CHAPTER 4 | More about Verbs: The Modern Greek Present Tense

The Modern Greek present tense is both good and bad news for absolute beginners. Let’s start with the good news. Check the following sentences:

(1a) 

Bλέπω τηλεόραση τώρα.  
“I am watching TV now.”

(1b) 

Bλέπω τηλεόραση κάθε μέρα.  
“I watch TV every day.”

Sentence 1a describes an ongoing action in the present. Sentence 1b describes a routine action, whose performance includes the present. The verb is different in the English sentences, but in the Modern Greek sentences it remains the same.

I believe it is clear that the Modern Greek present is not a simple or a continuous present. It is both. Therefore, don’t look for another present tense in Modern Greek, because there is none. And this is really great news for you: You simply have to bother only with one tense in the present, not two.

It is now time for the bad news. Here are the first person singular and first person plural of some basic Modern Greek verbs:

(2a) κάνω κάνουμε (“I do” / “we do”)  
τρώω τρώμε (“I eat” / “we eat”)  
μιλάω/-ώ μιλάμε (“I speak” / “we speak”)  
μπορώ μπορούμε (“I can” / “we can”)

(2b) έρχομαι ερχόμαστε (“I come” / “we come”)  
θυμάμαι θυμόμαστε (“I remember” / “we remember”)  

Modern Greek verbs in the present tense are not uniform in their endings. Verbs belonging to 2a share roughly the same endings in the first person singular but have slightly different endings in the first person plural. On the contrary, verbs belonging to 2b look the same regarding the first person plural, but their ending is slightly different in the first person singular. Obviously what lies behind these verbs is not a single but several inflectional patterns. There is then a lot to be said about the form of the present tense, and this is what I am going to do in the following unit.
4.1 The Form of the Present

As mentioned previously, the Modern Greek present is easy to use, but not that easy to form. Verbs follow different inflectional patterns, as shown in example 2. What we need then is a categorization frame to put verbs in and to group them around an inflectional model. Let’s see how this goes:

Check again the verbs in 2. The maximal difference lies between the verbs in 2a and those in 2b (compare κάνω / κάνουμε to έρχομαι / έρχόμαστε). It is reasonable then to use voice (see Unit 2.2.4 on page 30) as a first step in order to categorize verbs, and this is what most grammars do: Modern Greek verbs are first divided into “active” and “passive” verbs according to their endings in the first person singular of the present tense. If a verb ends in -ω, it belongs to the “active” group. If a verb ends in -μαι, then it belongs to the “passive” group.

(3) “ACTIVE” GROUP       “PASSIVE” GROUP
κάνω                      έρχομαι
τρώω                      θυμάμαι
μιλάω/-ώ                 μπορώ

This distinction is very clear, I guess, but still some practice wouldn’t harm. What about the following verbs? Think first and then check the answer after 4 (and don’t cheat!).

(4) σκέφτομαι (“to think”), πλένω (“to wash”),
λέω (“to say”, “to tell”), φοβάμαι (“to fear”)

(OK, πλένω, λέω are “active”, σκέφτομαι, φοβάμαι are “passive”.)

Each one of these two major groups is categorized again and again into several groups. Let’s start with “active” verbs. They are divided into two major groups, A and B, according to the position of the stress. If the stress falls on the stem of the verb, and therefore the ending is not stressed, the verb belongs to group A. If the stress falls on the ending of the verb, and therefore the stem is unstressed, then the verb belongs to group B.

(5) “ACTIVE” VERBS
GROUP A
κάνω, τρώω
GROUP B
μιλάω/-ώ, μπορώ

Again some practice might help. Which one of the following verbs is group A and which is group B? Think first, then check the answer after 6:
(6) παίζω (“to play”), προσπαθώ (“to try”), φοράω/-ώ (“to wear”), τρέχω (“to run”)

(OK, παίζω, τρέχω belong to group A, προσπαθώ, φοράω/-ώ belong to group B.)

Groups A and B are further divided into two sub-groups each.

Group A gives A1 and A2 on the basis of the stem: If its final sound is a consonant, then the verb goes to A1. If its final sound is a vowel, then the verb goes to A2.

![Group A Diagram]

Group B gives B1 and B2 on the basis of the ending: If there is an -ά- in it, then the verb goes to B1. If there is no -ά- in it, then the verb goes to B2.

