

Teaching Greek Accents with One Guiding Principle

Many students ignore accents, only develop a passing familiarity with them, or resort to creative and liberal guessing (what my students call the ‘confetti method’). Accents should not be ignored or forgotten, however, since they are a part of the Greek language that can be a valuable aid, rather than a hindrance. Moreover, students have to learn them if they intend to continue studying and eventually teach Greek. Therefore, I have been working on a method for teaching accents that addresses the problems listed above, by making them easier and less about memory work. It focuses on learning the principles from which the accent rules are derived: *why* do Greek accents behave the way they do? Once students understand the answer to that question, accents become much less daunting, even easy.

My approach is as follows: Explanations using the principles of contonation and *mora* have the power to teach why accents behave the way they do, but they tend to be technical and confusing for beginning and intermediate students. I have adapted such explanations by swapping difficult or technical terms for easily understood ones. I keep jargon to a minimum and present one guiding principle. Contonation is ‘falling’ (the accent brings the voice up and it must fall back down). *Morae* are ‘beats’ (short syllables last for one beat, long syllables for two). The three types of accents represent the rise and fall of the voice: acutes rise on one syllable and take the whole of the next syllable to fall; circumflexes rise and fall all on the same syllable; and graves signal a fall on the final beat of a word. One guiding principle governs the placement of accents: “Only one beat, at most, can follow the falling of the accent.” Once students understand how accents fall, this guiding principle can be applied to words with recessive or persistent accents.

For example, if I want to accentuate παιδευω, I run through the following steps. 1) I try to put an acute on the 3rd syllable back: παιίδευω. I start here because I know the recessive accent wants to be as far back as possible, but it is constrained by the guiding principle (a circumflex on the 3rd syllable back will never conform, nor will an acute further back). The accent falls on and gobbles up the whole next syllable: [παιίδευ]ω. 2) Now I ask: is there only one beat at most following the falling of the accent? No, there are two beats. The accent cannot stay there. 3) Move it over one syllable and try again, this time considering circumflex and acute (can I put a circumflex there? Yes, because it is a long syllable): παιδεῦω or παιδεύω. 4) Does one of these options conform to the guiding principle? παιιδ[εῦ]ω? No. παιιδ[εύ]ω? Yes. Therefore, I write: παιδεύω. A similar set of steps governs persistent accents: πόλεμος to πολεμω, for example. Can it stay in the same place: [πόλε]μω? No, it does not conform to the guiding principle (two beats follow the falling of the accent). Shift it over one syllable. It is short, therefore I need an acute. Does πολέμω conform to the guiding principle? Yes. Therefore, I write πολέμω. The method can also be extended to understanding the accents on compound verbs, as well as enclitics and proclitics.