

## Learning Modern Greek Grammar (Without the Tears)

My presentation has two objectives. The first is to make a short case that Modern Greek is an effective aid to mastering Ancient Greek, and the second is to talk about my work in progress that explains the essentials of modern demotic Greek to the "already Greeked" reader. Even if it had no other value -- and it does -- an active knowledge of Modern Greek completely demystifies much of the vocabulary of Ancient Greek, which often remains spongy for a long time. It can also rivet unusual words in our brains that send us scrambling to the lexicon. I will never forget the word for "swamp" (το έλος), for example, because my car was stuck in one for two hours north of Thessaloniki.

It's also simply a lot of fun to try out Ancient Greek words with modern pronunciation and endings to see what reaction you get from a native speaker. My experience is that 60% of the time the conversation proceeds as if nothing happened, 20% of the time you'll get a bemused smile as if "Be quiet" came out as "stynt thy clappe," and the final 20% will get you a blank stare, as when I tried to get directions to the Franchthi Cave by using the Homeric σπέος. An impediment to the classically trained wanting to pick up Modern Greek is that the grammars do not explain the material in the way they are expecting. Gone are the 3 declensions, for example, which have been replaced by 8 different declension patterns that are based on particular paradigmatic words. But it is a simple matter to disentangle all that and put it back into old paradigms.

The situation is even more disorienting with verbs. All that is left of the six principal parts are the present and aorist stems. The infinitives are gone, as are also the optative and nearly

all of the participles. Still, 90% of the endings and inflections will be easily recognized by someone at the intermediate level and beyond. That leaves only 10% for them to learn.

In short, a classicist is like an archaeologist trying to piece together a close copy of a shattered vase. We start with the advantage of having an image of the original right before our eyes. There is no reason not to start with the knowledge we already have and add or subtract from it only where and when we need to.

Modern Greek should take reasonably well-trained Greek readers no more than a couple of weeks to get a good grasp of the essential grammar of demotic Greek, provided that it is explained from the point of view of Ancient Greek.