![Group B Diagram]

This is it! No more groups and subgroups for “active” verbs. Here is a table to help:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>κάνω</td>
<td>μιλάω/-ώ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>τρώω</td>
<td>μπορώ</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>A</th>
<th>B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>μιλάω/-ώ</td>
<td>μπορώ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>μιλάω/-ώ</td>
<td>μπορώ</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.1: Basic Inflectional Groups of “Active” Verbs in the Present Tense.

Some practice is necessary, don’t you think? OK, which verb is in which group? Think and then you know what to do. But I believe you need some help at the moment, so I will split the verbs for you.

(9) γυρίζω (“to turn”, “to return”), μετράω/-ό (“to count”, “to measure”), καίω (“to burn”), τηλέφωνω (“to call”), ακούω (“to listen”, “to hear”), δουλέω (“to work”), τελειώνω (“to finish”, “to end”), αγαπάω/-ό (“to love”), φτιάχνω (“to make”)

(And here is the answer: γυρίζω, δουλέω, τελειώνω, φτιάχνω are A1, ακούω, καίω are A2,
μετράω/-ώ, αγαπάω/-ώ are B1 and τηλεφωνώ is B2.)

- The verb δουλεύω belongs to A1 group. The letter θ here represents [v], therefore a consonant (see Unit 1.4.2 on page 10).
- Take the verbs τελειώνω and τηλεφωνώ to see how stress affects their categorization. The first one is stressed on the stem, therefore it goes to A1. The second one is stressed on the ending, therefore it goes to B2.

“Passive” verbs follow the distinctions of “active” verbs. Considering that “passive” voice is basically examined in levels B1-B2, I will skip a detailed presentation and focus only on two groups of “passive” verbs:
- The first group consists of verbs ending in -ομαι, like έρχομαι. In order to save time and energy I will call it “passive” group 1.
- The second group is a rather limited group consisting of verbs ending in -άμαι, like θυμάμαι. Let’s call it “passive” group 2.

In the following units you will find tables representing “active” groups A1, A2, B1, B2 and the two “passive” groups. Each group is presented as an inflectional model. This model can be applied to all verbs of each group. The verbal forms of each inflectional model are represented first as whole, then split into the stem and the ending. The endings alone come last. Each inflectional model is followed by a list of basic verbs for levels A1-A2.

Personal pronouns are optional (see Unit 2.2.1 on page 26) but still necessary. They will be introduced with group A1 but will not be mentioned in the following groups.

4.1.1 Group A1: κάνω
Verbs in group A1 have an unstressed ending. The final sound of the stem is a consonant.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st (εγώ)</td>
<td>κάνω</td>
<td>κάνω</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd (εσύ)</td>
<td>κάνεις</td>
<td>κάνεις</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd (αυτός/αυτή/αυτό)</td>
<td>κάνει</td>
<td>κάνει</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PLURAL</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st (εμείς)</td>
<td>κάνουμε</td>
<td>κάνουμε</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd (εσείς)</td>
<td>κάνετε</td>
<td>κάνετε</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd (αυτοί/αυτές/αυτά)</td>
<td>κάνουν(ε)</td>
<td>κάνουν(ε)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.2: An Inflectional Model for Group A1.
The third person plural has alternative forms (κάνουν/κάνουνε). As absolute beginners, you are free to use any one of them.

Of all groups, A1 is by far the largest. The vast majority of basic Modern Greek verbs belong to group A1 (for more verbs, see the Appendix on page 162).

Table 4.3: Basic Verbs of Group A1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
<th>PLURAL</th>
<th>CASE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>τρώω</td>
<td>-ος</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>τρως</td>
<td>-ς</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>τράει</td>
<td>-ει</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Three of the above verbs are entered in the third person singular instead of the first person singular. Πρέπει is an impersonal verb (to be examined in Chapter 9). Αρέσει and μπάλει come most of the times as third-person verbs because of their syntax in Modern Greek.

4.1.2 Group A2: τρώω

Verbs in group A2 have an unstressed ending. The final sound of the stem is a vowel.
Group A2 comprises only few verbs, but all of them are basic for communication:

- ακούω (“to hear”, “to listen”)  
- καίω (“to burn”)  
- κλαίω (“to cry”)  
- λέω (“to say”, “to tell”)  
- πάω (“to go”)  
- τρώω (“to eat”)  
- φταίω (“to be responsible for something negative”, “to be blamed for something”)

The verb πάω has an alternative form (πηγαίνω), which belongs to group A1.

