

## Using Present Tense Markers to Make Beginning Greek Easier

This panel is devoted to methods for growing Greek programs. My fellow panelists today will soon provide inspiring tales and tools for starting and expanding Greek programs, but I want to start by tackling head on the most common issue raised that constricts the recruitment and retention of students in Greek: that it is hard. The saying “It’s all Greek to me,” after all, is predicated on the idea that the Greek language is fundamentally inscrutable. This idea pervades all levels of Greek instruction and remains a truism even among teachers of Greek.

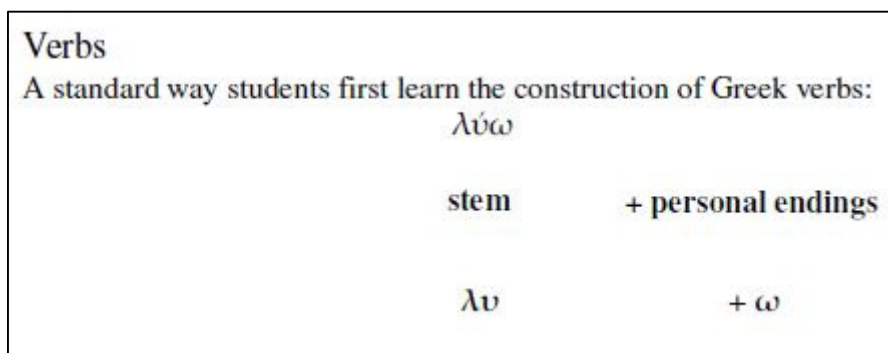
But it is not true. Some writings in Greek are very hard. But this is equally true of other languages. But no one uses James Joyce as evidence that English is impossibly hard. Joyce is hard and he wrote in English. The same is true of many Classical authors. Aristophanes found Aeschylus inscrutable sometimes. Dionysius of Halicarnassus admitted that sometimes he sometimes found Thucydides inscrutable. These examples do not mean that the Greek language is intrinsically as hard as it is in some writings.

Most of the confusion and desperation that students and teachers feel toward Greek develops in the experience of Beginning Greek and most of the distortion or misinformation that hinders their understanding of Greek is rooted in the first few lessons. What disguises these early problems is that the consequences of these initial pedagogical failures manifest themselves in later lessons. Most often these are sins of omission, where students and teachers never learn basic truths about the fundamentals of Greek. These omissions include, but are not limited to: (1) that only a limited number of sounds can end a Greek word (2) that the rules of vowel contraction typically introduced with contract verbs in fact apply nearly everywhere in Attic Greek regardless of the part of speech (3) that the rules of sigma contraction account for nearly

all the perceived irregularities in third declension forms and (4) that Greek has only one type of accent, and the three marks designate the placement and delivery of this single accent.

For the next few minutes, however, I am going to focus on the teaching of Greek verb tenses. The multiplicity of forms is a leading source of confusion and frustration for students of Greek. Confusion about forming and distinguishing Greek tenses is a primary factor in this frustration. The confusion is usually rooted in the way students learn their first tense. Too often the initial presentation of a Greek verb, most often the present tense, is so distorted that it permanently prevents accurate recognition of the way Greek verbs form the different tenses. I am as guilty of this as anyone. I learned it wrong. I managed to read Greek for years without realizing it was wrong. I taught it wrong. For years.

A general principle in life is that there are many more ways to get something wrong than there are ways to get it right. So I am going to limit myself to a single example of a wrong way to understand the pattern for forming the tenses of Greek verbs.



So here is how I first understood the pattern of Greek verbs. They have a stem and personal endings are added to this stem. Other tenses then add to or change this stem and add similar personal endings. If you learn or teach this pattern of Greek verbs first, you basically have two options: revise and correct this conception of the structure of Greek verbs OR

continually misunderstand Greek verbs and keep trying to find ways to understand the verb forms that you see and hear. Let me explain what I mean with more examples:

Verbs	
A standard way students first learn the construction of Greek verbs: δείκνυμι, λύω, λαμβάνω, δίδωμι, γιγνώσκω	
	stem + personal endings
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content;"> <p>This chart shows the root of only ONE of the verbs here.</p> </div>	δεικνυ + μι
	λυ + ω
	λαμβαν + ω
	διδω + μι
	γιγνώσκ + ω
	γιγν + ομαι

Here is λύω in with a group of very common Greek verbs. If you and/or your students analyze the stems of these other verbs on analogy with λύω and add tense markers as λύω does, you will, except for the imperfect tense, get every single form of every tense wrong. You will not even accidentally get one single form correct.

So again, you have two options. Revise the model for the understanding of Greek verb stems and tenses, or memorize your way out of it by reckoning these other five verbs, and a great many others, as exceptional or irregular. When I learned Greek, I followed this second, rather unpleasant path. I used to make my students follow down this same path. I suspect that I am not the only person in the room who has done so.

Let's consider the other option: revising and correcting our understanding of the way Greek verbs build their tenses:

## Verbs

Greek verbs have four parts:

prefix +	stem	+ marker	+ ending
preposition augment reduplication	meaning of verb	tense mood	person number voice
<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; display: inline-block;">           stem + marker = stem of tense         </div>			

I offer this as a model of Greek verb building that will last you most, even all, of your Greek life. Personally, I introduce Greek verbs on this model. You might find it pedagogically more effective to start with the simpler model and progress toward this one. The important point is to get to this model before you and your students are memorizing dozens and hundreds of principal parts. We always want our students to recognize and learn the patterns, so they should learn the correct ones.

