

2.18 Aspiration

One century ago James Moulton wrote in regard to the presumed phonological changes in Greek during the Κοινή period, “de-aspiration was the prevailing tendency ... as Modern Greek shows.”¹ “Aspiration ... was lost during the period of the Koine,” echoes Gignac.² Moulton and Gignac hold that the loss of aspiration in Greek occurred in Hellenistic times. Such assertions lead to the assumption that aspiration in Classical Attic, indicated by the symbol Η [h], was a phonological feature with distinctive acoustic properties. But was aspiration really even a part of the Classical Attic speech?

We know that Aeolic and Doric had no aspiration; and that in Ionia by the 7th c. BC aspiration had ceased to exist. In pre-Classical Attic, however, the use of Η (or Η̅) is uncertain. This uncertainty, says Caragounis, reflected by “the frequent occurrence of Η with ρ, λ, γ, etc. and Ϝ (digamma) — where aspiration is impossible — indicates that the sense of aspiration had been lost.[³] This together with the evidence ... respecting the extremely erratic use of Η shows conclusively that aspiration had ceased in Athens already before the end of the classical period. When observed in script, it was as an old relic, not as a living item of language ... — just as it has been till our own day!”⁴

Threatte says that after 450 BC “The comparative frequency of Η = η ... may be due to its previous existence in the Attic alphabet with the value of [h]. ... occasionally there are special instances ... where Η = η in almost all places, and there is no Η = [h] ... but the phenomenon begins essentially ca. 460-450 B.C.”⁵ This all the more indicates that in the mid-/late-5th c. BC Attic Η as a sign of aspiration was a legacy of the past. As Jannaris explains, “with the close of the 5th c. B.C., the aspiration was altogether done away with,” and that perhaps this explains why Plato never described aspiration in his etymologies of names in *Kratylos*; and Aristotle, who explains that the distinction between οῦ̅ and οὔ̅ consists in stress, does not even hint at aspiration as part of their difference,⁶ for by then Η had no value other than that of the vowel η. Thus, the

¹ James Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*, Vol. 1 *Prolegomena*, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh T. and T. Clark, 1908), 44.

² Francis T. Gignac, *A Grammar of the Greek Papyri of the Roman and Byzantine Periods*, Vol. 1: *Phonology* (Milan: Cisalpino-La Goliardica, 1976), 137.

³ Some examples Caragounis gives are: λΗέων for λέων (7th-6th c. BC); κΗόρη for κόρη (7th-6th c. BC); μΗεγάλου for μεγάλου (6th c. BC). (Caragounis, 390.)

⁴ Caragounis, 390-91. In 1982 the Greek Parliament abandoned the use of breath marks in Dimotiki to simplify spelling since Neohellenic has no aspiration. It also introduced a simplified accentuation system whereby the traditional accents marks (´ ` ^) were replaced with a *single accent mark* (´)—hence, *monotonic*—which is placed over the vowel of the accented syllable. All such diacritic symbols may find use in Katharevousa (p. 8).

⁵ Threatte, 42-43.

⁶ Jannaris, 64. Jannaris adds that the breath marks, allegedly invented in the 3rd c. BC, had no bearing on the pronunciation of Κοινή but only served as artificial links to antiquity; and that the smooth breathing mark (´) in particular is never found in the inscriptions and papyri, nor in the oldest MSS, and makes its first appearance in the MSS of the 7th c. AD, the practice having met with favor among the Byzantine successors. (Jannaris, 64-65.)

official designation of H(η) in 403 BC as the vowel “Hta” met no aspiring rivals, which explains why the Athenians had no problem deciding to continue using it as such.

Some scholars espouse the notion that H was the aspirate *h* with acoustic consonantal properties (such as described below) until 403 BC but the vowel H (η) afterward. If so, Socrates must have had to hurriedly adjust his Attic pronunciation at age 66 and Plato in his mid-20s! Could it be, then, that H in classical Athens had no acoustic value any more than the mute H in French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, or (’) and (˘) (up until 1982) in Neohellenic? An examination of Allen’s views regarding Attic H may help provide clear answers.