### 4.1.3 Group B1: μιλάω/-ώ

Verbs in group B1 have a stressed ending. The first series of their endings include -ά-.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>μιλάω/μιλώ</td>
<td>μιλάω/μιλώ</td>
<td>-άω/-ώ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>μιλάς</td>
<td>μιλάς</td>
<td>-άς</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>μιλάει/μιλά</td>
<td>μιλάει/μιλά</td>
<td>-άει/-ά</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PLURAL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>μιλάμε/μιλούμε</td>
<td>μιλάμε/μιλούμε</td>
<td>-άμε/-ούμε</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>μιλάτε</td>
<td>μιλάτε</td>
<td>-άτε</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>μιλάνε/μιλούν</td>
<td>μιλάνε/μιλούν</td>
<td>-άνε/-ούν</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The verb πάω has an alternative form (πηγαίνω), which belongs to group A1.

Group B1 is the second biggest group after A1, comprising lots of basic verbs:

- αγαπάω/-ώ (“to love”)  
- απαντάω/-ώ (“to answer”, “to reply”)  
- γελάω/-ώ (“to laugh”)  
- διψάω/-ώ (“to be thirsty”)  
- ζητάω/-ώ (“to ask [as in requests]”)  
- κρατάω/-ώ (“to hold”, “to last”)  
- μετράω/-ώ (“to count”, “to measure”)  
- μιλάω/-ώ (“to speak”, “to talk”)
Verbs like μιλάω are present in a great variety of alternative forms. These forms have almost equal status in speech. Why “almost equal”? Because the lengthy forms (μιλάω, μιλάει etc.) represent a more colloquial, everyday style, and the short forms (μιλώ, μιλά etc.) a slightly more formal and literary style. In principle you are free to use any one of the two. But as absolute beginners you are advised to focus on the lengthy forms, so as not to confuse verbs in group B1 with verbs in group B2 (for example the short form μιλώ looks exactly like μπορώ).

Considering that groups A2 and B1 share roughly the same inflectional pattern, one might wonder why we need to posit two separate groups. The answer is this: Though these verbs look very much alike, they behave differently in several respects. Verbs like μιλάω may also have a contracted form (see the above table), while verbs like τρώω cannot (this is why grammars split the verbs like μιλάω and τρώω). Verbs like μιλάω are regular verbs in the past and the future, while verbs like τρώω are not. These are the main reasons why we should maintain a distinction among these groups.

### 4.1.4 Group B2: μπορώ

Verbs in group B2 have a stressed ending. Their endings do not include -ά-.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>SINGULAR</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>μπορώ</td>
<td>-ό</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>μπορείς</td>
<td>-είς</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>μπορεί</td>
<td>-εί</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>PLURAL</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>μπορούμε</td>
<td>-ούμε</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>μπορείτε</td>
<td>-έτε</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>μπορούν(ε)</td>
<td>-ούν(ε)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4.8: An Inflectional Model for Group B2.
Among the basic verbs of this group we can list the following:

| ζω ("to live", "to be alive") | μπορώ ("can") | οδηγώ ("drive") |
| προσπαθώ ("to try") | τηλεφωνώ ("to call") | χρησιμοποιώ ("to use") |

**Table 4.9:** Basic Verbs of Group Β2.

### 4.1.5 “Passive” Group 1: έρχομαι

Verbs of this group include -o- as part of their ending.

| SINGULAR |  
|  
| 1st | έρχομαι | έρχομαι-ομαι |
| 2nd | έρχεσαι | έρχεσαι-εσαι |
| 3rd | έρχεται | έρχεται-εται |
| PLURAL |  
| 1st | ερχόμαστε | ερχόμαστε-όμαστε |
| 2nd | ερχόσαστε/έρχεστε | ερχόσαστε/έρχεστε-όσαστε/-εστε |
| 3rd | έρχονται | έρχονται-ονται |

**Table 4.10:** An Inflectional Model for “Passive” Group 1.

Some basic verbs of this group are the following:

| γίνομαι ("to become") | έρχομαι ("to come") | κάθομαι ("to sit") |
| πλένομαι ("to wash myself") | σκέφτομαι ("to think") |

**Table 4.11:** Basic Verbs of “Passive” Group 1.

Though the number of “passive” verbs at Levels A1-A2 may seem limited, in fact they represent an enormous group. Some of them stand as the “reflexive” counterpart of “active” verbs of group A1:

(I) πλένω  
πλένομαι  
“wash something”  “wash myself”

As absolute beginners, you are free to use anyone of the alternative types of the second person plural. The same holds for every “passive” verb.
4.1.6 “Passive” Group 2: θυμάμαι

Verbs of this group include -ά- as part of their ending.

| SINGULAR | 1st | θυμάμαι | θυμάμαι | -άμαι |
| 2nd | θυμάσαι | θυμάσαι | -άσαι |
| 3rd | θυμάται | θυμάται | -άται |
| PLURAL | 1st | θυμόμαστε | θυμόμαστε | -όμαστε |
| 2nd | θυμόσαστε/θυμάστε | θυμόσαστε/θυμάστε | -όσαστε/-όστε |
| 3rd | θυμούνται | θυμούνται | -όνται |

Table 4.12: An Inflectional Model for “Passive” Group 2.

