Greek Accentuation

> "Gentlemen, question mark"?   Put it on the penultimate, not on the diphthongic. You wanna brush
> up on your Greek, Jameson. ... Well, get a Greek and brush up on him.
>
> • Groucho Marx, in *Animal Crackers*

For the general principles of Greek accentuation, see the on-line tutorial at:
http://atticgreek.org/accent/accentuation.html

A glossary of relevant terms is included at the end of this sheet.

In modern English, the native speaker expects that each word will be marked by a <u>stress accent</u> that distinguishes one of its final syllables (regularly either the penult or the antepenult: *calcificátion, remárkable, uncértainty*).

Ancient Greek does something quite similar; instead of a stress accent, however, Greek employs a change in the <u>pitch, or musical tone</u>, of the speaker's voice. In Classical Attic Greek, every word was marked by a rise in the pitch of the speaker's voice on one syllable near the end of the word. (You might compare, e.g., modern-day Mandarin, which also employs a set of tonal accents to help define meaning.)

The rules governing how this practice works follow what is known as the **principle of contonation.**

A rise in the pitch of the speaker's voice is indicated in one of two ways in our texts:

   • an acute accent (′) appearing over a vowel or diphthong indicates that the speaker's voice rises on the syllable that has received the accent

   • a circumflex accent (ˆ) appearing over a vowel or diphthong indicates that the speaker's voice rises at the beginning the syllable that has received the accent, but then falls back to the base tone as the speaker finishes pronouncing the syllable. <u>By its very nature, a circumflex accent can only appear over a long vowel or diphthong</u>: it is impossible to pronounce such a rising and falling of the voice over the course of a short vowel.

Thus the pitch of the speaker's voice could rise on one syllable and fall back to the base tone on the next syllable, as indicated by an acute accent:

   • e.g., ἄν-θρω-πος, where the pitch of the speaker's voice would rise on the initial alpha and fall back to the base tone on the omega

or it could rise and fall in the course of a single (long) syllable:

   • as in the case of μοῖρα, where the circumflex accent indicates the rise and fall of the speaker's voice over the course of the long οι.

In either case, it was expected that <u>no more than one short syllable (if any) would follow the syllable (if any) on which the speaker's voice returned to the base tone</u>: to have more than one syllable, or a single long syllable, follow in this position would have sounded as awkward to a Greek as putting the stress on the wrong syllable sounds in modern-day English.

Note:

A short syllable is a syllable that contains a short vowel.

A long syllable is a syllable that contains a long vowel or diphthong.[1]

---

[1] For the most part, however, final -αι and -οι are treated as <u>short</u> for the purposes of accentuation. Hence ἄνθρωποι vs., e.g., ἀνθρώποις. By contrast, final –αις and –οις are treated as long. [Note the difference between Greek and Classical Latin on the last point noted in my text. In Greek, a syllable that is long by position (i.e., that contains a short vowel followed by two consonants or a double-consonant — and that therefore would be considered long in scanning the meter of a line of verse) is treated as short for the purposes of accentuation: e.g., αὖλαξ receives a circumflex accent on its first syllable, even though the short α of its final syllable is followed by the double-consonant ξ. (Contrast Latin *relíctus*.) This difference is cited as evidence for the presence of a stress — as opposed to a pitch — accent in Classical Latin.]

The principle of contonation does not, then, tell us where the accent in a particular Greek word must be placed; instead, it provides guidelines that tell us where a particular accent <u>cannot</u> be employed. Each Greek word will have its natural accent determined by the particular nature of the word itself. Since the endings of Greek words are notoriously subject to modification, however (as one works through the various persons, numbers, and moods of a Greek verb, for instance, or the various cases and numbers of a noun), the placement of the accent in a specific form of a word will often have to be modified in order to accord with the rules set out in the preceding paragraph.

Let's look at an example. The noun ἄν-θρω-πος, in the nominative singular, accords with the principle of contonation, since the speaker's voice returns to the base tone on the omega and that syllable (-θρω-), in turn, is followed by only a single syllable (-πος), which has a short omicron.