2.18.1 Sidney Allen’s treatment of Attic “aspirate” H[h]

This section examines Sidney Allen’s key claims (italicized) regarding the “aspirate” H as laid out in his *Vox Graeca* (1987), pages 52-53.

Claim #1. “*The existence of this phoneme in classical Attic is clearly established,*” declares Allen as he begins his description of “aspirate” H. He then proceeds to classify H as a consonantal phoneme with acoustic properties like those of the *h* in English, describing it as “*a pure voiceless aspirate, or ‘glottal fricative’.*” Allen’s designation of H /h/ as an Attic phoneme necessarily means that its presence or absence makes a difference in meaning. This distinction, Allen assures us, is all the more significant in that in Classical Attic the “*false writing of H is rare.*”

Upon examining a number of Attic inscriptions it can be determined whether the presence or absence of H makes a difference in meaning (as in *herring* and *erring*); and if not, whether the difference might be some rare false writing (as in writing *hour* for *our* or *our* for *hour*), in which case the meaning would be determined by the context.

A decree for the temple of Athens Nike, inscribed in 424/3 BC,⁷ shows that H is used both as h and as η practically side by side, where the spelling TEI HIEPEAI τει ηιερεαι (τη ιερεα) near the top of the inscription appears again a few lines below as THI IEPEAI τη ιερεαι (τη ιερεα), where the H[h] is missing. This means either that the two spellings form a minimal pair in which the presence or absence of H makes a difference in pronunciation and meaning, in which case “glottal fricative” H /h/ would be a phoneme;⁸ or, that the two variant spellings are read and pronounced alike and without a difference in meaning, in which case H would have to be mute in order for the two spellings to be read and pronounced alike. Since the context clearly indicates that in either case the word is one and the same—therefore pronounced alike—H could only be a grapheme (letter), not a phoneme.

⁷ See App. p. A-6.

⁸ As Allen himself points out by quoting R. Jakobson, “as a rule, languages possessing the pairs voiced/voiceless, aspirate/non-aspirate, have also a phoneme /h/.” (Allen, 53.)

Might this inaccuracy in spelling, though, be just a rare false writing of H? In other pre-Eucleidean Attic decrees from the same period (448 to 409 BC)⁹ several occurrences of words that would normally be aspirated are shown without aspiration (see App. A-12): ΕΚΑΣΤΟΝ for ΗΕΚΑΣΤΟΝ;¹⁰ ΕΚΑΣΤΟ for ΗΕΚΑΣΤΟ, ΥΙΕΣΙΝ for ΗΥΙΕΣΙΝ;¹¹ ΟΣΠΕΡ for ΗΟΣΠΕΡ, ΟΜΟΛΟΓΟΣΙΝ for ΗΟΜΟΛΟΓΟΣΙΝ, ΕΚΑΤΕΡΟΙ for ΗΕΚΑΤΕΡΟΙ, ΕΚΑΣΤΟ for ΗΕΚΑΣΤΟ, ΕΚΑΣΤΟΣ for ΗΕΚΑΣΤΟΣ, ΕΛΛΕΣΠΟΝΤΟΦΥΛΑΚΑΣ for ΗΕΛΛΕΣΠΟΝΤΟΦΥΛΑΚΑΣ, ΕΔΡΑΣ for ΗΕΔΡΑΣ, ΕΟΣ for ΗΕΟΣ, ΟΙ ΣΤΡΑΤΗΓΟΙ for ΗΟΙ ΣΤΡΑΤΗΓΟΙ;¹² ΕΜΕΡΟΝ for ΗΕΜΕΡΟΝ;¹³ ΑΝΤΙ ΟΝ for ΑΝΤΙ ΗΟΝ, and Ο for ΗΟ.¹⁴

These multiple occurrences of “de-aspirated” words from six different decrees (including the one discussed above) prove beyond any doubt that (a) the “false writing of H,” particularly when one takes into account the multiple occurrences of “aspirated” spellings of some of the same words in the same inscriptions, is hardly rare; and that (b) mute H does not qualify as an Attic phoneme.

