

**READING AND PRONOUNCING
BIBLICAL
GREEK**

Vol. I

**Historical Evidence of
Authentic Sounds**

Reference

*Excerpts from
the introductory pages
of the book*

Philemon Zachariou, Ph.D.

*Reading and Pronouncing Biblical Greek, Vol. I:
Historical Evidence of Authentic Sounds*

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GREEK LANGUAGE & LINGUISTICS

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Why This Book

Reading and Pronouncing Biblical Greek

addresses the oft-asked questions:

- How was Κοινή *Koine* Greek pronounced in New Testament times?
- How similar are the sounds of Κοινή and Attic Greek?
- How similar is the pronunciation of Modern Greek to New Testament Greek?
- Why is Erasmian so prevalent? Is it imitative of Attic Greek?

To that end, it traces the origins of Κοινή sounds to classical and pre-classical times and follows their development so diachronic comparisons can be made; and it describes the origins and spread of Erasmian and assesses its effects on Greek scholarship and learning.

The last chapter describes the Greek sounds, while the appendices examine Attic inscriptions from a special publication by the Epigraphic Museum of Athens.

CONTENTS

Why this Book	v
Endorsements	xi
Acknowledgments	xiii
Pronunciation Matters	xiv
Questions	xv
PART ONE	1
Chapter 1 The Development of Κοινή	3
1.1 The first Hellenes (Greeks)	3
1.2 Periods of the Hellenic language	3
1.3 Origin of Κοινή	4
1.4 Spread of Κοινή	5
1.5 The Septuagint written in Κοινή	5
1.6 The Κοινή of the NT	6
1.7 Byzantine Greek	6
1.8 Byzantine Greek: Κοινή's link to Neohellenic Greek	7
1.9 Neohellenic: a continuation of Κοινή	8
1.10 Greek dimorpha	10
1.11 Historicity of the Greek alphabet	11
1.12 Phonological definitions	12
1.13 Orthophonic pronunciation and its significance	13
Chapter 2 The Phonology of Κοινή: Development and Similarities to Neohellenic	15
2.1 A specific linguistic period	15
2.2 Iotacism	15
2.2.1 Interchange of ι-sound letters in Hellenistic papyri	16
2.2.2 Interchange of ι-sound letters in the pre-classical	17
and classical period	
2.3 Iotacism in the NT MSS	20
2.3.1 Interchange of letters in the NT MSS	20
2.4 Iotacism today	21
2.5 A five-vowel system	21
2.6 Fricativization of postpositive -υ	22
2.7 Effects of fricativization before Hellenistic times	23
2.8 Fricativization mirrored in Neohellenic	23
2.9 Further fricativization effects	24
2.10 The consonants Φ, Θ, Χ	24
2.10.1 Sidney Allen's treatment of φ θ χ, π τ κ	25
2.11 Robert Browning's treatment of β δ γ, φ θ χ	29

2.11.1	Browning's description of consonant changes	30
2.12	Euphonic b, d, g	31
2.13	Greek δ <i>not</i> [d]	32
2.13.1	Formal and informal spelling and pronunciation	33
	of νδ vs. ντ	
2.14	Monophthongization of diphthongs	34
2.15	Vowel quantity (length)	36
2.15.1	Some methods of compensating for Homeric sound loss	37
2.16	Metrical use of "long" Η, Ω	38
2.17	Pronunciation of Η(η) and Ω(ω)	40
2.18	Aspiration	42
2.18.1	Sidney Allen's treatment of "aspirate" Η[h]	43
2.19	Suprasegmental (prosodic) features	45
2.19.1	Accent marks	46
2.19.2	Phonological accent	47
2.19.3	Rhythmical accent (ictus)	47
2.20	Orthography and the sound Z	48
2.21	Summary	50
2.22	In retrospect	50
2.23	Concluding remarks	52
Chapter 3	The Historical Greek Pronunciation	53
3.1	Introductory	53
3.2	Formation of the historical Greek pronunciation (HGP). . .	53
3.3	The HGP in Κοινη	54
3.4	From Septuagint to New Testament	55
3.5	The tenacity of the HGP	57
3.6	"Modern Greek pronunciation" a misnomer	60
3.7	Applying the HGP to NT Greek	60
3.8	Testimonials	61
PART TWO	63
Chapter 4	Theoretical vs. Greek Pronunciation	65
4.1	Origins of the theoretical pronunciation	65
4.2	Latin transliteration of Greek	67
4.3	Erasmian "Classical Greek" sounds applied to Biblical Greek	68
4.4	Erasmian inconsistencies	69
4.5	Customized pronunciations of Greek	70
4.5.1	Summary of Erasmian pronunciation inconsistencies	70
4.6	Mispronunciation compounded by transliteration	71
4.7	The consistency of Greek	72
4.8	Conclusion	73
4.9	Addendum: Genesis of the Erasmian Doctrine	74

Chapter 5	Erasmian Misconceptions	77
	5.1 Two misconceptions about Neohellenic	77
	5.2 Misconception #1–difficult pronunciation	77
	5.3 English spelling and pronunciation	78
	5.4 Greek and English phonemes and corresponding	80
	alphabet letters	
	5.5 Greek vs. English orthography	81
	5.6 Greek vs. English phonology	81
	5.7 Concluding remarks and assessment	81
	5.8 Misconception #2 – dissimilar words	82
Chapter 6	Erasmian Latitudes	83
	6.1 Greek and English vowel diagrams	83
	6.2 The Greek vowel diagram	84
	6.3 The English vowel and diphthong diagram	84
	6.4 An un-Greek view	85
	6.5 A prismatic Erasmian view.	86
	6.5.1 Vowels	86
	6.5.2 Diphthongs	87
	6.6 Sidney Allen’s treatment of the Classical Attic	88
	vocalic system	
	6.7 Territorial interests	93
Chapter 7	The Erasmian Harm and the Remedy	95
	7.1 The Erasmian dichotomy of Greek	95
	7.2 Light from the later Greek	96
	7.2.1 Neohellenic	96
	7.2.2 Byzantine and Medieval Greek	98
	7.3 The Erasmian harm	99
	7.4 The Erasmian force	99
	7.5 An ill-founded fear	100
	7.6 Applying the HGP: a step forward	101
	7.7 Closing remarks	102
Chapter 8	Pronunciation Tips	103
	8.1 Tone vs. stress	103
	8.2 Stress in English	103
	8.3 English phonetic environment vs. Greek grammar	103
	8.4 English stress and Greek pitch-accent	103
	8.5 Accentuation	104
	8.6 Non-diphthongization	106
	8.7 Non-aspiration of [p, t, k]	106
	8.8 The sounds b, d, g	106

8.9 Palatalization of velars κ, γ, χ	107
8.10 Palatalization of ι [i] as [j]	108
8.11 Greek alphabetic consonants	109
8.12 Greek consonant phonemes	110
8.13 Vowels, vowel digraphs, and dieresis	110
8.14 Other sounds	110
Chapter Summaries	111
Conclusions	113
Closing Remarks	115
The HGP Today	117
Bibliography	119
Subject Index	125
Appendices	135
App. A1-A17	Decrees of Classical Athens
App. B	Changes in Attic Writing
App. C	Chronological Table of the Changes in the Attic Alphabet

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—Philemon Zachariou

PRONUNCIATION MATTERS

NEW TESTAMENT GREEK textbooks typically devote a page or two to some Erasmian pronunciation key. While different authors at times share some of the same examples in their keys, their description of Greek sounds often varies. As a matter of fact, at times one author's description of a given vowel may fit the description of a different vowel in another author's key. Such pronunciation inconsistencies speak of the need for some uniform approach to reading and pronouncing New Testament Greek.

