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# Phonocentrism in Greece: Side Effects of Two Centuries of Diglossia

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## Definitions, phonocentrism, γ-/φ-linguistics

According to Anis [1], **phonocentrism** is the linguistic ideology claiming that written language is subordinated to speech, and **autonomism** is the ideology where written and spoken language are considered as *equally important* interacting systems.

In the following we will prefix by a “γ-” (resp. “φ-”) linguistic sub-disciplines applied to written (resp. spoken) language, e.g., **γ-emics** (resp. **φ-ology**), **γ-morphology** (resp. **φ-morphology**), etc., and more generally **γ-linguistics** (resp. **φ-linguistics**) [2].

## Greek γ-syllable length, γ-aspiration

In ancient Greek, short φ-vowels had one mora, and long φ-vowels two morae. In modern Greek, all φ-vowels have equal length. But γ-vowels still carry length information (<η>, <ω> are long, <ε>, <ο> are short). γ-syllables have **γ-syllable length** depending on γ-vowel, position, POS, morphology.

In many dialects of ancient Greek, initial φ-vowels could be φ-aspirated. Currently φ-aspiration has vanished, but **γ-aspiration** remains, through the rough breathing γ-eme.

## γ-aspiration/γ-accentuation

γ-aspiration enhanced access to semantics by **etymological disambiguation**: <ἐνικός> vs. <ἐντονός>, <ἐκτός> vs. <ἐκτακτός>, <ὀμόνοια> vs. <ὀμίχλη>.

γ-accentuation used two dipoles:

1. *acute/grave vs. circumflex*, which indicated **γ-syllable length**: <πῆδα> vs. <μῆλα>, <τὰ ὀποῖα> vs. <ἡ ὀποῖα>, and fulfilled a **redundant morphological function**: <ἐρωτῶ> vs. <Ἐρατῶ>, <τοῦ ποιητῆ> vs. <τὸν ποιητῆ>, where redundancy enhanced the reading process.
2. *acute vs. grave*, which had a **redundant syntactic function**: <ἡ ἠθικῆ> vs. <ἡ ἠθικῆ του>, and a **redundant discursive function**: <γιατὶ τὸ εἶπε> (question) <γιατὶ τὸ πίστευε> (fact).

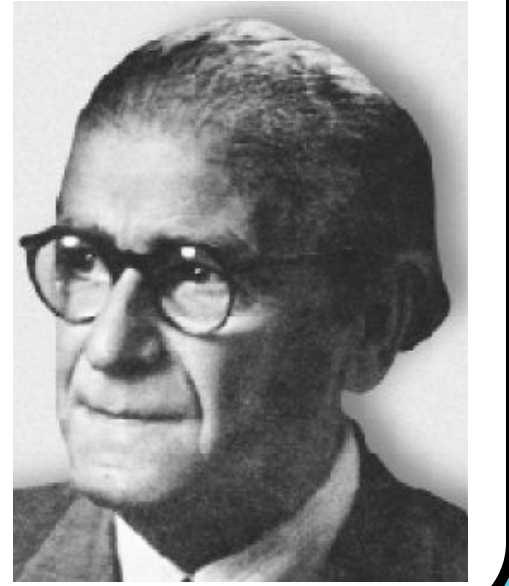
Current practice is to use a single **φ-stress accent**: <ἐνικός>, <ἐντονός>, <ἐκτός>, <ἐκτακτός>, <ὀμόνοια>, <ὀμίχλη>, <πῆδα>, <μῆλα>, <τα ὀποῖα>, <ἡ ὀποῖα>, <ερωτῶ>, <Ἐρατῶ>, <τοῦ ποιητῆ>, <τὸν ποιητῆ>, <ἡ ἠθικῆ>, <ἡ ἠθικῆ του>, <γιατὶ τὸ εἶπε>, <γιατὶ τὸ πίστευε>.

## The Greek Language Issue

In the 19th century, Greece has witnessed an increasing gap between the “purified” idiom (καθαρεύουσα) used by the State and taught in schools, and the “demotic” (δημοτική) which was the natural evolution of byzantine Greek. [4]

In the early 20th century, linguists amalgamated *written language w/ purified language* and *speech w/ demotic language*. They adopted Saussure’s phonocentric ideology as an additional argument in favor of demotic.

