

The Quantity of Syllables in Ancient Greek:



Figure 1: Ancient Greek is an extremely musical language, possessing both pitch, and rhythm.

Introduction:

In Ancient Greek, syllables are either:

1. long;
2. short;
3. or obscure.

Body:

We shall now examine each class of Syllable Length in turn:

Long Syllables:

In Ancient Greek, a syllable is considered *long*, by nature, should it contain one of the vowels:

η , ω

; or long:

ᾱ , ῑ , ῥ ,

; or diphthongs:

αι , ει , οι , αυ , ου , υι , ευ , ηυ

. Syllables that are long by nature¹. are held for the length of two morae², which is analogous to a minim or a half note in music.



Figure 2: The minim is analogous to a syllable of length two morae.

¹ There also exist syllables that are long *by position*, however these syllables are only considered *long* for the purposes of *contonation*, i.e. figuring out which type of accent to use and upon which syllable to use it. A short vowel, such as α , ε , ι , o & u ..., can become long by position, should they precede two or more consonants, or should they precede the double-consonants ζ , ξ & ψ . However, syllables that are long *by position*, are still only held for one mora.

² The English grammatical term, ‘mora,’ is derived from the Latin 1st-declension feminine noun, ‘mora, morae,’ which means ‘delay,’ or ‘duration of time.’ In English, we derive such words as ‘moratorium’ from this. Hence the etymological meanings: ‘for how long ought we to delay upon this syllable;’ ‘for what duration of time ought we to sustain [the pronunciation of] this syllable.’ etc.

Short Syllables:

In Ancient Greek, a syllable is considered short by nature should it contain one of the short vowels:

$\alpha, \varepsilon, \iota, \omicron, \upsilon$ ³

. Syllables that are short by nature are held for the length of one mora, which is analogous to a crotchet, or a quarter note, in music.



Figure 3: The crotchet is analogous to a syllable of length one mora.

³ One very often observes the short syllables, α, ι, υ written with breves, so as to distinguish them from their long counterparts: $\check{\alpha}, \check{\iota}, \check{\upsilon}$. However, it is safe to assume that when these three vowels do not have a macron or a tilde atop them, that they are short. The English grammatical term, ‘breve,’ is derived from the Latin 3rd-declension adjective, ‘brevis, brevis, brevium,’ which means ‘short.’ This *breve* diacritic – as well as the vowel that it is applied to – is also sometimes termed a ‘brachy;’ derived from the Ancient-Greek 1st/3rd-declension adjective, ‘βραχύς’ or, when transliterated: ‘brachús’ which means ‘short.’

Obscure Syllables:

In Ancient Greek, iota subscripts are considered to be obscure syllables:

α, η, ω

. In Ancient Greek, the above iotas are pronounced:

/ˈa:ɪ/ , /ˈe:ɪ/ , /ˈɔ:ɪ/

, or:

/ˈa:.(ɪ)/ , /ˈe:.(ɪ)/ , /ˈɔ:.(ɪ)/

, or:

/ˈa:ː/ , /ˈe:ː/ , /ˈɔ:ː/

. Obscure syllables are so short, that their value – in terms of morae – is not reckoned. Obscure syllables are zero morae in length. This is analogous to a grace note in music.



Figure 4: The grace note is analogous to a syllable of length zero morae.

Conclusion:

Knowing how to identify long and short syllables in Ancient Greek will aid us in our study of *accentuation* – which is the study of which syllables to stress, and which syllables to leave unstressed – and *contonation* – which is the study of the rise and fall of pitch across Ancient-Greek syllables.