The need for such an approach, however, remains a moot issue in the vast majority of theological institutions and universities in America and abroad where Erasmian is used. Brilliant scholars who are somewhat or even appreciably familiar with the historical development of Greek sounds, yet overshadowed by formative training, typically see no issue with the particular manner in which they teach their students to read and pronounce Greek. Consequently, many deem it unnecessary, if not collegiately inexpedient, to adopt the consistent pronunciation of Neohellenic (Modern Greek). After all, today's Greek spelling and sounds are a modern development, whereas Erasmian is imitative of the idealized pronunciation of Classical Greek—or so these scholars have been led to think.

This study describes the historical sounds of Greek and the graphemes that represent them and shows that these sounds are preserved in mainstream Neohellenic. Ample evidence in the light of historical research indicates that these sounds can be traced to the papyrial and inscriptional record of the Hellenistic period and to their origin in classical or pre-classical times.

To that end, I have incorporated works by native Greek scholars as well as non-Greek scholars in order to bring an added dimension to your understanding of the historical development of the Hellenic language in general and of its phonology in specific. I have also incorporated references to works by Erasmian advocates and adherents in order to not only spotlight their treatment of the historical evidence, but also to create an awareness of the main ramifications of that treatment.

A number of questions may have by now been raised in your mind. It is hoped that the essence of your questions is reflected in the "Questions" section that follows, as this work considers such questions legitimate and fair and devotes its beginning chapters to substantiating the answers.

QUESTIONS

The following questions come under the focal questions on page v.

GREEK PRONUNCIATION

- After two millennia since Christ, doesn't Neohellenic sound as different from the Κοινή *Koine* of Biblical Greek as, say, Modern English from Chaucer's Anglo-Saxon?
- If we had evidence that Κοινή sounded much like Neohellenic, what might that evidence be?
- Even if Κοινή sounded much like Neohellenic, isn't today's Greek spelling, syllabification, and reading different from that of Biblical Greek, which would complicate matters for English-speaking instructors and students?
- Are there any Bible colleges or seminaries that teach Κοινή Greek not the Erasmian way but the way Greek is pronounced today? If so, what is their reasoning?

ERASMIAN PRONUNCIATION

- If Erasmian has been the preferred pronunciation in universities and theological institutions for five centuries now, is it not because Κοινή, like Attic Greek, is a dead language and therefore unrelated to today's Greek?
- Why change the way Greek has been traditionally taught in our universities, Bible colleges, and seminaries, since professors of Greek are all in unity regarding the Erasmian way Κοινή is pronounced?
- Scholars of Greek advocate the use of Erasmian in an attempt to approximate that melodious Attic Greek of classical Athens—the speech of Plato and Aristotle. Isn't that the ideal pronunciation for our Bible and Ancient Greek students today?

Could you elucidate?

Answer: Certainly. Please read on ...

“The [Greek] pronunciation commonly used in American colleges and seminaries is an attempt to approximate that used by the Athenians during the classical period of Greece (fifth and fourth centuries B.C.).”

THIS REPRESENTATIVE assertion by an Erasmian scholar (discussed later) defines the so-called “academic, “theoretical,” or “standard” pronunciation of Greek. Invented in the early 1500s, this pronunciation is credited to the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus, so it is commonly known as Erasmian. The Erasmian pronunciation supposedly approximates the way Plato and Aristotle spoke Greek in classical Athens. As it will be shown in this study, however, Erasmian is artificial and inconsistent and has never been a part of the Greek speech.¹

In Erasmus’ day, while the Greek national voice remained silenced by the Ottoman Turks after the fall of Constantinople in 1453, unprecedented international interest in Classical Greek and in the newly printed Greek New Testament led non-Greek Renaissance intelligentsia to lump together everything Greek from antiquity down to the Christian era under one label: *Ancient Greek*. In other words, Erasmus had no reason to distinguish between the pronunciation of Aristotle’s Attic Greek and Paul’s Κοινή, for they both spoke “Ancient Greek.”

Unlike Erasmus himself, however, Erasmian adherents today view the pronunciation of New Testament Κοινή as being different from that of Classical Greek due to phonological changes they presume Greek underwent before New Testament times as a result of Alexander’s spread of Κοινή, yet they indiscriminately apply Erasmian to Classical Greek and New Testament Greek alike. Seen in this light, what the above assertion essentially says is that Aristotle’s Erasmian pronunciation of Classical Greek is a more appropriate model for New Testament Greek than Paul’s own pronunciation of Κοινή.

This implication raises questions about the pervasive presence of Erasmian—and in recent years, of other quasi-Erasmian varieties of pronunciation—in the study of Biblical and Classical Greek. A closer inquiry reveals that Erasmian is much more than just a pronunciation issue. Therefore the move being made in this study for the pronunciation warranted by the historical record eventually transcends the very question of pronunciation itself and elicits attention as well to other aspects of the Greek language and learning that are impacted by Erasmian and which as a result are currently at stake.

But let us now bring temporary closure to the above foretaste of the Erasmian issue and resume the topic in Chapter 4, that is, after a discussion of the historical background of the Greek language, the formation of Κοινή, and the development of the historical Greek sounds.

¹ The term *Erasmian* as used here encompasses all Erasmian-like pronunciations of Greek.

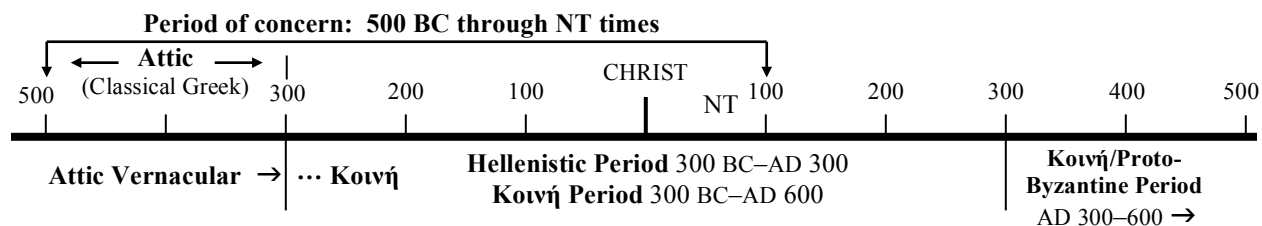


— CHAPTER 2 —

THE PHONOLOGY OF Κοινή: DEVELOPMENT AND SIMILARITIES TO NEOHELLENIC

2.1 A specific linguistic period

The Attic Greek vernacular did not die nor did it give birth to a new language;² rather, it continued to develop through Hellenistic and Byzantine times down to the present day. From Alexander the Great until technically AD 600, Greek is known as Κοινή *Koine* [kiní], and from then on as Neohellenic Κοινή or simply *Neohellenic* (1.2, 1.9). This chapter examines the development of the phonology of Κοινή and compares it with that of Neohellenic. Because certain features of Κοινή phonology had already been established by or initiated within classical times, reference will be made as well to their period of origin or initiation. Of immediate concern then becomes the time period from classical through NT times, as the diagram below shows:



2.2 Iotacism

English-speaking students of NT and Classical Greek are normally told that in Neohellenic the [i] sound is represented six different ways: ι, η, υ, ει, οι, υι; and that this “modern” Greek method of pronouncing these letters and digraphs began to develop around Medieval times. This method, students are further told, could not have been true of Classical Greek as there was no reason for the Athenians, a people of the subtlest intellect, to have assigned the same phonetic value to such a variety of symbols.³ As it will be shown, however, this variety of spellings for the same sound—that of ἰῶτα *iota* (ι)—is not a modern invention but rather the result of a centuries-old linguistic progression that reached classical Athens.