In 1941, Triantafyllidis standardized the grammar of demotic [6], and in 1982 γ-accentuation and γ-aspiration were abandoned by law.



## Greek γ-morphology

**γ-double articulation** refers to the two-fold structure of writing that consists of elementary meaningful units (**γ-morphemes**), in turn built of distinctive γ-elements (**γ-emes**).

Thanks to iotacism, γ-syllable length, and γ-accentuation, **γ-morphology** of Greek is more elaborate than φ-morphology. E.g., <σῶζεται> ≠ <σῶζετε>, <Θεῶ> ≠ <Θεός>, <ὄρος> ≠ <ὄρος>.

## Transcription

In the 19th and early 20th century, **transcription of foreign words** took the following into account:

1. **γ-syllable length**: <Καίμπριτζ> (Cambridge), <Βερλαίν> (Verlaine), <Γκαίτε> (Goethe), <Τσῶσερ> (Chaucer), <Μῆλε> (Miele);
2. **foreign γ-morphology**: <βόλλεϊ> (volley), <τρένο> (train), <μοτοσυκλέττα> (motocyclette);
3. **γ-aspiration**: <Αμλετ> (Hamlet), <Ερρίκος> (Henri), <Αμβούργο> (Hamburg).

Cavafy’s proposal of writing <Ύόρκη> (York) with a smooth breathing [3] was thoroughly γ-autonomistic.



Current practice denies γ-properties and relies solely on **foreign φ-etics**: <Κέμπριτζ> (Cambridge), <Βερλέν> (Verlaine), <Γκέτε> (Goethe), <Τσῶσερ> (Chaucer), <Μίλε> (Miele); <βόλλεϊ> (volley), <τρένο> (train), <μοτοσυκλέττα> (motocyclette); <Αμλετ> (Hamlet), <Ερρίκος> (Henri), <Αμβούργο> (Hamburg).

## Hyphenation

Before Triantaf. [6], **hyphenation** was

1. **γ-morphological**: <συv-άδελφος>, <παρ-έμβαση>, <έξ-έχω>, <ἄv-ισος>;
2. **based on foreign morphology** for transcribed words: <Φόλκσ-βαγκεν> (Volkswagen), <Χίλντεσ-χάϊμ> (Hildesheim), <Ἄουγκσ-μπουργκ> (Augsburg);
3. **sensitive to prenasalisation**: <ἄv-τί> but <ἄ-vτιο>, <έμ-πρός> but <μπαμπάς>, <κοv-τός> and <κοv-τέσσα> but <vτα-vτά>.

Obeying [6] rules, current hyphenation is **mechanistic**:

1. <συ-vάδελφος>, <πα-ρέμβαση>, <έξ-έχω>, <ἄ-vισος>;
2. <Φόλ-κσβαγκεν> (Volkswagen), <Χίλντε-σχαϊμ> (Hildesheim), <Ἄουγκσ-μπουργκ> (Augsburg);
3. <ἄ-vτί> = <ἄ-vτιο>, <έ-μπρός> = <μπα-μπάς>, <κο-vτός> = <κο-vτέσσα> = <vτα-vτά>.

According to [5], mechanistic hyphenation is partly responsible for decreasing prenasalisation: γ-\* influences φ-\*.

## Conclusion

In their efforts to solve the Greek Language Issue, Greek linguists adhered to a phonocentric ideology whose side effects are the current practices of φ-stress-based accentuation, φ-etically-based transcription of foreign words, and mechanistic hyphenation.

## References

- [1] Anis, Jacques: *L'écriture, théories et descriptions*. Paris: CNRS Éditions, 1988.  
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[3] Haralambous, Yannis: *Ὁδηγὸς γραφῆς γιὰ τὴν ἐλληνικὴ γλῶσσα*. Athens: Ἐκδόσεις Ἄγρα, 2019.  
[4] Mackridge, Peter: *Language and National Identity in Greece, 1766–1976*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.  
[5] Moschonas, Spyros: *Ἰδεολογία καὶ Γλῶσσα*. Athens: Πατάκης, 2005.  
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