

Chapter Six

Present Tense Verbs

Well, it's finally time to learn some verbs. In this chapter you will learn the forms by which Greek *makes statements and asks questions* (the forms, that is, of what grammarians call the **indicative mode**) and those by which it *gives commands* (the forms of what grammarians call the **imperative mode**). For now we will restrict ourselves to the active voice, which I will not bother to define until *Chapter Eight*, when we will be able to contrast it with the middle voice.

Verb Conjugation

Verb conjugation is the process of changing the form of a verb to agree with its subject. Conjugation has almost disappeared from the present tense in modern English. If you have studied Spanish, though, you should understand the following exchange: “¿**Comprendes**?” “**Comprendo**.” “Do **you understand**?” “**I understand**.” The verb stem (**comprend**/) means **understand**. The ending **es** means **you**. The ending **o** means “**I**.” No Spanish subject pronoun (an explicit *I* or *you*) is required. If one is used, it tends to be emphatic. French and German have similar endings. For that matter, so does Shakespeare's English: I walk [**walk/ø**]; thou **walkest**; he **walketh**. In modern English only one personal ending remains: I **walk**; you **walk**; but he **walks**.

Greek—like Spanish, French, German, and Middle English—attached a **personal ending** to every present tense verb. Each of these endings functioned much like subject pronouns do in English. Our subject pronouns are *I*; *you* (singular); *he* (or *she* or *it*); *we*, *you* (plural) or *y'all* as folks say where I came from; and *they*.

Grammarians speak of

I (the person speaking) as **1st-person singular** and **we** (the person speaking + somebody else) as **1st-person plural**;

you (the person spoken to) as **2nd-person singular** and **y'all** (the people spoken to, or the person spoken to along with somebody else) as **2nd-person plural**;

he, she, and it (neither the speaker nor the person spoken to) as **3rd-person singular** and **they** (more than one person or thing including neither the speaker nor the person spoken to) as **3rd-person plural**.

Greek present tense verbs always consist of two components: the **present stem** (which expresses the core meaning of the verb) and the **personal ending** (which functions like an English subject pronoun). Greek does not have a verb form that merely says “walk.” Instead, Greek has six verb forms with which to make statements or ask questions in the present tense: **walk/I**; **walk/you**; **walk/he** (or **/she**, or **/it**); **walk/we**; **walk/y'all**; **walk/they**.

There are two important consequences of the fact that all Greek verbs consist of **present tense stem** + **personal ending**:

- 1) A Greek sentence does not have to contain a written subject—either noun or pronoun. Just as in the Spanish *Comprendo*, a single verb can be a complete sentence. As you translate into English, you will have to read the personal ending as a subject pronoun and relocate it to subject position in English: “**walk/we**” becomes “We are walking” or “We walk” or —with a **Greek question mark** (;)—“Are we walking?” or “Do we walk?”
- 2) Even when a Greek sentence does contain a specified subject, its verb must include the correct personal ending. This may appear redundant to an English speaker, but that’s how it works. Greek will say the equivalent of the following: “The king and his brother **walk/they**.” You may notice that some immigrants do just this sort of thing before they become fluent in English: “My brother and I, *we* live in that house.” They speak that way because their language has conditioned them to expect a **subject pronoun indicator** accompanying each **verb**.

In this and virtually all other books about Greek verb morphology, a template like the following is used to chart out verb conjugations. You may well be familiar with it from studying other languages. If you aren’t, make sure you understand it.

	Singular	Plural
1 st person	verb/I	verb/we
2 nd person	verb/you	verb/y'all
3 rd person	verb/he, she, it	verb/they

Present active verbs: Principles

There are three morphological patterns for the present tense of Greek verbs

Athematic verbs. The most common dialects of Greek include few verbs of this type, but those few are very commonly used.

Thematic verbs. The vast majority of Greek verbs follow this historically later pattern.

Irregular verbs. The verbs for *to be* and *to go* were originally plain old athematics, and some of their forms continue to follow the regular athematic pattern. But some of their forms changed radically enough that in Greek as in most other languages these two verbs may be learned most efficiently as “irregular.”

