

**READING AND PRONOUNCING  
BIBLICAL  
GREEK**

**Vol. I**

**Historical Evidence of  
Authentic Sounds**

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**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

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### **Reading and Pronouncing Biblical Greek**

addresses the oft-asked questions:

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

To that end, it traces the origins of Koine 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 at the Epigraphic Museum in Athens as presented in a special publication by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture.

## CONTENTS

Why this Book . . . . .	v
Endorsements . . . . .	xi
Acknowledgments . . . . .	xiii
Pronunciation Matters . . . . .	xiv
Questions . . . . .	xv
<b>PART ONE . . . . .</b>	<b>1</b>
Chapter 1 <b>The Development of Κοινή</b> . . . . .	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 dimorphism . . . . .	10
1.11 Historicity of the Greek alphabet . . . . .	11
1.12 Phonological definitions . . . . .	12
1.13 Orthophonic pronunciation and its significance . . . . .	13
Chapter 2 <b>The Phonology of Κοινή: Development and Similarities to Neohellenic</b> . . . . .	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>b, d, g</b> . . . . .	31
2.13	Greek <b>δ</b> <i>not</i> [d] . . . . .	32
2.13.1	Formal and informal spelling and pronunciation . . . . .	33
	of <b>νδ</b> vs. <b>ντ</b>	
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" <b>Η, Ω</b> . . . . .	38
2.17	Pronunciation of <b>Η(η)</b> and <b>Ω(ω)</b> . . . . .	40
2.18	Aspiration . . . . .	42
2.18.1	Sidney Allen's treatment of "aspirate" <b>Η[h]</b> . . . . .	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 <b>Z</b> . . . . .	48
2.21	Summary . . . . .	50
2.22	In retrospect . . . . .	50
2.23	Concluding remarks . . . . .	52
Chapter 3	<b>The Historical Greek Pronunciation</b> . . . . .	53
3.1	Introductory . . . . .	53
3.2	Formation of the historical Greek pronunciation (HGP). . .	53
3.3	The HGP in Κοινή . . . . .	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
<b>PART TWO</b>	. . . . .	63
Chapter 4	<b>Theoretical vs. Greek Pronunciation</b> . . . . .	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	<b>Erasmian Misconceptions</b> . . . . .	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	<b>Erasmian Latitudes</b> . . . . .	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	<b>The Erasmian Harm and the Remedy</b> . . . . .	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	<b>Pronunciation Tips</b> . . . . .	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>b, d, g</b> . . . . .	106
	8.9 Palatalization of velars κ, γ, χ . . . . .	107

8.10 Palatalization of τ [i] as [j]	108
8.11 Alphabetic consonants	109
8.12 Consonant phonemes	110
8.13 Vowels, vowel digraphs, and dieresis	110
8.14 Nasal γ	111
8.15 Voiced σ/ς	111
8.16 The sounds τξ, τσ/ς	111
Chapter Summaries	113
Conclusions	115
Closing Remarks	117
The HGP Today	119
Bibliography	121
Subject Index	127
Appendixes	137
A Decrees of Classical Athens and their Historical Greek Sounds	A-1
IG I <sup>3</sup> 34 Decree of Kleinias (448/7 BC)	A-2
IG I <sup>3</sup> 46 Decree for the Foundation of a Colony at Brea (445 BC)	A-3
IG I <sup>3</sup> 49 The Springhouse Decree (432/1 BC)	A-4
IG I <sup>3</sup> 35 Decree for the Temple of Athena Nike Side I (427/4 BC)	A-5
IG I <sup>3</sup> 36 Decree for the Temple of Athena Nike Side II (424/3 BC)	A-6
IG I <sup>3</sup> 93 Decrees Relating to the Sicilian Expedition (415 BC)	A-7
IG II <sup>3</sup> 145 Honorific Decrees for Eukles (402 BC) and Philokles (399 BC)	A-8
IG I <sup>3</sup> 61 Decrees Concerning the Methonaians (430/29 – 424/3 BC)	A-9
IG I <sup>3</sup> 102 Honorific Decree for Thrasyboulos and Seven Others (410/9 BC)	A-10
SEG XXV 149 (303/2 BC)	A-11
Changes in the Attic Alphabet and their Significance	A-12
Consonants; Vowels Ε, Ο and Η, Ω	A-12
Η(h) and Η(η)	A-13
Ε, Ο and Η, Ω, ΟΥ	A-14
Phonopathy	A-15
Review of vowel letter changes	A-16
Summary and conclusions	A-16
B Changes in Attic Writing	
C Chronological Table of the Changes in the Attic Alphabet	
D Greek Dimorphia	