² Wallace’s analogy of a physical but not linguistic birth of Κοινή in 330 BC can be misleading: “Just as a newborn baby does not immediately speak, it took some time before Koine took shape.” Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 18. Such descriptions, regardless of intent, can lead to the erroneous notion that Κοινή was an “infant” tongue, not the continuation of an existing language.

³ Notably, English i-sounds are spelled 30 different ways (5.7).

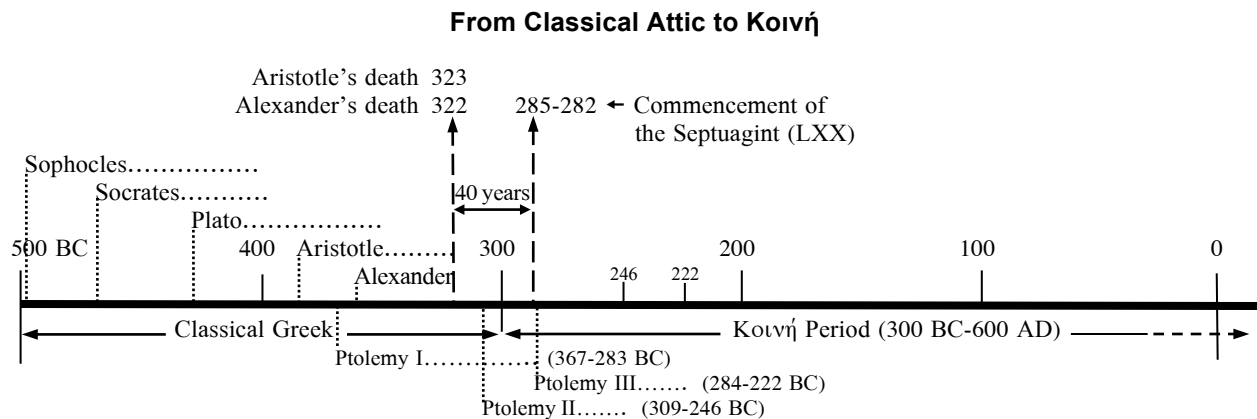
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3.4 From Septuagint to New Testament

As already seen, the translation of the Septuagint, initially the Pentateuch, commenced around 285 BC (1.5), while the original NT writings were all completed by the end of the first century. However one slices the pie, the Κοινή of the Septuagint and the Κοινή of the New Testament are one and the same language and share one and the same writing and orthographic system, the post-Eucleidean. Distinctions such as “Egyptian Greek,” “Alexandrian Koine,” “Jewish Koine,” or “Christian Greek” regarding Κοινή are nothing more than fanciful names, dear though they are to grammarians, lexicographers and exegetes. Besides, our premise concerns the mainstream Κοινή phonology, not arbitrary descriptions of Κοινή or isolated peculiarities of any Κοινή expression.

How different were the Κοινή sounds of the Septuagint translators from Aristotle’s Classical Attic sounds?

Our premise then triggers the question: Since the Septuagint and the New Testament were written in Κοινή, and while the Κοινή sounds were supposedly different from the Attic Greek sounds of classical Athens, how different were the Κοινή sounds of the Septuagint translators in 285 BC from Alexander and Aristotle’s Attic Greek sounds in 325 BC, or about 40 years earlier? The chart below is meant to add some visual perspective to this question and its answer:



As the above chart shows, Alexander and his private tutor, Aristotle, died within a year of each other, their death coinciding with the close of the classical period (500-300 BC) and the beginning of the Hellenistic (300 BC-300 AD). If Aristotle’s Attic was now to turn into the Κοινή of the Septuagint, there was barely a 40-year window between his death and the commencement of the translation of the Septuagint in order for classical η, η, υ, ει, οι, υι to be read as ι [i], αι as ε [e], α as α [a], ω and ω as ο [o]; for φ, θ, χ, β, δ, γ and the υ of αυ ευ ηυ to become fricativized; for aspirate [h] to go into disuse; for

biphthongal ζ [dz]/[zd] to turn into monophthongal [z]; for the long-short vowel distinction to disappear; and for the tonal features of the language to give way to stress.⁴

Such preposterous notions laid aside, it is highly likely that at least some of the seventy-two Jewish emissaries assigned to the task of translating the Hebrew Scriptures into Κοινή were old enough to have been educated in Greek even while Aristotle was still alive.⁵ These Jews therefore spoke Κοινή using the historical sounds of Attic Greek as did Aristotle, Alexander, and the Ptolemies, and wrote according to the same standardized post-Eucleidean orthography of contemporary Athens—irrespective of whether or not any of them spoke flawless Athenian or with some Semitic accent.

From the very outset these erudite men knew, for instance, that ευ was not [ju] as in *feud* but fricativized [ev] as in Λευιτικόν [levitikón] *Leviticus*; and that αυ was not [aʊ] as in *sauerkraut* but [av] as in Δαυίδ [ðavíd] *David*. For by then the processes of fricativization and other linguistic changes, such as already discussed, had long been in place by classical times, with the Attic Greek vernacular and its HGP sounds and orthography entering the Κοινή period in their definitive form.

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⁴ If so, the Κοινή of Ptolemy III, king of Egypt, would have sounded nearly unintelligible to his grandfather, Ptolemy I, one of Alexander's generals and for 44 years a contemporary of Aristotle, also a contemporary of the Jewish translators; and, alas, the Κοινή of Atticist Dionysios Thrax (170–90 BC), like a foreign tongue.

⁵ As the diagram shows, Sophocles died at age 90, Plato at 82, Aristotle at 62. The average lifespan of these men, including Socrates' premature death at 70, was 76 years, a high average even by modern standards. Though the natural lifespan average in classical Athens was probably lower, it was not unusual for a person born in that period, whether in Athens, Rome, Jerusalem, Alexandria, or elsewhere, to live well past the age of 70. In that the translation of the Septuagint began in Alexandria around 285 BC or earlier, that is, within 40 years of Aristotle's death, it follows that any of the Septuagint translators enjoying a higher lifespan were educated in Greek when Aristotle was still living, while the younger ones were educated by teachers who had been contemporaries of Aristotle. In either case, the Greek speech sounds of those emissaries were the HGP sounds of Aristotle's day. And while parts of the Septuagint were completed in later years, they were written in the same Κοινή, also the Κοινή of the New Testament.

CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Excerpt from
the last pages

Chapter 1 gives a historical overview of the development of the Hellenic language into the dimorphic (artistic and vernacular) Attic dialect of Athens. Following Alexander, the Attic vernacular spreads throughout the Hellenized world and becomes the Κοινή “common” speech of Hellenistic and Roman times, and further evolves through Byzantine times into today’s Neohellenic.