Notice in this model that all the grammatical parsing information that they will ever need is covered here, as well as semantic information. This basic pattern will accommodate all the Greek verb forms students learn until they face periphrastic constructions. To help students adjust to this scheme of verb forms, I show them how English verbs convey the same information. The information is often in a different location and often conveyed by separate words rather than clustered into a single form. A graphic presentation helps students get the idea:

- stopdoi
- stopdoyou
- stopdohe
- stopdowe
- stopdo'all
- stopdothey

The idea here is to think of a Greek verb form as a cluster of information bits but with an order and patterns. This also introduces them to Greek words with the idea that Greek and English fundamentally do NOT match word for word.

The practical problem is that λύω is a simple enough verb that presenting a four-part scheme for Greek verbs seems unnecessarily complex. But there are a great many verbs in Greek, and many of them extremely common, that have three or four of these components even in the present tense. Moreover, it is common for textbooks to include these verbs in the vocabulary of early lessons without ever indicating that they have a more complex set of components than λύω. Consequently, students analyze these verbs incorrectly and then later on struggle, and often fail, to understand the construction of other tense stems. This causes problems for the future tense but it tends to result in chaotic explosions when it comes to the aorist.

Teaching the markers of the present tense offsets the errors and confusion otherwise endemic to later understanding of principal parts and tense formation. Focusing on present tense markers benefits students in two ways simultaneously: (1) it trains them early to look for tense markers, a habit that is critical and that will serve them well for all of their Greek lives and (2) it immediately establishes the rationale for components of Greek verb forms not appearing in other tenses. It makes sense that a marker linked to the present tense will not remain in the verb form when it is not in the present tense. So let's look at the markers:

<p>Verb markers of the present tense:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- ν           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• δείκνυμι, λαμβάνω, βαίνω</li> </ul> </li> <li>- ζ           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• θαυμάζω</li> </ul> </li> <li>- σκ           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• εὕρισκα</li> </ul> </li> <li>- doubling the initial sound + ι:           <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• γίγνομαι, γιγνώσκα, δίδωμι, τίθημι, ἵστημι, ἵημι</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p>NB: Verbs with strong/2<sup>nd</sup> aorists tend to add markers on their present stems: e.g., λαβ + ν + ω → λαμβάνω</p>
---

A basic marker of the present tense is -v-, which is commonly added to the stem of verbs having a second aorist. The key is that this suffix is added to mark the present tense, not one that is deleted in other tenses. The vowel sound added before or after the -v- marker is easily understood when students try to sound out the words without the additions. Thus δείκνυμι is a logical pronunciation of \*δείκνυμι and λαμβάνω is a logical solution to \*λαβνω. From these you can move to less intuitive examples like ἀπόλλυμι and βάλλω. This exercise builds in and reinforces the principle that in Greek spelling follows pronunciation. This is a critical skill for reading any Greek and one that pays off in many areas, not least when students encounter variable spellings of forms in different texts. Students know that different people pronounce words differently, but they are not accustomed to a writing system that consistently records these differences.

Next, a prefixed reduplication also marks the present tense. Reduplication is more often associated with the perfect tense, but in the present tense a duplicated consonant is separated by -ι- instead of -ε-. As with -v-, the key is to understand that this is an addition that marks the present tense, not a component of the stem that vanishes in other tenses. And again, verbs that use this marker tend to have second aorists, so understanding this pattern illuminates unusual stem changes elsewhere. Moreover, some verbs with this marker, especially when including their compounds, are very frequent (e.g., γίγνομαι, γιγνώσκω, δίδωμι, τίθημι, ἵστημι, ἵημι).

The next marker is the suffix -ζ-. This one is not actually a tense marker. It is a marker used to take a root and make a verb of it (e.g., θαυμα → θαυμάζω, νομ- → νομίζω). As such it remains in other tenses, but not as a ζ. As is normal for dentals, the -ζ- becomes -σ- when a σ is added (θαυμάσω, ἐθαύμασα, ἐνόμισα), or -ε- in the case of -ιζ- (future tense νομιῶ). For pedagogical purposes, its value lies in the fact that whenever you see a verb form with its stem

ending in -ζ-, that MUST be the present stem of that verb. There can also be something entertaining for students to learn this is the way Greeks turned basically any word into a verb.

A less common marker but familiar from several high-frequency verbs is the suffix, -σκ-. This marker has semantic value, in that it indicates inceptive meaning, but before advanced levels students are unlikely to encounter any Greek where this matters. The key here is to convey and reinforce that this marker is specific to the present tense and so does not remain in any other tense. Especially since the most common of these verbs have a second aorist, it helps to realize that the -σκ- does not “disappear” but is added to the stem to form the present (e.g., εὕρ- → εὕρισκω, θαν- → ἀποθνήσκω).

So let's go back to our chart:

Verbs  
Greek verbs have four parts:  
δείνυμι, λύω, λαμβάνω, δίδωμι, γιγνώσκω

prefix +	stem	+ marker	+ ending
	δεικ	+ νυ	+ μι
	λυ		+ ω
	λαβ	+ αν	+ ω
δι +	δω		+ μι
γι +	γεν		+ ομαι
γι +	γνω	+ σκ	+ ω

Now the chart can show the actual stems of all these verbs, the stems that will be apparent in other tenses.

Finally, let's look at these markers in another environment where students can and will benefit from recognizing them: vocabulary entries. [run through VOCABULARY SLIDES] ...all of which I hope demonstrates that teaching and incorporating present tense markers, even if it requires a little extra time early in Beginning Greek, saves time and reaps great benefits over the long run.

Ευχαριστώ.