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—Philemon Zachariou



## PRONUNCIATION MATTERS

**N**EW TESTAMENT GREEK textbooks typically devote a page or two to some 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 pronunciation of Neohellenic (Modern Greek). After all, today's Greek spelling and sounds are a modern development, whereas Erasmian is imitative of Attic 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 inscriptional record of the Hellenistic period and to their origins in classical or pre-classical times.

To that end, I have incorporated works by native as well as non-native Greek scholars in order to form an added dimension of 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 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 is devoted 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 complicates matters for English-speaking students and instructors?
- Are there any Bible colleges, seminaries, or other entities that teach Κοινή Greek the way Greek is pronounced today? If so, what is their reasoning?

### ERASMIAN PRONUNCIATION

- If for five centuries now Erasmian has been the predominant pronunciation in universities and theological institutions, 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 dialect 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.).”*

**T**HIS ASSERTION by a New Testament Greek scholar (discussed later) is in reference to the so-called “theoretical,” “academic,” or “standard” pronunciation of Greek. Invented in the early 1500s, this pronunciation is credited to the Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus (1466–1536), so it is commonly known also 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.<sup>1</sup>

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 proponents 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. Close inquiry reveals that Erasmian is 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.

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<sup>1</sup> The term *Erasmian* is used here as a blanket term that encompasses all Erasmian-like pronunciations of Greek, including “restored” and other such varieties.

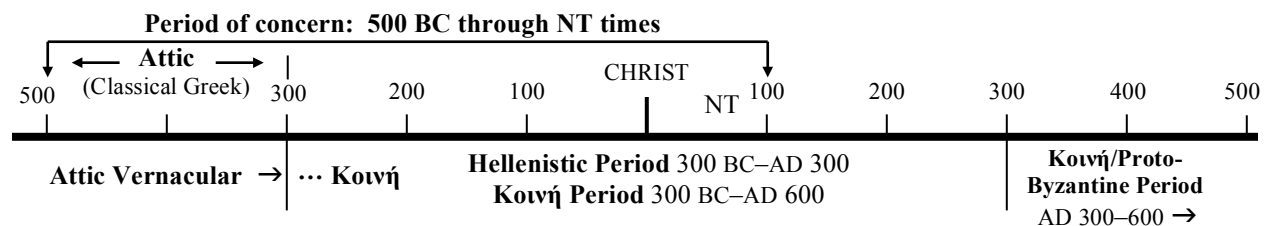


## — CHAPTER 2 —

# 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;<sup>2</sup> 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 presently as Neohellenic Κοινή or simply *Neohellenic* (1.2, 1.8). 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> 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 one.

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

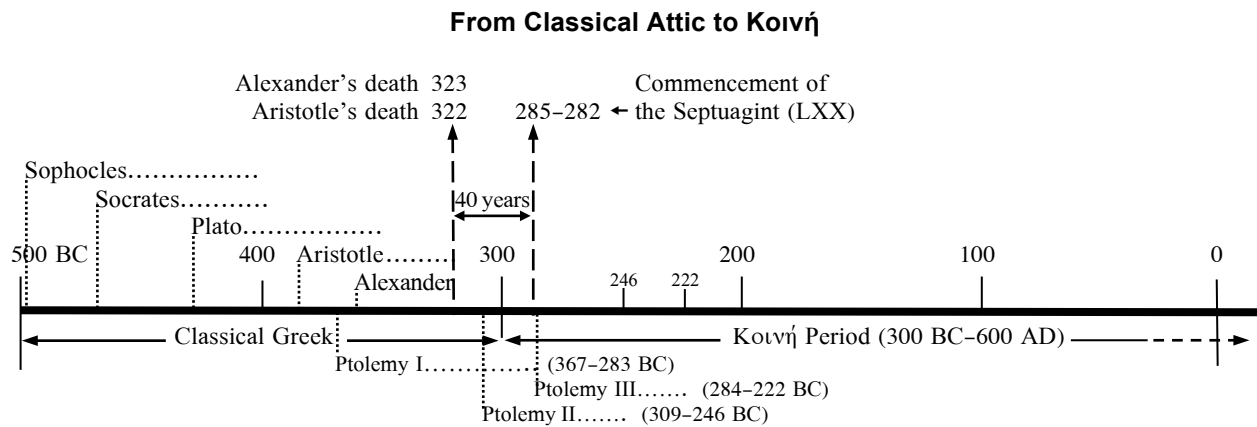
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### 3.4 From Septuagint to New Testament