Present active verbs: Details

Indicative forms of Athematic verbs

Indicative forms communicate *statements* or *questions* (as opposed, for example, to *commands*). I will explain the term *athematic* later, when I can contrast it with *thematic*. For now you should merely understand that you are learning one of two major ways that Greek forms its present tense verbs.

This chart of the verb ἵστημι (“I stand”) will serve as a **paradigm** (a pattern) for conjugating athematic verbs in the indicative.

<i>Present indicative active: Athematic verbs</i>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	ἵστημι [ἵ <u>στα</u> / <u>μι</u>]	ἵσταμεν [ἵ <u>στα</u> / <u>μεν</u>]
2 nd person	ἵστης [ἵ <u>στα</u> / <u>ς</u>]	ἵστατε [ἵ <u>στα</u> / <u>τε</u>]
3 rd person	ἵστησι(ν) [ἵ <u>στα</u> / <u>σι</u>]*	ιστάασι(ν) [ἵ <u>στα</u> / <u>σι</u>]*

*Greek words that end in σι usually add a ν and become -σιν if they are immediately followed by a vowel. So, you should expect to see either ἵστησι or ἵστησιν; either ιστάασι, or ιστάασιν. Notice that this ν has no impact on the meaning of the word. It merely affects the sound. We might usefully (though inaccurately) liken this phenomenon to our word “a(n),” which is “a” in the phrase “a book,” but appears to become “an” when the next word begins with a vowel: “an apple.” Grammarians call this optional nu **moveable nu** or **euphonic nu**.

Right now read aloud about ten or twenty times the actual forms (rather than the analyses) on the chart till you have all of them memorized. ... Done? Then let’s make sure you understand the morphological analysis.

Greek Before Christmas

Remember what the two parts of each form mean: **ἵστα**/ means “stand,” (whether or not it lengthens to ἵστη/).

μῖ means *I*

ς means *you*

σι means *he, she, or it*

μεν means *we*

τε means *y’all*

Νσι means *they*

By combining the present stem with the personal ending, Greek produces a complete thought: “**I stand**”; “**you stand**”; etc. These words can be construed either as statements or as questions.

Notice that in all three singular forms the final vowel of the present stem undergoes *vowel lengthening*. Vowel lengthening is a frequent occurrence in Greek morphology. You have already encountered it in forming nouns:

- both α and ε lengthen to η.
- ο lengthens to ω:

N: Sonant N

The analysis of the 3rd-plural ending **Νσι** contains a symbol that is new to you: **N**. It is called **Sonant N**. I know of no ancient Greek who was aware of this sound. Modern linguists invented the term to designate a sound that they hypothesize in the pre-history of the Greek language. You should certainly not expect to see it written in an ancient text. It is called *sonant* (from the Latin word for *vowel* because this N sound carried its own vowel sound with it (much as the *m* in our word *prism* carries a vowel sound in it that makes *prism* a two-syllable word). The vowel carried by the Greek **N** is an alpha. As prehistoric Greek became historic (and written) Greek, this strange combination of α and ν sounds always lost one of its parts. *It was always heard either as its consonant part (ν) or as its vowel part (α)*. In the **Νσι** ending for athematic verbs, N always became α: **ασι**.

If you don’t understand Sonant N, don’t sweat it. You will meet the sound again and again, and each time it is explained it will become less mysterious.

Indicative forms of Thematic verbs

The vast majority of Greek verbs are conjugated using the thematic endings you will learn in this section rather than the athematic ones you learned in the previous section. The personal endings of thematic verbs all either begin with or entirely consist of a vowel sound, while the personal endings of athematic verbs characteristically begin with a consonant. Early grammarians called the initial vowels in the personal endings of thematic verbs **theme vowels**. And so, they called those verbs that contained theme vowels **thematic verbs** and those that didn’t, **athematic verbs**.

This chart of the verb λούω (*I bathe*) will serve as a paradigm of the conjugation of thematic verbs.

