The Greek Pronunciation Guide

The Greek language is a fantastic language that has a long history. Even its alphabet has a fascinating history developed from the Phoenician alphabet; later influencing the Latin alphabet through Etruscan (after all, it is where the name alphabet comes from). In fact, many of the early spellings of Latin words looked much like Greek. Furthermore, during the late Republic and early Principate, Roman philosophers and writers created new letters to better represent Greek words. As you can imagine though, Greek too changed with the times. The Greek alphabet as we know it today became formalized well before the time of our mod. Several letters were dropped or their writing refined. And if that were not enough, pronunciation has changed drastically over time.

Greek had several dialects. Because of the surviving corpus of literature, Attic tends to be the foremost among them. Even then, Attic is different from the Homeric Greek (itself not even a unified dialect) used to compose works like *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. In the post-Alexander world, however, a common dialect would surface known as *Koine* (Κοινή: Greek for "common"). This was partly the result of Attic Greek being introduced in the Makedonian court by Philip II and used rather than the Makedonian language/dialect. As Alexander and his successors dominated the eastern Mediterranean basin, the various Greek dialects gained prominence, spread by conquest, and mixed to form *Koine*. This new dialect of Greek seems to have found its birth in the Levant with Ionic and Attic having principal roles in its birth. Over the next few centuries, this dialect would change in its pronunciation and undergoing a process of *itacism*. Yet at its birth, the dialect's pronunciation probably sounded similar to Attic Greek. As a result, Attic Greek is the pronunciation that forms the rules of this guide.

This guide is mostly geared toward speakers whose primary language is English. Those who are unfamiliar with Greek will find it a quirky language, but with practice will become more comfortable with it. However, this is a simple guide and rules change as words are used in the greater context of a sentence; thus the more complicated rules are generally not included. This guide generally follows the conventions of the Latin pronunciation guide for ease and clarity. If you have any questions, feel free to ask in our fora.

The Alphabet

As stated above, the Greek alphabet was derived from the Phoenician alphabet. Originally, the alphabet was written with only capital letters, no spaces between words, and no punctuation or accent marks. All of those conventions were added much later. Diacritics are attributed to literary scholars in Alexandria ca. 200 BC and the miniscule – or lowercase – script in 9th century AD Byzantium. Since so many texts and grammar books are published using the miniscule script, that is what we will use for this guide. The Latin transliteration follows after the full name of the letter.

A, α – Alpha (a)
B, β – Beta (b)
Γ, γ – Gamma (g)
Δ, δ – Delta (d)
E, ε – Epsilon (e)
Z, ζ – Zeta (z)
H, η – Eta (e; in early Attic, this was aspirated and rendered *heta*, which may explain the origin of the
        Latin letter *h*)
Θ, θ – Theta (th)

I, ι – Iota (i)
K, κ – Kappa (k)
Λ, λ – Lambda (l)
M, μ – Mu (m)
N, ν – Nu (n)
Ξ, ξ – Xi (x)
O, o – Omicron (o; literally "little O")
Π, π – Pi (p)
P, ρ – Rho (r)
Σ, σ, ς – Sigma (s; the third character seen for sigma is known as the terminal sigma and is used at the
        end of words)
T, τ – Tau (t)
Y, υ – Upsilon (y)
Φ, φ – Phi (ph)
X, χ – Chi (ch)
Ψ, ψ – Psi (ps)
Ω, ω – Omega (o or sometimes w; literally "big O")

Vowels and Diphthongs

<u>Vowels</u>
Greek has seven vowels. As in Latin, there are long and short vowels, but there are exceptions. Some
vowels only have one sound, which is either long or short. For those that can be either, a short sound is
noted by a *breve* or meniscus (˘) above the vowel. This is what can be seen in some dictionaries,
which differs from Latin dictionaries where a macron (¯) is used to mark a long vowel. In the
pronunciations for the various Greek names, we will just use the *breve* to mark a short vowel.

Alpha
        ᾱ – as the *a* in *father*
        ᾰ – as the *a* in *idea* or *Dinah* or *hat*

Epsilon
        ε – as *e* in *net* or *pet*; the "short" *e* of Greek

Eta
        η – as the *-ey-* in *they* or *a* in *date*; the "long" *e* of Greek

Iota
        ῑ – as in *machine* or *-ee-* in *seen*
        ῐ – as in *sit* or *pin*

Omicron
        o – as the *o* in *obey* or *off* or *pot*

Upsilon
        ῡ – as in the long *u* in the French *ruse*
        ῠ – as in the *u* in the French *tu* or the German *über*

Omega
> ω – as in the -aw- of *saw*; the "long" *o* of Greek, but different from the *ō* of Latin; however, sometimes it will be pronounced that way

