P is long and U is short *and* P receives the accent then the accent *must* be a

circumflex. (The last rule just said it *may* be a circumflex.) This explains a common pattern of 2nd aorists; ἦλθον εἶδον εἶπον etc., as well as οὗτος ἐκεῖνος etc.

One more (anti-) rule: Forget (almost) everything about metrical scansion. Issues like short vowels lengthening before paired consonants and long word-end vowels shortening before vowels at the start of the succeeding word; these don't apply here.

These rules tell you where you *may* find the accent, but they don't tell you where you actually *do* find it. To understand that, we have to consider verbs, nouns/adjectives, and other words separately.

Verbs :: Recessive Accent

All **finite** forms of verbs place the accent as far back as the Fundamental Rule allows (called *Recessive Accent*) So for example, 'νομίζω'νομίζεις νομίζει νομίζομεν νομίζετε νομίζουσι. (The contonation is underlined.) The same holds for all tenses of active, middle, and passive. E.g., ἐνόμισα νομίζομαι. Thus the accent is usually an acute on A or P, the exception being two-syllable words (e.g., ἦλθον εἶμι) with a long long P and short U, and contract verbs (see below). The rule applies equally to athematic verbs, and to all other moods, e.g., κεράννυμι ἀρχώμεθα. Participles and infinitives are *not* finite forms, and the rules for them are different; see below.

For **contract verbs** the rule is:

1. Place the accent as far back as possible on the *uncontracted* form
2. If the accent falls on the first of the two uncontracted vowels (i.e., if the contract is the whole of the contonation) then the contracted vowel receives a **circumflex**, e.g., τιμά-ω becomes τιμῶ
3. If the accent falls on the second on the two uncontracted vowels (i.e., the contonation completes on the succeeding syllable), then the contracted vowel receives an **acute**, e.g., ποιε-όμεθα becomes ποιούμεθα
4. If the accent lies outside the uncontracted vowel pair then the accent is unchanged in that location, e.g., ἐποίε-ον becomes ἐποίουν, but ποιέ-ω becomes ποιῶ

Nouns :: Persistent Accent

The basic rule for nouns and adjectives (participles are adjectives too!) is that the accent tries to stay the same as in the nominative singular, unless the Fundamental Rule forces it to move toward the end of the word. There are a number of exceptions, however (see below). Thus, for example,

λόγος λόγε λόγον λόγου λόγῳ λόγοι λόγους λόγων λόγοις

keeps the same accent in its declension. However, with

ἄνθρωπος ἄνθρωπε ἄνθρωπον ἀνθρώπου ἀνθρώπῳ
ἄνθρωποι ἀνθρώπους ἀνθρώπων ἀνθρώποις,

the accent is forced from A to P in some cases. (Compare the nom sing with the dat pl, bearing in mind that -οι is only short when it comes at the very end of a word.)

Special Rules:

First Declension: The **gen pl** always accents -ῶν.
Exception: Adjectives/participles in -ος. E.g., λυόμενος becomes λυομένων not λυομενῶν

First & Second Declension: If the accent is on U in nom sing (e.g., φυγή, ὁδός) then the **gen and dat** get circumflex in all numbers (e.g., λόγου / ὁδοῦ). This explains αὐτός ὅς ὅδε and almost all of the article ὁ (see below)

Third Declension: Monosyllabic stems (e.g., φλέψ θήρ θρίξ) give the accent to the case ending; circumflex for -ων and -οιν, acute/grave for the rest (e.g., φλεβός φλεβῶν). Also Note: Many Third Declension nouns and adjectives involve contractions (e.g., gen pl γένος is γενέ-ων becomes γενῶν)

Participles: Most participles put the accent in recessive position (e.g., ἀγρεύων πεμόμενος ἀνδραποδίσθεις). There are two important exceptions: In **perfect act/mid** and **second aorist act** forms, the accent is moved one syllable back. E.g., λελυκώς λελυμένος λιπών

Proclitics

There are ten monosyllabic words which take no accent themselves but form a word-unit with the *following* word. These are called the **proclitics** and are:

ὁ ἡ αἱ οἱ ἐν εἰς ἐκ εἰ ὡς οὐκ

together with their variants (e.g., ἐς ἐξ οὐ οὐχ)

Enclitics

These words – always of only one or two syllables - form an accentual word-unit with the *preceding* word. Several important words change their meaning depending whether they are enclitic (e.g., τίς interrogative / τις indefinite; enclitic οἱ dat sing 3rd pers pronoun / proclitic οἱ masc nom pl definite article).

Understanding enclitics: The basic principle of enclitics is that they want to drop their accent and simply be attached to the preceding word. In some cases doing this would violate the Fundamental Rule that there cannot be more than one mora *in the word-group* after the contonation, e.g., ἔργον τι is OK, but θάλασσα τις or λόγος εἰμι are not.

When violations like this happen, the enclitic will add a *second* accent (acute) to the U of the preceding word, *provided* the U is not part of the contonation (that is, there is not an acute on P). E.g., θάλασσά τις is OK, but λόγος εἰμι is still not.

Finally, in this case, and only in this case, the enclitic accepts an acute on its **second** syllable (the enclitic will *always* be bisyllabic in this case), e.g., λόγος εἰμί

A list of enclitics:

1. Oblique cases of the singular personal pronouns (e.g., με μου μοι / σε σου σοι / ἑ οὗ οἱ)
2. Indefinite pronoun τις and indefinite adverbs που ποι ποτε πως ποθεν πῃ
3. Present indicative of εἰμι and φημι *except* 2nd sing
4. The particles γε τε τοι περ

Proclitic + enclitic: The proclitic receives the accent, e.g., οὔκ ἐστι

Enclitic + enclitic: The first receives the accent from the second, e.g., αἰπόλος τίς ἐστιν ἀγαθός.

References

Mastronarde, Donald J., *Introduction to Attic Greek*, University of California Press, 1993

Smyth, Herbert W., *A Greek Grammar for Colleges*, American Book Company, 1920