Claim #2. “[T]he symbol H in its consonantal value dropped out of general use after the introduction of the Ionic alphabet.”

An audience would have to be too passive, if not also too naïve, to receive words uttered in such a nonchalant fashion for a linguistic event of tectonic magnitudes! One should only try to imagine waking up one morning and, upon turning on the TV news, being appalled at hearing that according to recent legislative action, and effective immediately, the initial letter “h” of every English word would now be permanently deleted from speech (except in certain “stereotyped phrases”) as well as from all printed materials, whether governmental, academic, or private.

The implications of such a linguistically debilitating situation for speakers of English would be nonetheless no match for the gargantuan task that must have been faced by Socrates, Plato, and all speakers of Attic in 403 BC. For in addition to instantly having to change H from a consonant to a vowel, besides having to adapt to a technically new alphabet, they must have had to hurriedly adjust their pronunciation of every Attic Greek word hitherto pronounced with the initial “glottal fricative” phoneme /h/.

One too quick to relegate such notions to sheer fantasy should first ascertain whether Allen’s perfunctory portrayal of the demise of the phoneme /h/ is not an attempt to piggyback a potentially earth-shattering happening atop a government-sanctioned

⁹ Based on Attic decrees in the Epigraphic Museum (EM) of Athens as presented in *Athenian Democracy Speaking Through Its Inscriptions* (Athens 2009, M. Lagogianni-Georgakarakos and K. Buraselis, eds.), auspices of the Hellenic Ministry of Culture (henceforth, EM).

¹⁰ EM 13044 (IG I³ 34), 61. (App. A-2)

¹¹ EM 6849 (IG I³ 49), 49. (App. A-4)

¹² EM 6596 (IG I³ 61), 63. (App. A-9)

¹³ EM 6577 (IG I³ 46), 81. (App. A-3)

¹⁴ EM 6601 (IG I³ 102), 102. (App. A-10)

momentous event that went seemingly unnoticed and with relative ease. To claim that as a consequence of the introduction of the Ionic alphabet /h/ simply dropped out of general use, not only as a symbol but also as a phoneme, is to pass off the function of a phoneme as a superficial stylistic option. Any linguist would acknowledge that the role of phonemes transcends pronunciation; for phonemes are the main arteries of oral communication, the primary conveyors of the life of meaning. How could then this highly artistic classical tongue, so elevated to phantasmagoric echelons, possibly be (without public stir, without signs of civil strife and remonstrance by a society teeming with educators, philosophers, playwrights, satirists, demagogues, politicians, historians, orators, versifiers, poets, musicians, artisans, sculptors, painters, and the hosts of the proud citizens of Athens) so arbitrarily and so abruptly subject to phonological mayhem?

Claim #3. *“That [h] had been lost, as in modern Greek, by the 4 c. A.D. is indicated by its frequent omission or misplacement of Gothic transcriptions.”*

Allen’s reliance on Gothic transcriptions for drawing his conclusion regarding Neohellenic is uncanny given the fact that he failed to make the same observation with respect to 5th c. pre-Eucleidean Attic inscriptions, as shown above. Had Allen looked at the true nature of things more closely, he might have figured out that the legislative action behind dropping H from Attic in 403 BC was actually repeated for the very same major reason in 1982 when Neohellenic dropped the symbols of aspiration (’) and (´). For, whether in Attic or Neohellenic, the symbols of aspiration were as burdensome in writing as they were unrelated to speech.

In short, Allen’s unsubstantiated claims and assumptions related to the nature and use of Attic H conclusively lack merit.