Chapter 2 shows that Hellenistic papyri yield evidence of the Koine sounds through an unbroken record of repeated spelling errors by individuals inadequately acquainted with Greek orthography and who as a result confuse graphemes that stand for the same sound. Such errors are traced back to Athens’ Golden Age, when older Attic writing begins to clash with Athens’ newly adopted Ionic script, *the post-Eucleidean* grammar, an alphabet shared as well by Koine and Neohellenic alike. In the ensuing confusion, iotacism emerges as a primary cause for misspellings that will be seen repeated through Hellenistic, Byzantine, and modern-day writings. The phonological and orthographical features Koine and Neohellenic share, all established by or initiated within classical times, form the basis for the *Historical Greek Pronunciation* (HGP).

Chapter 3 focuses on the emergence of the HGP. Formed by or initiated within classical times, the HGP sounds make their entrance into the Hellenistic era, loyal post-Eucleidean orthography by their side. Barely four decades past Aristotle’s death, 72 Jewish emissaries steeped in a Κοινή molded by the HGP and the orthography of Aristotle’s day commence their translation of Hebrew Scriptures. Paul’s speech to the Athenians some three centuries later speaks of Κοινή’s tenacious HGP, the mainstream Greek sound system that prevails through Hellenistic and Byzantine times over all other potential pronunciations of Greek.

Chapter 4 discusses the politically orchestrated origins and spread of Erasmian in the 1500s and shows that as a pronunciation system, Erasmian is artificial and inconsistent, whereas the Greek pronunciation is natural, consistent, and euphonic.

Chapter 5 refutes two misconceptions: reading and pronouncing the ι-sound Greek letters and digraphs—in what is erroneously thought to be) the Neohellenic way presents difficulties for English-speaking students; and Κοινή and Neohellenic words are dissimilar. A comparison of Greek and English phonemes and alphabets demonstrates that the English way of spelling, reading, and pronouncing is much more complex for learners of English than the Greek way is for English-speaking students, thereby rendering the concern of difficulty in language learning pointless. The chapter moreover shows that a high percentage of the NT vocabulary is used or understood by speakers of Neohellenic.

Chapter 6 critiques the far-fetched extent to which Erasmian scholars go in applying English phonological concepts to Attic Greek and Κοινή alike. As a case in point, the chapter analyzes the description of the pronunciation of Classical Greek by two Erasmian scholars, one being Sidney Allen, author of *Vox Graeca*, and shows that the Erasmian pronunciation of Classical Greek, which Erasmians apply to Hellenistic Koine as well, is untenable.

Chapter 7 describes Erasmian as the barrier that for five centuries now has inhibited viewing the Greek language holistically and diachronically, therewith preventing the light

of the later Greek from illuminating exegetically the Greek NT texts. This barrier is sustained by leading Erasmian advocates operating in accountability-free scholastic environments with respect to the pronunciation of Greek. The chapter shows that Neohellenic can shed light on NT usage, exegesis, and textual transmission; and that the application of the HGP can serve as the remedial force that may eventually cancel out the Erasmian effects on Greek scholarship.

Chapter 8 offers tips on key differences between Greek and English phonologies, points out the features most crucial in pronouncing Greek, and summarily describes the features of the Greek phonemic sounds.

Annotated Attic decrees from the 5th and 4th c. BC in the appendices lend added support to the basic premise in this work regarding Greek sounds: that the repeated misspellings seen in Hellenistic, Byzantine, and modern-day writings are traced to Attic Greek; and that such errors, judged diachronically by the same alphabet and orthography, are the strongest proof of the historical Greek sounds and their preservation in Neohellenic.

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THE HGP TODAY

TODAY THE HISTORICAL GREEK PRONUNCIATION (HGP) is moving forward in strides as an increasing number of scholars and students around the world advance its application even while favoring greater familiarity with Neohellenic. It is hoped that the HGP will eventually be viewed by the majority as a step in the right direction, a departure from the confines of the Erasmian dichotomy of Greek and the grip of its anachronistic tradition, and into a linguistically sound approach to Hellenic studies. This could only invigorate interest in the Greek language and literature, lead to deeper New Testament insights, cultivate close articulation and academic commerce with the Greek-speaking world, and engender greater appreciation for the millennia-old authentic sounds of the Hellenic tongue.

It is also hoped that some parts in this book will seize the interest of students and scholars who might take the HGP to new heights of linguistic competence throughout the non-Greek-speaking world, thereby vindicating the tongue whose 400 years of silence during captivity, and for nearly half that number of years since, created a vacuum in countless centers of Hellenic learning around the world only to be filled with discordant sounds supposedly imitative of her genuine voice.

(Cont'd)

SUBJECT INDEX

Pages 1-117

A

Accent

marks 46, 47, 104

Accentuation 34, 35, 46, 47, 104, 105

Achaean 3, 11

Acoustic, -ally 12, 13, 16, 18, 20, 34
40, 42, 43, 46, 91, 97, 104, 107

Acts 6, 57, 58, 108

Aeolic, -an(s) 4, 42

Affricate 68, 110

Alexander 4, 5, 9, 15, 16, 54, 55, 56
59, 60, 92, 111, 115

Alexandria(n), -ine 5, 34, 46, 55, 97

Allen, Sidney 18, 19, 25, 26, 27, 29
30, 43, 45, 54, 59, 69, 70, 88, 85, 89
90, 91, 92, 93, 94, 100, 112

Allograph, -ic 13, 21, 25, 50, 51

Allophone, -ic 13, 25, 49, 72, 108

Alphabet, -ic(al)

-Attic — 10, 11, 13, 38, 39, 41, 43, 45
50, 60, 86, 95

-Chalcidic — 67

-Classical Greek — 11,

-Greek — 11, 33, 59, 61, 79, 80, 106
111, 112

-English — 79, 80, 112

-International (IPA) — 12, 13, 68, 80
109

-Ionic — 11, 12, 39, 44, 45, 50, 111

-Κοινή — 32, 95,

-Latin — 29, 68,

-Neohellenic — 55, 115

-Phoenician — 11

Alveolar 30, 109, 110

Anglo-Saxon 9, 58

Apicoalveolar 109, 110

Apicodental 30, 110

Aristophanes of Byzantium 46

Aristotle 14, 43, 51, 54, 55, 56, 58, 59
111, 115

Asia 55

Asia Minor 3, 5

Aspirate 12, 24, 26, 43, 56

Aspirated 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 33, 44, 67
68, 106, 109

Aspiration 22, 25, 26, 28, 42, 43, 44
45, 50, 52, 54, 55, 65, 68, 72, 111

Athenian(s) 7, 8, 10, 11, 15, 18, 33, 38
39, 40, 43, 48, 49, 51, 54, 55, 56, 57
60, 77, 94, 111, 115

Athens 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 11, 12, 15, 41, 42
43, 44, 45, 48, 50, 51, 52, 54, 55
56, 57, 86, 111, 115

Attic 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15
17, 19, 25, 26, 27, 29, 30, 31, 32, 34
36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45
46, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53, 54, 55
56, 57, 60, 67, 68, 86, 88, 89, 90, 91
92, 95, 98, 101, 102, 111, 113, 115

-Classical — (see Classical)