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<u>Present indicative active: Thematic verbs</u>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	λούω (<u>λου/ω</u>)	λούομεν (<u>λου/ομεν</u>)
2 nd person	λούεις (<u>λου/εις</u>)	λούετε (<u>λου/ετε</u>)
3 rd person	λούει (<u>λου/ει</u>)	λούουσι(ν)* (<u>λου/ο</u> N ^v <u>σ</u> ^{ουσι} <u>ι</u>)

*Subject to moveable nu.

In the 3rd-plural thematic ending the sonant N (N) resolves (just as it should) as ν rather than α after the theme vowel ο. That resolution, though results in an unacceptable sound combination: ονσι. As you have already learned (*cf.* the nominative singulars of *Row 13* nouns), Greek did not allow the sound combination –νσ. Consequently, some change was required. The combination –ονσ here, as almost always, becomes –ους. And so, the 3rd-plural ending ουσι. The ^{superscript} in the analysis shows the spelling that resulted after the disappearance of the original ονσ (printed in grey because it has disappeared).

Indicative forms of irregular verbs

The verbs *to be* and *to go* are irregular in all the languages I am familiar with, and Greek is no exception. Both of these verbs are athematic in Greek, and some of their forms can be readily explained as typical athematic forms. Others have undergone such odd changes that you will do best merely to memorize them without trying to understand their anomalies.

The irregular verb εἰμί (“I am”)

The stem of the verb *to be* is ἐσ/ and is visible in the English word **essence** (the *being-ness* of something, what it really **is**).

<u>Present indicative active: ἐσ/ (“to be”)</u>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	εἰμί [<u>ἐσ/μι</u>]	ἐσμέν [<u>ἐσ/μεν</u>]
2 nd person	εἶ [<u>ἐσ/σι</u>]	ἐστε [<u>ἐσ/τε</u>]
3 rd person	ἐστί(ν) [<u>ἐσ/τι</u>]*	εἰσί(ν) [<u>ἐσ/</u> N ^v <u>σι</u>]*

*Subject to moveable nu.

- ἐσ/μι. The combination σμ is almost as untenable as σν. Almost always something gives. Here the sigma disappears, and ε experiences compensatory lengthening to ει. *I.e.*, the vowel lengthens to compensate for the loss of the double consonant (σμ) that previously made epsilon long “by position.” Compare Σωκράτης (Σώκρατεσ/ς).
- ἐσ/σι exhibits the 2nd-singular ending (/σι) of Western Greek dialects rather than the /ς of Ionic. Eventually both intervocalic sigmas were lost.

Greek Before Christmas

- **ἐσ/τι** exhibits the 3rd-singular ending (/τι) of Western Greek dialects rather than the /σι of Ionic.
- The 1st- and 2nd-plurals follow the regular athematic pattern without complication.
- **ἐσ/Ν^νσι**. After resolving to **ἐσ/νσι**, the sigma of the stem disappears from the untenable combination **σν**, leaving **ενσι**. **ενς** (as always) becomes **εις**, producing **εις**.

The irregular verb εἶμι (“I go”)

The stem of the verb *to go* is **ι/** and is visible in the English (Latin) word *exit* (<A person> **goes** out <here>) and the Spanish verb *ir* (*to go*).

<u>Present indicative active: ι/ (“to go”)</u>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	εἶμι [εἶ/μι]	ἵμεν [ἵ/μεν]
2 nd person	εἶ [εἶ/σι]	ἴτε [ἴ/τε]
3 rd person	εἴσι [εἴ/σι]*	ἴασι [ἴ/Ν ^α σι]*

*Subject to moveable nu

- The present stem undergoes vowel change in the singular forms just as it does in regular athematic verbs. The change from **ι/** to **εἶ/** is not normal lengthening, but it seems to be driven by the same impulse.
- The 1st-singulars of **ι/** and **ἐσ/** are indistinguishable except by their accent marks.
- I guess the 2nd-singular must have begun with the West-Greek 2nd-singular ending **σι** and lost the σ as intervocalic. Note that the 2nd-singular of **ι/** is identical to the 2nd-singular of **ἐσ/**.
- The Ν of the 3rd-plural expresses itself as α even after a vowel—as is usual in athematics.

Imperative forms of Athematic verbs.

