

7.3: Introduction to Greek written accents

We have been disregarding Greek accents so far. There are two linguistic reasons to justify the delay, plus a third reason, which is pedagogical.. First, written accents are a relatively late development for ancient Greek. Complicated rules about them were created by grammarians who needed to represent them graphically because they did no longer have, as earlier speakers did, an intuitive recognition of this trait of the language. Second, what had been in its origin a *pitch accent* was gradually displaced by a *stress accent*. This is how almost all of those who study either ancient or *koine* Greek pronounce it. The pedagogical consideration is last, but not least. It does not pay to invest great effort and time in learning all the niceties in the spelling of a language that one is only beginning to learn. We will be adding specific rules of accent as we move on in the study of the Greek forms. A streamlined introduction to accents includes the following facts.

- There are three written accents in Greek: **acute** (e.g. **σοφός**), **grave** (e.g., the first two in **καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός**), and **circumflex** (**δῶρον**). Originally an acute accent would have signaled a higher pitch of the syllable where it falls; but if the last syllable of a word that is not the end of an utterance carries the accent, the pitch is lowered. The accent in that case is drawn as grave (in the example above, **καλός** becomes **καλὸς** and **καί** becomes **καὶ**, but **ἀγαθός**, being the last word before a pause, retains its acute accent).
- The circumflex accent is sometimes described as lasting twice as long as the acute or grave, or as representing the rising and lowering of the pitch. We imitate these actions as best we can with the stress accent that most of us apply when we read Greek.
- An accent pertaining to a diphthong is written on its second vowel: e.g. **καί**, **αἶ** (= always).

■ Because the circumflex lasts longer, it can only fall on a long vowel: $\bar{\alpha} \eta \bar{\iota} \omega \bar{\upsilon}$ or a diphthong: e.g. $\epsilon\bar{\upsilon}$ (= well)

■ *There are rules limiting the place where an accent may fall on any word.* To simplify this explanation, instead of calling syllables "ultima," (the last syllable of a word), "penultima," (the one before the last, penultimate), and "antepenult" (the syllable before the penultima), I will number them, beginning from the end of the word:

3 2 1

Rules of limitation for the acute accent:

It may fall on syllable 3 only if syllable 1 (the ultima) is short. If syllable 1 is long, an acute accent may fall on syllable 2, but not 3. There is no condition for an acute accent to fall on syllable 1: that is always acceptable.

3 **2** **1**
 / / /
 — — short

3 **2** **1**
 / /
 — — long

Rules of limitation for the circumflex accent:

Its very nature (long duration) imposes the first limitation on the circumflex accent: it can fall only upon a long vowel or a diphthong. With respect to position, it has fewer options than the acute.

It may fall on a long vowel in syllable 2 only if syllable 1 (the ultima) is short.¹ If syllable 1 is long, the circumflex accent may only fall on that syllable.



Note 1: Later on you will be interested in learning that, when such a pattern is given and syllable 2 carries the accent, the circumflex is obligatory. I prefer to delay that explanation.