The group comprises only four verbs, namely:

θυμάμαι (“to remember”)
κοιμάμαι (“to sleep”)
λυπάμαι (“to feel sorry”, “to be sorry”)
φοβάμαι (“to be afraid”, “to fear”)

Table 4.13: Verbs of “Passive” Group 2.

4.1.7 Where is the Verb “to be”?

The verb “to be” stands alone here, because it can be nowhere else. In principle είμαι is a “passive” verb, but its endings look like no “passive” group here (there is no -ο- or -ά- in the ending) or elsewhere. In other words, είμαι is a typical irregular verb. So you will have to memorize the following table only for the sake of είμαι. And if you are wondering why είμαι has to be irregular after all, note that the verb “to be” happens to be irregular across several languages (English included).

| SINGULAR | 1st | είμαι |
| 2nd | είσαι |
| 3rd | είναι |
| PLURAL | 1st | είμαστε |
| 2nd | είσαστε/είστε |
| 3rd | είναι |

Table 4.14: The Present Tense of the Verb είμαι (“to be”).
4.1.8 Modern Greek Verbs in Two Steps

To the eyes of the absolute beginner, Units 4.1.1-4.1.7 must look like a nightmare. “How do I know where a specific verb belongs?” is the obvious question. Well, there are simple steps for it. Let’s see the following sentence:

(10) Ο Πέτρος μαθαίνει ισπανικά.

“Peter is learning Spanish.”

• In order to find which category the verb μαθαίνει belongs to, go to the first person singular of the present. This is not hard. Verbs are entered like this in dictionaries. If you are in class, the teacher will give you the first person singular as well. In our case the first person singular of the verb is μαθαίνω. If you are a mastermind of grammar, perhaps you are able by now to track similarities with a specific model and go to the first person.

• Let’s now put μαθαίνω under the microscope. Check the ending first. Μαθαίνω is clearly an “active” verb. Now check the stem. The stem is stressed, so you go to group A. Check the stem again. The final sound is a consonant, so you go to group A1. Now you are ready to apply the inflectional model of A1 (Table 4.2 on page 54) to μαθαίνω and live happily ever after.

4.2 The Use of the Present

The use of the Modern Greek present is roughly equivalent to the use of the English simple and continuous presents together. Basically the Modern Greek present is used to describe:

• Actions that happen at the present (keep in mind that the term “present” should be understood as the moment of speaking):

(11) Φεύγω τώρα.

“I am leaving now.”

• Actions that repeat themselves in a pattern that includes the present. In this respect the Modern Greek present is used to describe everyday routines, scheduled events or even general truths.

(12a) Ο Πέτρος πάντα ξυπνάει στις οχτώ το πρωί.

“Peter always wakes up at eight a.m.”

(12b) Το τρένο φεύγει στις οχτώ.”

“The train leaves at eight o’clock.”
(12c) Η Γη γυρίζει γύρω από τον Ήλιο.
“The Earth goes around the Sun.”

- Actions that started in the past, but continue in the present (notice that in this context the Modern Greek present equals the English present perfect continuous).

(13) Δουλεύω από το πρωί.
“I have been working since morning.”

Accordingly, the present combines with three major groups of adverbials:

- Adverbs related to the present:

  τώρα (“now”)    σήμερα (“today”)
  απόψε (“tonight”)  φέτος (“this year”)

  **Table 4.15: Adverbs Related to the Present Tense.**

- Adverbs of frequency (they are provided below on a frequency scale):

  πάντα    “always”
  συνήθως    “usually”
  συχνά    “often”
  μερικές φορές/ πότε πότε    “some times”
  σπάνια    “rarely”
  (δεν) ___ ποτέ    “(not) ever” (=“never”)

  **Table 4.16: Adverbs of Frequency.**

Adverbs of frequency represent another instance of free word order in Modern Greek: Unlike English, these adverbs may hold several positions within the sentence:

(IIa) Συνήθως πίνω καφέ.
(IIIb) Πίνω συνήθως καφέ.
(IIc) Πίνω καφέ συνήθως.
All of the above sentences mean “I usually have coffee”.