Imperatives communicate commands. This chart of the verb ἵστημι (*I stand*) will serve as a paradigm for conjugating athematic verbs in the imperative. In analyses I identify **imperative personal endings** with a green underline to help you visually appreciate the impact that these endings have on the meaning of the verb.

<u>Present imperative active: Athematic verbs</u>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	[None]	[None]
2 nd person	ἵσταε (ἵστα/ε)	ἵστατε (ἵστα/τε)
3 rd person	ἱσάτω (ἵστα/τω)	ἱσάντων (ἵστα/ντων) or ἱσάτωσαν (ἵστα/τωσαν)

The **stem ἵστα/** still means *stand*. Remember, though, that **imperative endings** do not make statements or ask questions. They give orders. So, **ἵσταε** commands “Stand!” spoken to a single person.

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As you can see, nothing strange happens in forming athematic imperatives, though it might be well to note a couple of things.

- There are no 1st-person forms of the imperative. That is because one cannot give oneself a command without speaking as though to someone else: *Hurry up, Slowpoke!* a runner might command herself. If she were to continue, though, notice the sort of thing she would say: **You** *can run faster than this*.
- Greek has 3rd-person commands, which English doesn't have. English would have to say something like *Have her stand* (3rd-singular) or *Have them stand* (3rd-plural). These forms represent a command that a speaker gives to the person he is speaking to, but which is to be carried out by someone else.

Imperative forms of Thematic verbs.

Λούω (*I bathe*) provides a good paradigm for conjugating the imperatives of thematic verbs.

<u>Present imperative active: Thematic verbs</u>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	[None]	[None]
2 nd person	λούε (λου/ε)	λούετε (λου/ετε)
3 rd person	λούέτω (λου/ετω)	λούντων (λου/οντων) or λούέτωσαν (λου/ετωσαν)

Bathe! (2nd person). *Have him/her bathe* or *Have them bathe* (3rd person).

- These endings are the same as those you learned for athematic verbs except that these have theme vowels. (E.g., athematic -τω; thematic ετω.)
- As in the athematic verbs, the 2nd-plural imperative is indistinguishable in form from the 2nd-plural indicative. You will have to rely on context to determine whether a 2nd-plural is a statement or a command.

Imperative forms of irregular verbs.

<u>Present imperative active: εσ/ ("to be")</u>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	[None]	[None]
2 nd person	ἴσθι [ἐσ/θι]	ἑστέ [ἐσ/τε]
3 rd person	ἔστω [ἐσ/τω]	ἔστων [ἐσ/ντων] or ἑστωσαν [ἐσ/τωσαν]

- The 3rd-singular is entirely regular, but the 2nd-singular is odd. It retains the very ancient imperative ending θι, and its stem changes vowel grade for reasons I do not understand.

Greek Before Christmas

- The plurals are regular. The ν of the personal ending disappeared from the 3rd-plural $\xi\sigma/\nu\tau\omega\nu$ to avoid the unacceptable combination $\sigma\nu$. The ϵ does not need to undergo compensatory lengthening to $\epsilon\iota$ because the syllable is long, followed as it is by two consonants.

<i>Present imperative active: ι/ (“to go”)</i>		
	Singular	Plural
1 st person	[None]	[None]
2 nd person	ἴθι [$\iota/\theta\iota$]	ἴτε [$\iota/\tau\epsilon$]
3 rd person	ἴτω [$\iota/\tau\omega$]	ἰόντων [$\iota/\nu\tau\omega\nu$] or ἴτωσαν [$\iota/\tau\omega\sigma\alpha\nu$]

- These imperatives follow the normal pattern for athematics except that the 2nd singular uses the old $\theta\iota$ ending and the $\omicron$ theme vowel somehow slipped into one form of the 3rd plural.

What now?

- Make sure you understand the difference between thematic and athematic verb forms and the difference between indicative and imperative mode.
- Memorize the four sets of personal endings, making sure you understand how to put **stem** and **personal ending** together to make each form.
- Commit to memory the indicative forms of the two irregular verbs. Make sure you know where to find the imperative charts in this book when you begin to encounter irregular imperatives in your readings.