— vernacular 5, 6, 10, 11, 15, 31, 48
55, 57, 111

Attica 1, 17, 19

Atticist(s), -ic 6, 10, 36, 98

Aurelius, Marcus (Emperor) 5

B

Basel, Switzerland 65

Biblical Greek (see Greek)

Bilabial 27, 28, 30, 109, 110

Blass, Friedrich 17, 19, 31, 94, 100

Boeotia(n) 4, 96

Breath(ing) marks 45, 69

Byzantine

-Dark Age 98

-Empire 7, 6, 16, 91, 95

-Greek(s) 6, 7, 8, 11, 66, 95, 98

-manuscript(s) (MSS) 20, 21, 31, 97
98, 111

-papyri 41

-period(s), Times 7, 10, 13, 15, 21, 30
32, 41, 54, 67, 96, 98, 111, 115

-pronunciation 65, 77, 95

-Renaissance 98

Byzantium 6, 7, 46, 65, 98

C

Cambridge 66, 73, 75
 Catholic(s) 66, 73, 98
 Catholic Church 66
 Cheke, Sir John 66, 73
 Christ 5
 Christian(s) 6, 7, 61, 98, 99, 100
 Christian era 5, 6, 7, 95, 113
 Christian Greek 55
 Christian literature
 Christianity 6, 96
 Christianized 7
 Chrysostomos 98
 Cicero 5, 27, 28, 29
 Classical
 -antiquity 46
 -Athens 15, 41, 52, 54, 55, 86, 115
 -Attic 3, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 13, 29, 31
 38, 39, 42, 43, 47, 48, 49, 50, 51
 52, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 88, 89, 90
 113
 -authors 94, 98
 -Greece 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 36, 54,
 -Greek 4, 10, 15, 26, 36, 39, 48, 57
 65, 68, 77, 85, 89, 93, 94, 95, 96
 97, 98, 99, 112
 -inscriptions 32, 46
 -literature 10, 34, 36
 -period 4, 17, 25, 31, 42, 51, 54, 55
 77, 86, 87, 90, 115
 -times 13, 15, 18, 19, 21, 29, 32, 42
 48, 52, 53, 57, 58, 60, 82, 91, 92
 93, 96, 115
 -versifiers 38
 -works 46, 96, 98
 Consonant, -al 11, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27
 28, 30, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 43, 44
 45, 48, 49, 50, 52, 59, 72, 78, 81, 86
 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111
 Constantine I 6
 Constantinople 6, 7, 20, 59, 65, 98
 Continuant (sound) 24, 25, 26, 30, 32, 64
 68, 70, 109, 110
 Copyists 11
 Cratylus 67 (see *Kratylos*)
 Crete 3, 11

Crusades 7

D

Dark Age
 -of Greece 3, 4, 15, 35, 36
 -Byzantine — 98
 Demotic (or Dimotiki)
 -Attic 5, 96
 -Neohellenic 10, 11, 31, 32, 82
 Demosthenes 5
 Diachrony, -ic(ally) 21, 31, 33, 34, 50
 51, 52, 53, 58, 96, 101, 111, 113
 115
 Dieresis (diaeresis) 72, 110
 Digamma *Ϝ* 22, 42
 Diglossia 10
 Digraph(s) 14, 15, 22, 24, 25, 44, 49
 52, 53, 60, 67, 68, 69, 71, 72, 79
 81, 82, 100, 107, 110, 112
 Dimorphia, -ic 10, 31, 50, 52, 96, 111
 Diocletian (Emperor) 6
 Dionysios (Areopagite) 57
 Dionysios of Halikarnassos 29
 Dionysios Thrax 26, 29, 39, 40, 48, 49
 Dittography 97
 Doric, -an(s) 3, 4, 12, 40, 90
 Dorsovelar 109, 110
 Dutch(man) 10, 65, 66, 74, 99
E
 Egypt 5, 6, 16, 55, 92
 Egyptian Greek 55
 Egyptian papyri 41, 92
 Elegiac 38
 English
 -alphabet, -ical 79, 80, 112
 -American — 81, 85, 86
 -borrowing(s) from Greek 71, 72, 92
 -Chaucer's — 6, 9
 -consonant(s) 81
 -diphthong(s) 21, 55, 81, 87, 106
 -i-sounds 13, 81
 -learners of 79, 75
 -letter(s) 79, 88
 -modern — 9, 58
 -orthography, spelling 79, 81
 -phonemes 80, 81, 112
 -phonology, -ical 77, 81, 112

- pronunciation 81
- reading 81
- sound(s) 22, 35, 43, 54, 81, 106, 107
- speakers, -speaking 15, 27, 45, 71, 77
81, 82, 100, 110, 112
- spelling 59, 69, 81, 112
- stress 103
- vocalic system 55, 81, 83, 84
- vowel diagram 81, 83, 84, 85
- vowel-shift 59, 115
- vowels 55, 59, 81
- Erasmian
 - adherent(s) 30, 48, 70, 85, 88, 89, 90
97, 99, 112
 - comfort zone
 - dichotomy of Greek 95, 99, 112
 - disadvantage 113
 - doctrine 74, 75
 - force 99, 100
 - Germanized 66
 - harm 94, 95
 - inconsistencies 69, 70
 - influence 25, 67, 71, 72, 112
 - latitudes 83
 - misconceptions 77, 112
 - pedagogy 81
 - peers 73, 82
 - pronunciation 24, 49, 61, 62, 66, 67
68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75, 77, 81
82, 86, 90, 93, 101, 105, 112
 - scholars 77, 94, 99, 100, 112
 - sounds 68, 77, 85
 - system 97, 112
 - transliteration 72
 - view of Greek 85, 86, 87, 88
- Erasmianism 74
- Erasmus 7, 65, 66, 67, 73, 74, 75, 94
98, 99
- Erasmus' *Dialogus* 65, 66, 73, 74
- Eucleidean
 - post- — 11, 36, 41, 51, 52, 55, 56, 58
101, 111
 - pre- — 36, 41, 44, 49, 67, 92
- Eucleides 11, 116
- Europe 59, 65, 66, 67, 77, 95, 99
- European(s) 66, 67, 77, 95, 98
- F**
 - False writing 43, 44
 - Faulty reading(s) 21, 51, 52 (see also
Spelling errors)
 - France 65, 66, 75
 - French 10, 21, 25, 43, 68, 75, 88, 89
90, 91, 92
 - Fricative (or Spirant) 22, 24, 25, 26, 27
28, 29, 30, 31, 43, 45, 50, 54, 57
59, 67, 109, 110
 - Fricativization 115
 - Fricativized 22, 50, 51, 57
- G**
 - Gardiner, Stephen 66, 73
 - Gentile(s) 57
 - German, -ic 10, 21, 22, 25, 61, 65, 69
75, 89, 90, 115
 - Germanic (dialects, languages) 10, 58
87, 115, 116
 - Germanized 66, 68,
 - Germany 66, 75
 - Glareanus, Henricus 65, 74
 - Glottal 43, 45
 - Golden Age of Athens/Greece 4, 6, 55
111
 - Gospel(s) 6, 58
 - Grammarian(s) 25, 26, 29, 34, 36, 39
46, 48, 55
 - Grapheme 14, 42
 - Graphic 34, 35
 - Grassmann's Law 25
 - Greece 3, 4, 5, 6, 9, 10, 11, 36, 54, 60
66, 73, 77, 99
 - Greek
 - alphabet (see Alphabet)
 - Ancient — 4, 9, 10, 48, 58, 59, 65
66, 67, 77, 95, 96, 98, 115
 - Attic — 12, 13, 45, 48, 53, 54, 57
102, 113
 - Atticistic — 6, 10, 98
 - Biblical — 6, 13, 68, 89, 94, 99
 - Byzantine — 6, 7, 8, 11, 66, 98
 - Classical — 4, 6, 10, 15, 26, 34, 39
46, 48, 56, 57, 65, 68, 77, 85, 86
87, 93, 94, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, 112