- Single (non-prepositional) accusative (see Unit 3.2.5 on page 42). The accusative may also be modified by the word κάθε to express frequency or by other words related to the present:

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Apart from describing present actions, the Modern Greek present may also refer to actions that belong to the future (usually the immediate future):

(III) Πάω στην Ιταλία την άλλη Τρίτη.

“I’m going to Italy next Tuesday.”

Going to Italy seems to be a very strong possibility, a fact that relates the use of the present here to modality (see Unit 2.2.3 on page 30).

The same holds for the following sentence:

(IV) A: Ποιος θα πάει για καφέ;

B: Πάω εγώ.

“Who will go to get some coffee?”

“I am willing / I am ready / I can go [to get some coffee].”

Πάω in this context expresses ability, which again belongs to the area of modality.
A User-Friendly Tense

I kept the best part for the end: The Modern Greek present needs no auxiliaries and relevant syntactic changes in order to form its interrogative or negative version:

(Va) Θέλει παγωτό.

“She/He wants ice cream.”

(Vb) Θέλει παγωτό;

“Does she/he want ice cream?”

(Vc) Δεν θέλει παγωτό.

“She/He doesn’t want ice cream.”

In Modern Greek, in order to ask a yes-no question (sentence Vb) all you have to do is change your intonation (see Unit 1.7.2 on page 16). In order to refuse or deny (sentence Vc) you just add the negative particle δεν before the verb. In both cases you skip all formal changes involved in languages like English. The Modern Greek present then is an “auxiliary-free” tense and this is true about the Modern Greek past and the future (you will be reminded later about this).

• If you want to ask a question starting with an interrogative word, you simply put this word first and follow the intonation pattern for questions:

(VI) Τι θέλει;

“What does she/he want?”

Notice, though, that when the sentence includes an explicit subject, it is usually posited after the verb:

(VII) Τι θέλει η Ελένη;

“What does Helen want?”
Cats sound much the same everywhere, but people across cultures seem to hear them differently. In human terms, Modern Greek cats say νιάου! Dogs say γαβ! Hens say κο, κο, κο! while roosters say κικιρίκου! Sheep and goats say μπεεε! Cows say μουουουου! Birds say τσιου, τσιου! And fish say nothing at all.

If you wish to call a cat, what you should do is ψι,ψι,ψι,ψι. If you wish to call a dog, what you should do is a sound like a kiss. If you want to send them away (but I hope you don’t) what you should do is ξουτ! There are several verbs to describe animal voices, among them νιαοριζω for cats, γαβγιζω for dogs, κακαριζω for hens, μουγκανιζω for cows, τιτιβιζω for birds (and at least twenty more in dictionaries). Which group are they? Yes, you guessed right. It’s the almighty group A1.

**SUMMARY**

Chapter 4 introduces the Modern Greek present tense. Considering that there is not a single inflectional model for verbs in the present tense, the greatest part of the chapter is dedicated to form, in order to offer a comprehensive categorization frame for basic Modern Greek verbs. The use of the present tense is exemplified by typical adverbials related to its use.

**KEY WORDS**

present tense, stem/ending, inflectional model, inflectional group

**EXERCISES**

1. What is Peter doing? Match the sentences with the sounds.

| 1. Πίνει χυμό πορτοκάλι. | a. |
| 2. Ακούει μουσική. | b. |
| 3. Βλέπει τηλεόραση. | c. |
| 4. Κάνει μπάνιο. | d. |
| 5. Φτιάχνει ομελέτα. | e. |
| 6. Μιλάει με την Κατερίνα. | f. |
| 7. Οδηγεί. | g. |
| 8. Κοιμάται. | h. |
2. Choose the correct verb.

1. Ο Πέτρος _______ τζιν παντελόνι.
   a. φοράει  b. μιλάει  c. αγαπάει

2. Εμείς συνήθως _________ καφέ.
   a. τρώμε  b. πάμε  c. πίνουμε

3. Από πού _________ η Κατερίνα;
   a. είναι  b. είμαι  c. είσαι

4. Η Ελένη _________ τα αεροπλάνα.
   a. κοιμάται  b. λυπάται  c. φοβάται

5. Ο Πέτρος κι εγώ _________ συχνά στο τηλέφωνο.
   a. φοράμε  b. λέμε  c. μιλάμε

6. Τα παιδιά τώρα _________ μπάσκετ.
   a. περνάνε  b. παίζουν  c. πίνουν

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