

### 2.18.1 Sidney Allen's treatment of Attic "aspirate" H[h]

This section examines Sidney Allen's key arguments (italicized) regarding "aspirate" H as laid out in his *Vox Graeca* (1987), pages 52-55.

**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,<sup>1</sup> shows that H is used both as h and as η practically side by side, where the spelling ΤΕΙ ΗΙΕΡΕΑΙ τει ηιερεαι (=τη ηιερεα) near the top of the inscription appears again a few lines below as ΤΗΙ ΙΕΡΕΑΙ τηι ιερεαι (=τη ιερεα), where the H[h] is missing. This means either that the two spellings form a minimal pair where the presence or absence of H makes a difference in pronunciation *and* meaning, in which case "glottal fricative" H /h/ would be a phoneme;<sup>2</sup> 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.

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)<sup>3</sup> several occurrences of words that would normally be aspirated are shown without aspiration:

ΕΚΑΣΤΟΝ for ΗΕΚΑΣΤΟΝ;<sup>4</sup> ΕΚΑΣΤΟ for ΗΕΚΑΣΤΟ, ΥΙΕΣΙΝ for ΗΥΙΕΣΙΝ;<sup>5</sup> 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;<sup>6</sup> ΕΜΕΡΟΝ for ΗΕΜΕΡΟΝ;<sup>7</sup> ΑΝΤΙ ΟΝ for ΑΝΤΙ ΗΟΝ, and Ο for ΗΟ.<sup>8</sup> (See App. A-13.)

<sup>1</sup> See App. A-6.

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> EM 13044 (IG I<sup>3</sup> 34), 61 (App. A-2).

<sup>5</sup> EM 6849 (IG I<sup>3</sup> 49), 49 (App. A-4).

<sup>6</sup> EM 6596 (IG I<sup>3</sup> 61), 63 (App. A-9).

<sup>7</sup> EM 6577 (IG I<sup>3</sup> 46), 81 (App. A-3).

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 befallen 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 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 in support of his claim regarding the fate of Attic H[h] by the 4<sup>th</sup> c. AD is uncanny given the fact that he could have made the same observation with respect to 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC Attic inscriptions. Had Allen looked at the

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<sup>8</sup> EM 6601 (IG I<sup>3</sup> 102), 102 (App. A-10).

historical record more closely, he might have figured out that the legislative action behind dropping H[h] from Attic in 403 BC was actually repeated for the same major reason “in modern Greek” in 1982 when Neohellenic dropped the symbols of aspiration ( *´* ) and ( *ˆ* ). For, whether in 5<sup>th</sup> c. BC, in 4<sup>th</sup> c. AD, or in modern times, aspiration was as burdensome in Greek writing as it was unrelated to Greek speech. Allen’s unsubstantiated claims related to Attic H[h] conclusively lack merit.