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. Numerous direct quotations from the Septuagint were incorporated into the NT text without the need for any morphological, syntactic, semantic, orthographical, or other linguistic adjustment. Thus, 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 “Jewish Koine,” “Egyptian Greek,” “Alexandrian Koine,” or “Christian Greek” regarding Κοινή (1.6) 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:



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).<sup>4</sup> If Aristotle’s (or Alexander’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, ου, 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

<sup>4</sup> Some authorities view the year of Alexander’s death (323 BC) as the beginning of the Hellenistic period.

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.<sup>5</sup>

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.<sup>6</sup> 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 εϋ was not Erasmian [ju] as in *feud* but fricativized [ev] as in Λευιτικόν [levitikón] *Leviticus*; and that αυ was not Erasmian [aʊ] as in *sauerkraut* but [av] as in Δαυίδ [ðavíð] *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, historical alphabet, and orthography entering the Κοινή period in their definitive form.

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<sup>5</sup> 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.

<sup>6</sup> 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, 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 doubtless 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. This opening chapter is 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 Neohellenic.

Chapter 2. Numerous Hellenistic papyri contain spelling errors by inadequately schooled individuals who are led by their ear to euphonic spelling practices and to interchanging graphemes that stand for the same sound. Such errors, yielding phonemically evidentiary values, are traced back to the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century BC when older Attic writing begins to clash with Athens’ newly adopted Ionic alphabet, *the post-Eucleidean grammar* (officially in 403 BC). In the ensuing confusion, misspellings by the less literate take root and will be repeated throughout Hellenistic times and subsequent centuries. Koine sounds commonly held in dispute by Erasmians are followed diachronically from classical times in light of the unbroken inscriptional record, while works by native and non-native Greek scholars as well as by Erasmian scholars are referenced in order to show their respective treatment of the phonological evidence.

Chapter 3. The focal point in this chapter is the emergence of the historical Greek pronunciation (HGP). Formed by or initiated within classical times, the historical 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. An investigation of the politically orchestrated origins and spread of Erasmian in the 1500s, followed by an examination of the basis of its application by various scholars today, shows that as a pronunciation system Erasmian is artificial and inconsistent, whereas the Greek pronunciation is natural, consistent, and euphonic.

Chapter 5. Refuted in this chapter are two misconceptions: that reading and pronouncing the ι-sound Greek letters and digraphs the Neohellenic way presents difficulties for English-speaking students; and that Κοινή and Neohellenic words are dissimilar. A comparison of Greek and English phonemes and conventional 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 Κοινή vocabulary is used or understood by speakers of Neohellenic.

Chapter 6. This chapter is a critique of 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. This chapter 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 New Testament texts. This barrier is sustained by leading Erasmian advocates and acolytes operating in accountability-free scholastic environments with respect to the pronunciation of Greek. The chapter shows that Neohellenic can shed light on New Testament 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. Tips on key differences between Greek and English phonologies help point out the features most crucial in pronouncing Greek. The chapter also summarily describes the features of the Greek phonemic sounds.

Appendixes. Annotated Attic decrees from the fifth and fourth centuries BC lend visual support to the basic premise in this book regarding Greek sounds: that the repeated misspellings seen in Hellenistic, Byzantine, and modern-day writings are traced to Attic Greek inscriptions; 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

**T**ODAY 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  
Achaeans 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  
  -Chalchidic — 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  
  -Kouνή — 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 *f* 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  $\gamma$  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  $\gamma$  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

# APPENDIXES

App. A1 - A17

DECREES OF CLASSICAL ATHENS  
AND HISTORICAL SOUNDS

App. B

CHANGES IN ATTIC WRITING

App. C

CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF THE CHANGES  
IN THE ATTIC ALPHABET

App. D

GREEK DIMORPHIA

(End of excerpts)