Diphthongs

αι – as *ai* in *aisle* or *i* in *high*
αυ – like *ow* in *now* or as in *ou* in *house*
ει – as in *eight* or *reign*
ευ – a relatively difficult sound for English speakers; similar to the *-eu-* in *feud*, the ε and υ are
> pronounced separately in the same syllable as *eh-oo*; often spoken simply as a *-oo-* sounds by modern readers

ηυ – similar to the ευ diphthong, but with the long eta sound rather than the short epsilon; however, any
> distinction of sound between the two seems to have disappeared by the 4th century BC

οι – like *oi* in *oil* and *coin* or *oy* in *boy*
ου – like *oo* in English *boot* and *pool* or *ou* as in French *rouge*
υι – as *oo'ee* or English *gooey* or Spanish *muy*

Iota-subscript or "Long Diphthongs"

Although all diphthongs are long, in Classical Greek these diphthongs were composed of two distinct sounds within the same syllable instead of a single sound. Originally, the sound of these diphthongs were of the primary letter gliding into the iota. By Hellenistic times, the iota simply became a glide similar to the English *y*. Beyond the 2nd century BC, the iota was not pronounced at all. Modern pronunciations therefore just sound like simple vowels. These three examples are included mostly for the sake of completeness. They have no noticeable presence in Europa Barbarorum and even in Hellenistic times their use became inconsequential.

<p align="center">ᾳ   ῃ   ῳ</p>

Consonants

β – pronounced like the English *b*
γ – similar to the English *g* and always pronounced hard as in *go* or *get*; when γ appears before a γ, κ,
> or χ it shifts to a sound similar to English *n*; an example would be ἄγγελος, which transliterates to *angelos* meaning messenger; or ϕάλαγξ

δ – although analogous to English *d*, it is more like a French *d* which is less aspirated
ζ – zeta was brought into the Latin alphabet as the letter *z*; its pronunciation is a linguistic nightmare as
> it has seems to have changed over time and has not been agreed upon; it has been interpreted as *-ds-, -zd-, -sd-,* and perhaps by 350 BC even just the simple fricative *z* as in English *doze*; for sanity's sake, a simple *z* will do just fine

θ – transliterated as *-th-*, it was an aspirated plosive pronounced much like in *hot house* instead of *the*
> or *they*, but in one syllable

κ – pronounced just as the English letter *k*
λ – pronounced just as the English or French letter *l*
μ – pronounced just as the English letter *m*
ν – pronounced just as the English letter *n*
ξ – has the sound of *ks* as in *axle* or *fox* and not *gz* and in *exert* nor the *z* sound of *xylophone*
π – more like the French *p* rather than the explosive English *p*

ρ – trilled or rolled like the letter *r* in Romance languages.

σ – like *s* as in *see* or *sea* or *mouse* and not roughly as in *ease*

τ – as the *t* in *tired* or *top* and never as an *sh* or *ch* as in *nation* or *mention*

φ – originally pronounced as the more explosive English *p* in *pot* or as in *uphill* rather than the *f* sound in *philosophy*

χ – pronounced as the *ch* in Scottish *loch* and not as in *church*

ψ – a double consonant represented by *ps*; it is pronounced in one syllable such as in English *lapse*

Double consonants were always pronounced and often split syllables. Each vowel in a word would form a syllable as long as it wasn't part of a diphthong. There are exceptions to this rule wherein consonants are followed by a "liquid" (*l* and *r*) and these would run together (eg. English *tree* is an example of a liquid) or in the case of γ as described above.

The Aspiration Diacritic

Whereas Latin uses the letter *h* to represent aspiration, Greek has no such letter. Instead, a diacritic is used at the beginning of words starting with a vowel or above the second letter of initial diphthongs to indicated whether there is aspiration (῾) or not (᾿). Examples of this are ἑταῖροι (*hetairoi*), ἱππεῖς (*hippeis*), εὔζωνοι (*euzonoi*), and ἀκοντισταί (*akontistai*). The aspiration diacritic also appears above the initial rho in words that begin with that letter: Ῥόδος (*Rhodos*).

Accent

The Greek accent is unfortunately not as straight forward as the Latin accent is. Initially, the language had a pitch accent with rises and falls in pitch over certain syllables. These could be marked by an *acute* (´) for a rise in pitch, a *circumflex* (˜ or ^) over diphthongs and contracted vowels for a rise then return in pitch, or *grave* (`) over only ultimate syllables and having an uncertain effect on pitch. As can be imagined, this is very difficult to conceive and by ca. 400 AD it seems a stress accent had completely supplanted the pitch accent. Therefore, it is suggested that a stress accent be used with the stressed syllables determined by the presence of one of the above accent marks. Unlike Latin, this may mean that a stress could appear over an <u>ultimate</u> (last) syllable as well as <u>penultimate</u> (second to last) and <u>ante-penultimate</u> (before the penultimate).

For those who are curious as to how a pitch accent *may* have sounded, the SORGLL project has several recordings available for listening: http://www.rhapsodes.fll.vt.edu/index.php