- dialect(s) 4, 5, 9, 40, 55
(see Aeolic, Attic, Doric, Ionic)
- dimorphia, -ic 10, 31, 50, 52, 96, 111
- Katharevousa 8, 10, 11, 23, 31, 32, 82
- learners of — 65, 79
- Medieval — 98
- Modern — 4, 5, 7, 8, 9, 33, 42, 45
47, 52, 59, 60, 77, 62, 82, 93
96, 97, 115
method, way 77, 93, 100
pronunciation 60, 62, 75, 111
scholars 8
sounds, letters 25, 26, 27, 52
system 78
usage 96
words 82
- Mycenaean — (see Mycenaean)
- Neohellenic — (see Neohellenic)
- New Testament / NT — 7, 58, 82, 90
94, 98, 105, 112
MSS 20, 31, 48, 98
text 81, 105, 112
- Orthodox Church 66
- orthography
Greek 9, 11, 12, 16, 20, 21, 32, 41
48, 51, 56, 57, 58, 79, 81, 95, 101
107, 111
English 79, 81
- papyri, -cal 6, 12, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21
41, 46, 52, 53, 55, 73, 89, 92, 107
111
- parliament 42
- period(s), times of
Ancient 3, 4, 9, 10, 47, 77
Archaic (Epic) 4, 18
Byzantine 4, 7, 10, 13, 15, 21, 30
32, 41, 67, 96, 98, 111, 115
Classical (Attic, Hellenic) 3, 4, 17
25, 26, 31, 42, 51, 54, 56, 77, 86
90, 113, 115
Dark 4
Epic 4
Hellenic 4
Hellenistic (see Hellenistic)
inscriptional 21, 35, 36, 53, 60, 91
Κοινή 4, 42, 50, 56, 57, 111, 113
- Medieval 4, 15, 21, 77, 96, 98, 115
77
- Modern (Neohellenic) 3, 4
- Mycenaean 4, 86, 87
- Neohellenic 4, 21
- New Testament
papyri(cal) 52
post-classical 4, 8
pre-classical 17
proto-Byzantine 4
- phoneme(s) 21, 22, 3, 34, 44, 45, 59
80, 81, 89, 110, 112
- pitch-accent 13, 14, 46, 47, 48, 50
103, 104
- pronunciation (see Pronunciation)
- reconstructed — (see Pronunciation)
- sounds (see Sounds)
- spelling (see Spelling)
- syllable(s) 32, 34, 100, 102, 103, 104
- vernacular (see Vernacular)
- vowel diagram (see Vowel diagram)
- vowel(s) (see Vowel(s))
- Greeks 6, 11, 24, 28, 36, 39, 41, 58, 67
74
- Modern-day — 9, 58, 60, 100
- Non-Hellenized — 6
- The first — 3
— under Turkish oppression 66
- Grimm's Law 54
- H**
- Hebrew
-language 11
-people 5
-scriptures 56, 111
- Hebrews* (book) 5, 6, 58,
- Hellas 4, 5
- Hellene(s) 3, 4
- Hellenic 10, 44
- Hellenistic 4, 31
-period 4, 5, 6, 10, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17
21, 22, 23, 29, 30, 32, 33, 42, 48, 51
56, 57, 59, 65, 87, 91, 96, 111, 115
— coins 91
-grammarians 39
— Greek, Κοινή 4, 10, 25, 26, 29
-papyri, inscriptions 12, 16, 17, 20, 41

Subject Index

- 48, 53, 92, 107, 111
 -sounds 33
 -spelling 17
 Hellenize(d)
 -Jews 5, 6
 -world 30, 54, 55, 57, 60, 111
 -writers 6
 Historical sounds of Greek
 12, 21, 51, 53, 55, 56, 58, 65, 115
 -formation of 12, 53,
 -tenacity of 57, 59
 Historical Greek Pronunciation (*HGP*)
 52, 53, 54, 55, 57, 59, 60, 61, 62, 94
 97, 99, 101, 102, 111, 112, 113, 117
 -formation of 53
 -preserved in Byzantium 65
 Homer 3, 4, 7, 9, 37, 38
 Homeric 36, 37, 47, 58
 Homerists 38
I
 Iambic 38
 Ictus 38, 46, 47
Iliad 4
 Indo-European (IE) 3, 9, 10, 116
 Inscription(s) 8, 11, 12, 17, 19, 20, 21
 38, 42, 43, 44, 46, 49, 52, 53, 60, 111
 -Attic, Classical Greek 19, 32, 38, 43
 45, 46, 52, 90, 91
 -Hellenistic 12, 17
 Inscriptional 3, 19, 21, 35, 36, 51, 53, 89
 91, 111
 Inscriptionist 33, 51, 111
 International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)
 12, 61, 68, 80, 109
 Intonation, -al 13, 36, 46, 47, 50, 60, 115
 Ionia 3, 42
 Ionia(ns) 3, 11
 Ionic
 -alphabet 11, 12, 39, 41, 44, 45, 50, 51
 -dialect 4
 -letter(s), symbol(s) 12, 19, 21, 38, 41
 -spelling 12
 -writing 51
 Iotacism (Itacism) 19, 21,
 Iotacized, -ation 50, 70, 90, 115
IPA (see International Phonetic Alphabet)
- ι-sounds (Greek) 15, 81
 i-sounds (English) 15, 81
 Isochronous, -nically, -ny 12, 36, 42, 50
 71, 104, 105
 Israelis 58
 Italy, ian, -ic 4, 7, 10, 43, 65
J
James (epistle) 6, 31, 58,
 Jesus 71, 96
 Jewish 5, 55, 56, 111
 Jews 5, 6, 56
John (gospel) 31, 58, 62, 96
Jude (epistle) 6
 Juncture 13, 31, 32, 33, 46, 49, 60, 106
 Justinian (Emperor) 7
K
 Katharevousa 8, 10, 11, 23, 31, 32, 82
 King James AV 7, 98
 Knossos 3
 Κοινή 4, 7, 9, 13, 14, 24, 34, 52, 53
 55, 57, 58, 60, 67, 92, 95, 96, 98, 111
 112, 113, 115
 -of the new Testament / NT 55, 95, 96
 113
 -of the Septuagint 55
 Koine 3, 4, 8, 10, 11, 15, 33, 42, 58, 111
Kratylos 18, 26, 40, 43, 46, 49
L
 Labiodental 22, 28, 109, 110
 Labiodental nasal 31
 Lateral 109, 110
 Latin 4, 7, 10, 17, 25, 27, 28, 29, 34
 56, 65, 67, 68, 71, 74, 75, 86, 89, 90
 115, 116
 Lebrixa, Antonio 65
 Length (see Vowel length)
 Lexicography 97
Linear B 11, 86
 Linguistics 20, 54
 Loanword 21, 31, 33, 67, 71, 72, 92
Luke 31, 62
M
 Manutius, Aldus 65
 Manuscript(s) (MS, MSS)
 -Greek (NT, Hellenistic, Byzantine)
 7, 20, 21, 31, 43, 48, 89, 90, 97, 98, 111

