

Greek Verb Morphology

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Present Tense Verb Conjugation

Note: Greek seems to lack as infinitive forms

Example: 'to see'

stem = [vlɛp-]

Present Tense Verb Inflections		Number	
		Singular	Plural
Person	First	[ɔ]	[ume]
	Second	[is]	[ɛtɛ]
	Third	[i]	[un]

English:	Greek:
I see	[vlɛpɔ]
you see (singular)	[vlɛpis]
he/she/it sees	[vlɛpi]
we see	[vlɛpumɛ]
you see (plural)	[vlɛpetɛ]
they see	[vlɛpun]

We asked our consultant how to say a few simple phrases with verbs in the present tense. We started by asking how to say the verb in the infinitive form (ex: How do you say 'to see'?)

But Sunday responded "Do you mean 'I see'?"

Our class was not able to obtain any infinitives. It seems if the the first person singular form of the verb is the way that she identifies the verb in question.

Once we started pairing different pronouns with verbs, we quickly saw that for each verb, there is a stem, followed by an inflectional suffix.

The inflectional suffix of the verb depends on the subject - different subjects result in different conjugations (see chart).

Greek is a Null-Subject, Fusional Language

1) Null-Subject

Since Greek verb endings conjugate depending on the subject, the subject itself is redundant, and therefore not needed.

[εγω βλέπω] → Ø [βλέπω]
1.SG see-1.SG.PRS see-1.SG.PRS

2) Fusional

The end of each conjugated verb is a morpheme with several meanings (person, number, tense). Removing such morphemes makes the word meaningless (*[βλέπ]).

Based on the data we collected concerning Greek verbs, there are a few things we can say about the Greek language in general.

First of all, Greek is a null-subject language. This means that subject pronouns are often dropped.

This is because the inflectional affix of the conjugated verb already contains the information that the subject would express.

For example, saying [εγω βλέπω] is redundant, because both [εγω] and the [ω] in [βλέπω] contain the same meaning (first person singular).

Therefore, the subject can be dropped, and the relevant information regarding the subject (person, number) is retained by the verb.

Second of all, Greek seems to be a fusional language. This is a synthetic language with morphemes which often have many, specific meanings.

For example, the morpheme [ω] in [βλέπω] tells us information concerning person (first), number (singular), and tense (present).

If we wish to change any of these features, we must use a completely different morpheme.

The opposite of this would be an agglutinative language, which instead of relaying all of this information fused in a single morpheme, would add many different morphemes. Also note that if we remove the [ω] in [βλέπω], the remaining morpheme [βλέπ] doesn't mean anything, as verb stems cannot stand on their own.

Allomorphy in Present Tense Verb Inflections

Among the present tense verbs in Greek, the endings seem to change slightly depending on whether or not the verb stem ends with a consonant or a vowel.

Example:

Stem ends with consonant: 'to give' (stem = [ðin-])	Stem ends with vowel: 'to eat' (stem = [tro-])	Unattested:
[ðinə]	[troə]	
[ðinis]	[tros]	*[trois]
[ðini]	[trɔi]	
[ðinume]	[trɔme]	*[trɔume]
[ðinete]	[trɔte]	*[trɔete]
[ðinun]	[trɔne]	*[trɔun]

Greek seems to display a pattern, consistent with all of the verb data we collected. If the verb stem ends with a consonant, the inflectional suffix will start with a vowel. If the verb stem ends with a vowel, the inflection suffix will start with a consonant (unless it does not contain any consonants in the other form) by dropping a vowel. For example, a verb with the stem [ðin] adds [is] with an [i] to make “you give” (singular), whereas a verb with the stem [tro] adds [s] without the [i] to make “you eat” (singular). As a result of this pattern, the following forms are unattested (see unattested section of chart).

This is an example of allomorphy, because even though there are sometimes two different forms (the [un] in [ðinun] versus the [ne] in [trɔne]), both morphemes mean the same thing (3rd person plural). Forms such as these are said to be allomorphs.

Explanation: Phonological Alternation (Elision)

Traditional schema for phonological alternation:

$$A \rightarrow B / C _ D$$

Applied to Greek verb inflections:

$$[is] \rightarrow [s] / V _ \#$$

$$[um\epsilon] \rightarrow [m\epsilon] / V _ \#$$

$$[\epsilon t\epsilon] \rightarrow [t\epsilon] / V _ \#$$

$$[un] \rightarrow [n\epsilon] / V _ \#$$

Why might this alternation occur?

One hypothesis: to restrict hiatus occurrence.

Hiatus aren't very common in Greek.

From the data collected:

% of words with a hiatus	26%
% of words with a hiatus which don't include [i]	3%

If this alternation did not occur, it would result in many hiatus, such as [ɔu], [uu], [ɔɛ], and [ɛu].

But why do these two different forms exist?

One way to understand this is through phonological alternation. Specifically, it is a case of elision, since some forms delete the vowel in the suffix.

The traditional schema for showing alternation is to say that: phonological form A changes to phonological form B when the preceding environment C and/or the following environment D is present.

When we apply this to the Greek verb inflections, it seems that the verb inflections drop their initial vowel whenever there is a vowel in the preceding environment.

But based on the data that our class collected, Greek does allow vowels to be adjacent, so why would this alternation occur?

One hypothesis is that this happens to restrict the occurrence of hiatus. A hiatus refers to two syllables that come in contact, but are not separated by a consonant (adjacent vowels, like in the word 'hiatus').

Hiatus do occur in Greek, but not very frequently. In fact, among all of our collected data, only ~3% of our data show Greek words with a hiatus that doesn't include [i]. However, if this alternation didn't occur, we would get many hiatus that didn't include [i], such as [ou], [uu] [oe], [eu],..

Based on our data, these kind of hiatus are very rare, and so this alternation most likely occurs to limit the occurrence of hiatus like these in Greek.