Generally speaking, Greek nouns and adjectives have a persistent accent: the accent will attempt to remain on the same syllable on which it appears in the nominative singular (in the case of adjectives, the <u>masculine</u> nominative singular). This is not always possible, however. In the case of ἄνθρωπος, the dative plural form ἄν-θρω-ποις would violate the principle of contonation, since the syllable on which the speaker's voice returns to the base tone (-θρω-) is now followed by a single syllable (-ποις), but one that has the long οι of the dative plural ending. In order to accord with the principle of contonation, the accentuation of this form has to shift by placing the acute accent nearer the end of the word: ἀν-θρώ-ποις. The resulting form accords with the principle of contonation, since there is now (as it happens) no syllable following that on which the speaker's voice returns to the base tone (-ποις).

The adjectival form ἄν-θρω-πι-α is equally unacceptable, since more than one syllable follows the syllable on which the speaker's voice returns to the base tone (-θρω-). In order to accord with the principle of contonation, the accentuation of this form again has to shift by placing the acute accent nearer the end of the word: ἀν-θρώ-πι-α. The resulting form accords with the principle of contonation, since there is now only a single short alpha following the syllable on which the speaker's voice returns to the base tone (-πι-).

Words such as ἐχθρός or μοιρῶν, on the other hand, automatically meet the requirements of the principle of contonation, since the accent appears on the final syllable. Remember: the principle of contonation simply states that no <u>more</u> than one short syllable can follow the syllable (if any) on which the speaker's voice returns to the base tone; if the speaker's voice never returns to the base tone (as in ἐχθρός) or returns to the base tone on the final syllable (as in μοιρῶν), the accentuation would sound fine to the native Greek-speaker's ears.

The above rules deal with words when they are treated in isolation. In the context of a continuous phrase or sentence, however, other factors come into play. The most important of these concerns words that have an acute accent on their final syllable. When such words appear at the end of a sentence, or before a mark of punctuation (i.e., before a comma or colon), they are printed with an acute accent; when they appear elsewhere in a sentence, however, they will (barring other factors) be printed with a grave accent (`).

Thus ἐ<u>χθρός</u> is printed as ἐ<u>χθρὸς</u> in the sentence: ἐ<u>χθρὸς</u> ἀπέθανεν.

Precisely what this convention indicates is not altogether certain, but it must reflect some modification of the accent to accommodate the pronunciation of the next word in the sentence. The above circumstances represent the only occasion on which a grave accent is employed in Classical Greek.

Following the above set of rules, then, there are six possibilities for the accentuation of a Greek word:

Placement of Accent	Example	Classification
acute on the ultima	ἐχθρός	oxytone
acute on the penult	δεσπότης	paroxytone
acute on the antepenult	ἄνθρωπος	proparoxytone
circumflex on the ultima	μοιρῶν	perispomenon
circumflex on the penult	μοῖρα	properispomenon

grave on the ultima	ἐχθρὸς	barytone

Glossary of Relevant Terms

antepenult — the second-to-last syllable of a word (i.e., the third syllable of a word when counting back from the end). Example: δεσ-πό-της

barytone — a word with a grave accent on the final syllable. Example: ἐχθρὸς

consonant — a letter that represents a sound made by closing off the vocal tract in some way. Such sounds, made by themselves, represent inarticulate noises: a consonant must be accompanied by a vowel or diphthong in order to produce a sound that conveys meaning (i.e., a syllable). Examples: d, t, b, p; δ, τ, β, π

diphthong — a combination of two vowels employed to indicate a complex (impure) vowel sound. Diphthongs are by nature long in quantity. Examples: ae, ei, ou; αι, οι, ου

oxytone — a word with an acute accent on the final syllable. Example: ἐχθρός

paroxytone — a word with an acute accent on the penult. Example: δεσπότης

penult — the next-to-last syllable of a word

perispomenon — a word with a circumflex accent on the final syllable. Example: μοιρῶν

proparoxytone — a word with an acute accent on the antepenult. Example: ἄνθρωπος

properispomenon — a word with a circumflex accent on the penult. Example: μοῖρα

syllable — a discrete spoken element employed to construct a particular word. "Hus-band" contains two syllables; "mis-an-throp-ic" contains four syllables; "a" contains one syllable. By their nature, each syllable must contain one (and no more than one) vowel or diphthong.

ultima — the final syllable of a word

vowel — a letter indicating a sound formed by the relatively free passage of air through the larynx, accompanied by some form of intonation. Examples: a, e, i, o, u; α, ε, η, ι, ο, υ, ω