- Latin, Roman 7
- Marcus Aurelius 5
- Medieval
 - Greek 4, 36, 98
 - times, period 4, 15, 21, 36, 77, 96, 98, 115
- Metrical foot, verse 38, 40, 47
- Minoan
- Misspelling(s), -ed (see Spelling errors)
- Monoliteral 19, 49, 67
- Monophthong(s), -al(ly), -ized
 - 19, 29, 34, 35, 37, 40, 50, 51, 56, 59, 77, 89
- Monophthongization 34, 35
- Morphology, -ical 51, 57, 62, 95, 115
- Mycenae 11
- Mycenaean(s) 3, 11
 - civilization 3, 11
 - period 4, 86, 87
 - vowels 55, 86, 87
- N**
- Nasal(s) 50, 106, 109, 110
- Nasal γ 59
- Neohellenic (see also Greek)
 - and Greek Parliament in 1982 42,
 - and Grimm's Law 54
 - continuation of Attic 6, 45, 55, 57
 - continuation of Κοινή 6, 8
 - dimorphia 10, 31
 - Early, Middle, Late — 4
 - Homeric words in — 58
 - illuminating NT usage — 96, 101, 112
 - immersion in — 101
 - English — 59, 80, 81, 112, 115
 - misconceptions about — 59, 77, 82, 112
 - name adopted in 1976 — 10
 - formal / informal — 24, 30, 31, 32, 33
- Netherlands 65
- New Testament (NT)
 - Greek 4, 8, 60, 61, 70, 77, 81, 82, 89, 100, 111
 - Greek of — 7, 58, 82, 90, 94, 98, 105, 112
 - Κοινή of — 9, 55, 95, 96, 113
 - manuscripts (MSS) 7, 20, 21, 31, 43, 48, 89, 90, 97, 98, 111
 - preserved by the Byzantines 7, 65
 - understood by average Greek 58, 82
- New Testament Greek (see also Κοινή) 4, 61
- Nicene Creed 98
- Non-aspirated (see Unaspirated)
- O**
- Odyssey* 4
- Orthodox, -y
- Orthographical errors (see Spelling errors)
- Orthography (see Greek orthography)
- Orthophonic, (-ally) pronunciation 13, 12, 14, 36, 50, 60, 103, 104, 113
- P**
- Palatal 59
- Palatalization 107, 108
- Palatalized 107, 108
- Panhellenic 5
- Papyri, -cal 6, 12, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 41, 46, 52, 53, 55, 73, 89, 92, 107, 111
- Parthenon 94
- Paul (Apostle) 5, 6, 51, 57, 58, 62, 71, 111
- Pelasgians 3
- Pericles 94
- Persian (language) 13, 90, 91
- Persians 4
- Peter* 58
- Philhellenes 8
- Philip II 5
- Phoenician(s) 11, 22, 24
- Phoneme(s), -ic 13
 - Greek — 11, 21, 31, 33, 34, 36, 41, 43, 44, 45, 50, 55, 59, 60, 62, 71, 79, 80, 81, 87, 89, 95, 105, 107, 108, 11, 29, 30, 43, 72, 85, 106, 109, 110
 - English — 59, 80, 81, 112, 115
- Phonological sounds
 - affricate 68, 110
 - alveolar 27, 28, 30, 109, 110
 - apicoalveolar 109, 110
 - apicodental 30, 110
 - aspirate 12, 24, 26, 43, 56
 - unaspirated 24, 25, 26, 29, 30, 33, 44

Subject Index

- 67, 68, 106, 109
- bilabial 27, 28, 30, 109, 110
- consonant, -al 11, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26
27, 28, 30, 31, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 43
44, 45, 48, 49, 50, 52, 59, 72, 78, 81
86, 106, 107, 108, 109, 110, 111
- continuant 24, 25, 26, 30, 32, 64, 68
70, 109, 110
- dorsovelar 109, 110
- fricative (or spirant) 22, 24, 25, 26
27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 43, 45, 50, 54
57, 59, 67, 109, 110
- fricativization 115
- fricativized 22, 50, 51, 57
- labiodental 22, 28, 109, 110
- labiodental nasal 31
- lateral 109, 110
- glottal 43, 45
- nasal 50, 106, 109, 110
- nasal γ 59
- non-aspirated 106, 109
- palatal 59
- palatalization 107, 108
- palatalized 107, 108
- plosive (or stop) 22, 24, 25, 26, 27
29, 33, 54, 57, 87, 106, 110
- sibilant (or strident) 109
- spirant (or fricative) 22, 29
- stop (or plosive) 22, 24, 25, 27, 29
30, 32, 68, 70, 109, 110
- strident (or sibilant) 109
- trill 109, 110
- unaspirated 25, 27, 30, 106, 109
- vocalic 21, 22, 34, 50, 55, 59, 83
85, 86, 87, 88, 110, 112
- voiced 22, 23, 26, 29, 30, 48, 49, 50
59, 72, 85, 106, 109, 110
- voiceless 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28
67, 68, 69, 72, 73, 75, 81, 82, 106
107, 112, 115
- vowel(s) 11, 12, 20, 21, 22, 23, 28
34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42
43, 45, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57, 59, 65
67, 71, 72, 81, 83, 84, 85, 86, 87
88, 89, 91, 103, 104, 105, 106, 107
108, 110
- Phonology, -cal(ly) 12,
-Greek — 9, 15, 27, 35, 50, 52, 53, 55
59, 62, 71, 81, 85, 88, 95, 106, 112
-English — 81, 112
- Phonopathy 31, 35, 38
- Pitch 47, 60, 103, 104, 105
- Pitch-accent 13, 14, 46, 47, 48, 50, 103
104
- Plato 5, 14, 18, 21, 26, 41, 43, 45, 49
51, 56, 90
- Platonic 98
- Plosive (or Stop) 22, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28
33, 54, 57, 87, 106, 110
- Poetic, -al(ly) 26, 36, 46
- Poetry 10, 36, 48
- Portuguese 10, 43
- Pronunciation (of Greek*) 12, 13, 21
-American — 78, 85, 86*
-Ancient Greek — 11, 19, 25, 36, 52
58, 65, 66, 67, 77
-arbitrary, customized — of Greek
-Attic, Classical Greek — 26, 33, 40
43, 44, 45, 49, 53, 54, 57, 77, 112
113, 115
-Broad vs. Narrow —
-Byzantine — 32, 65, 66, 77, 93, 95
99
-customized — 70, 71, 99
-English — 59, 71*, 78, 79, 81
-Erasmian, theoretical — 26, 27, 59, 61
62, 65, 66, 68, 69, 70, 71, 73, 74, 75
82, 85, 86, 90, 93, 94, 95, 99, 100
101, 112
-euphonic — 26, 29, 31, 32, 33, 34, 48
50, 52, 61, 112
-French 25
-Greek — 21, 29, 58, 59, 61, 65, 66
-Κοινή, Hellenistic, biblical — 13, 14
19, 24, 29, 33, 50, 52, 57, 111, 113
-Historical Greek — (HGP) 52, 53, 54
55, 57, 59, 60, 61, 62, 94, 97, 99
-NT Greek — 30, 77
-Latin — 29, 67, 75
-Neohellenic, Modern 14, 30, 32, 48
50, 52, 60, 61, 62, 75, 77, 82, 93
100, 111

