

A note on the pronunciation of Ancient Greek

Ursula Coope informed me of the CD ‘Speaking Greek’, produced by the Joint Association of Classical Teachers, and published by the Cambridge University Press. I ordered the course through Amazon, and thoroughly enjoyed it. I have nevertheless two critical remarks concerning the pronunciation adopted in the recording. The first concerns the pronunciation of ζ. On the CD, David Langslow in his ‘Introduction’ on ‘Pronouncing Ancient Greek’ argues that although the letter might have been originally pronounced as δσ, we may be pretty sure that the fifth century pronunciation of the sound was σδ. He supports his view by referring to the use of ζ in the word Αθήναζε ‘towards Athens’, where the σ-ending of the accusative Αθήνας coalesces with the ending –δε into the sound reproduced by the letter ζ. This view goes far back. H. W. Smyth in his *Greek Grammar* published in 1920 writes: ‘ζ was probably = zd’. W.W. Goodwin in *A Greek Grammar*, the first edition of which was published in 1879, writes: “Z is called a compound of δ and σ; but opinions differ whether it was δσ or σδ, but the ancient testimony seems to point to σδ.” Goodwin does not specify the ancient testimony to which he refers, and the only ancient testimony in favour of σδ pronunciation to which Smyth refers is the same as the one to which Langslow refers: Αθήνας-δε. Smyth indicates what may lie behind Langslow’s conjecture that ζ may originally have been read as ‘dz’: ‘we find both κόσμος and κόζμος on inscriptions’.

So let me point out that we have a very strong ancient testimony according to which ζ = σδ is out of the question concerning pronunciation in fifth century Athens. Let me quote the relevant passage in Plato’s *Cratylus* in Jowett’s translation:

‘And there is another class of letters, φ, ψ, σ, and ξ [the last is erroneous, in Plato’s original stands ζητα], of which the pronunciation is accompanied by great expenditure of breath; these are used in the imitation of such notions as ψυχρὸν (shivering), ξέον (seething) [erroneously, in the original stands ζέον], σείεσθαι (to be shaken), σεισμὸς’ (shock), and are always introduced by the giver of names when he wants to imitate what is φυσῶδες (windy). He seems to have thought that the closing and pressure of the tongue in the utterance of δ and τ was expressive of binding and rest in place.’ (427a2-b2).

Is it my copy of Jowett's translation that is mistaken, or does the mistake go back to Benjamin Jowett, the great Master of Balliol? In other words, was it intentional? The last sentence quoted above seems to indicate that it was intentional, for the translation, as it stands, obscures the force of Socrates' words: τῆς δ' αὖ τοῦ δέλτα συμπίεσεως καὶ τοῦ ταῦ καὶ ἀπερίσεως τῆς γλώττης τὴν δύναμιν χρήσιμον φαίνεται ἠγγήσασθαι πρὸς τὴν μίμησιν τοῦ “δεσμοῦ” καὶ τῆς “στάσεως”. Jowett fails to reproduce the force of the adversative particle δε with which the sentence is introduced: ‘But the pressing together of the “delta” and of the “tau” ...’, which brings the δ and τ sounds into stark contrast with the φ, ψ, σ, and ζ sounds discussed in the preceding sentence. Furthermore, he fails to reproduce the contrasting force of the φ, ψ, ζ, and σ sounds, demonstrated by reference to the words “φυσῶδες”, “ψυχρόν”, “ζέον”, “σεῖεσθαι”, “σεισμός”, as compared by Plato to the contrasting force of the δ and τ sounds demonstrated by the words “δεσμοῦ” and “στάσεως”. The fault is aggravated by the fact that the words chosen by Jowett to represent Plato's “δεσμοῦ” and “στάσεως”, i.e. ‘binding and rest in place’ have nothing to do with the force of the δ and τ sounds as it is demonstrated at the beginning of words in which they are used. The contrast between the use of ζ in “ζέον” to the use of τ in “στάσεως” is particularly telling.

The second remark is closely related. Langslow argues that the letter φ represents aspirated ‘p’, for the Romans had the letter ‘f’, yet reproduced the Greek φ consistently as ‘ph’: ‘philosophia’. I cannot see how the aspirated ‘p’ could be referred to by Socrates in Plato's *Cratylus* as the paradigm of φυσῶδες: ‘windy’. I believe one gets as near to the Greek φ as possible if one pronounces a labial ‘f’; the sound one thus produces begins with a light ‘p’, but is as windy as can be: you can prolong it as your breath allows you to. The reading of φ as aspirated ‘p’ is consistently adopted in the CD recording, but since the performers, being English speakers, cannot avoid aspirating the π sound, it is confusing, to say the least, if one listens to the CD without the text in hand. In my reading of Plato I read the φ simply as ‘f’, for my aim is to produce reading of the text that can be enjoyed when one listens to it with one's eyes closed.

Finally, I fully agree with Langslow that θ is pronounced as a strongly aspirated 't'. This is the pronunciation to which I have adhered in my reading of Plato, but in Czech, which is my mother tongue, one pronounces 't' without aspiration, so that I was in little danger of confusing the two. But as far as native English speakers are concerned, I would strongly recommend pronouncing θ as you pronounce 'th' in 'thin' or in 'bath'. Again, since the readers on the CD 'Speaking Greek' cannot help aspirating their τ , it causes difficulty for the listener in distinguishing their θ from τ .