

Teaching Ablaut in Elementary Ancient Greek

Students of ancient Greek may recognize formal and semantic similarities between words such as ἀείδω ‘sing’ and ἀοιδός ‘singer’, and λέγω ‘speak’ and λόγος ‘speech’, but they are rarely aware that these similarities are not arbitrary, but are regulated by a system of changes involving the quantity and quality of vowels in roots and suffixes known as ablaut. Ablaut changes such as those exemplified by λέγω ‘speak’ and λόγος ‘speech’ depended on the particular verb and noun formation. Second declension agent and abstract nouns are good examples. These nouns were built from verb roots whose vowel regularly appears as o (underlined): agent nouns ἀοιδός ‘singer’, σκοπός ‘watcher’, φονός ‘murderer’, etc., with suffix accent, and abstract nouns φόνος ‘murder’, τόνος ‘act of stretching’, λόγος ‘speech’, τόμος ‘a cutting, a slice’, etc., with root accent.

In this presentation we describe the system of ablaut in ancient Greek and discuss some approaches to and some reasons for teaching the topic in the elementary Greek classroom. We conclude by making a pitch for increasing the amount of linguistics that is introduced in classical language courses.