- orthophonic — 12, 13, 113
- reconstructed, restored — 101
- regional, peripheral — 41, 54, 89, 111
- un-Greek — 85, 95, 99, 112, 113
- Prosodic features
 - in metrical verse 36, 39, 46
 - in speech 14, 45, 46, 47
 - (see also Suprasegmental)
 - in writing
- Prosody 96, 111
 - qualitative 46
 - quantitative 46
- Protestant 98
- Q**
- Quality (of voice) 13, 46, 60, 103
- Quantity (see also Vowel length)
 - 12, 14, 36, 38, 40, 65, 104, 111
- Quintilian 27, 28, 29, 90, 92
- R**
- Reformation 7, 98
- Renaissance
 - Byzantine — 98
 - European — 59, 65, 67, 95
- Reuchlin, Johannes 65,
- Reuchlinian 66
- Rhythm, -ical(ly)
 - in speech 13
 - in verse 38, 40, 41, 55
- Rhythmical accent 47 (see also Ictus)
- Romance (dialects, languages)
 - 9, 10, 28, 58, 115
- Roman Empire 5, 6, 7, 57, 68, 87
- Roman manuscripts (see Manuscripts)
- Romans* (book) 5
- Rome 5, 6; “New Rome” 6
- Rotterdam, Netherlands 65
- S**
- Sanskrit 13, 25, 90
- Scribal errors 97 (see Spelling errors)
- Scribe(s) 16, 20, 31, 39, 97, 111
- Scriptorium, -a 20, 97
- Semiliterate 21, 97, 111
- Semitic 11, 56
- Septuagint* (LXX) 5, 6, 10, 55, 56
- Sibilant (or Strident) 109
 - in NT / Byzantine MSS 20, 97
- Smith, Sir Thomas 66, 73
- Socrates 43, 45, 56
- Socratic dialogues 18
- Sophocles 5, 56,
- Spain 54, 65
- Spanish 28, 43, 67
- Spartans 3
- Spelling
 - Attic 12, 17, 111
 - conformity in — 34
 - confusion in — 12
 - Byzantine — 32
 - determining pronunciation through —
 - 21, 22, 32, 39, 44, 111
 - English
 - changes in — 59
 - and pronunciation 78, 79
 - inconsistencies 81
 - of i-sounds 14, 81
 - errors (see Spelling errors)
 - euphonic — 32, 48
 - formal vs. informal — 33
 - Greek — of i-sounds 14, 81
 - Hellenistic — 16, 32, 42, 107, 111
 - inscriptional —
 - Ionic — 12
 - i-sound — 16, 78
 - Κοινή — 9
 - MSS (NT) — 20
 - — in pre-classical times 25
 - simplified archaic — 25
 - today’s — 9, 11, 42, 48, 115
 - traditionist — 71
 - variant — 13, 32, 51
 - variations in — 21, 51
- Spelling errors
 - in Attic inscriptions 12, 17, 19, 39
 - 50, 51, 52, 53, 91, 111
 - in Hellenistic / Κοινή inscriptions
 - 12, 16, 50, 51, 52, 53
 - in Neohellenic 21, 51, 52, 115
- Spirant (see also Fricative) 22, 29
- Stop (or plosive) 22, 24, 25, 27, 29, 30
 - 32, 68, 70, 109, 110
- Stress(ed) 13, 38, 43, 46, 47, 48, 54, 55
 - 56, 103, 104, 105

- Stress-accent 47 (see also Pitch-accent)
 Strident (or Sibilant) 109
 Suprasegmental 45 (see Prosodic)
 Swiss 65, 74
 Switzerland 65
 Syllabary (of *Linear B*) 11
 Syllable(s) 11, 12, 13, 26, 28, 30, 34
 35, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 46, 47, 60, 91
 103, 104, 105, 106, 107, 108
 Syntax, syntactical(ly) 8, 57, 62, 95, 97
 115
- T**
- Text-critical 97
 Textual Criticism 97
 Textual Transmission 101, 112, 113
Textus Receptus (TR) 9
 Theodosios (of Alexandria) 46
 Theodosios (Emperor) 5, 6
 Thucydides 5, 18
 Tonal 46, 47, 48, 54, 55, 56, 103
 Tone 14, 46, 48, 55, 103
 Tongue
 -language 5, 6, 9, 10, 45, 48, 97, 99
 115, 117
 -in mouth 28, 83, 84, 89, 107, 110
 TR (see *Textus Receptus*)
 Traditionist 71, 72
 Transliteration 21, 67, 71, 72, 90
 -Erasmian — 71
 -of Greek words in English 71, 72
 -of Greek words in Latin 67, 90
 -of loanwords in Greek 21
 -mispronunciation caused by — 71, 72
 -traditional — 71, 72
 -traditionist — 71, 72
 Trill 109, 110
 Trojan War 3
 Trisyllabotomy 35, 47, 50
 Trochaic 38
- U**
- Uncial(s) 8
 Unaspirated 25, 27, 30, 106, 109
- V**
- Variant
 -allophonic (phonemic) — 13
 -combinatory (euphonic spelling) — 31
 32, 33
 -graph (allograph) 13, 21, 25, 50, 51
 -sound (allophone) 13, 108
 -spelling 13, 32, 44
 Velar 28, 30, 107, 109, 110
 Vernacular (see also Demotic)
 -Attic — 5, 6, 10, 11, 15, 31, 41, 48
 55, 57, 96, 111
 -Byzantine — 7
 -Κοινή — 6, 7, 24, 96
 -Neohellenic — 8, 11, 108
 Verse 10, 31, 32, 36, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42
 46, 47, 48, 53, 55, 69, 71, 87, 88,
 Versification 36, 38, 46
 Versifier(s) 38, 41, 45, 47
 Vocalic (see also Vowel) 21, 22, 34, 50
 55, 59, 83, 85, 86, 87, 88, 110, 112
 Voice quality (see Quality)
 Voiced 22, 23, 26, 29, 30, 48, 49, 50
 59, 72, 85, 106, 109, 110
 Voiceless 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29
 30, 43, 72, 85, 106, 109, 110
 Vowel(s) (see also Vocalic) 11, 12, 20
 21, 22, 23, 28, 34, 35, 36, 37, 38, 39
 40, 41, 42, 43, 45, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57
 59, 65, 67, 71, 72, 81, 83, 84, 85, 86
 87, 88, 89, 91, 103, 104, 105, 106
 107, 108, 110, 111, 115
 Vowel diagram(s) 83, 84, 85
 Vowel length 12, 13, 14, 35, 36, 37, 38
 39, 40, 41, 42, 46, 45, 55, 57, 60, 93
 104
 Vowel-shift (English) 59, 115
Vox Graeca 17, 19, 31, 94, 100
- W**
- Wordplay 97
- X**
- Xenophon 90

APPENDICES

App. A1 - A17

DECREES OF CLASSICAL ATHENS
AND THEIR HISTORICAL GREEK SOUNDS

App. B

CHANGES IN ATTIC WRITING

App. C

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF THE CHANGES
IN THE ATTIC ALPHABET

(End of excerpts)