CHAPTER 2 | Nouns and Verbs

Nouns and verbs are Very Important Parts of any language. Take the words water and drink. These words describe basic facts of human experience. These words can stand alone to form elementary meaningful sentences such as Water! or Drink! Therefore such words are basic for communication and usually come first in language learning (any teacher in her/his right mind would introduce water and drink prior to curious or nevertheless). Modern Greek is not an exception in this respect.

Modern Greek nouns and verbs are inflected words. Therefore, apart from their (lexical) meaning, they come with lots of grammar inside them. In the following units I shall introduce basic grammatical features for each one of these groups, focusing on those features that seem to be less evident for learners of Modern Greek.

2.1 The Grammar of Nouns

Modern Greek nouns are present in speech in different forms. Here is an example:

(1) δρόμος δρόμοι
“street” “streets”

Different forms of the same noun share a common left part (δρόμο- in our example), which bears the lexical meaning of the noun. Checking this left part (or stem of the noun) I can tell that this noun means “street”. Their right part (-ος or -οι in our example) bears grammatical information about the noun. Checking the right side (or ending of the noun) I can tell for instance that δρόμος is in the singular and δρόμοι is in the plural.

Number, gender and case are the three major grammatical features that shape the Modern Greek noun system. Number (here as singular vs. plural) is a very common inflectional feature for many languages, not only Indo-European ones, so we have few things to say. Gender and case are less common, so it is worth mentioning a few things about them.

2.1.1 Gender

If you are familiar with gender languages such as German, French, Russian, Italian or Spanish, then you have some idea about what gender is. For those who are not, I will try to explain gender using an analogy from real life: Humans and animals can be assigned a sex (a man or a bull are males, a woman or a cow are females), things cannot (tables and chairs are “neuter” in this respect). Likewise nouns must be either masculine, or feminine, or, finally, neuter (which originally meant “neither masculine, nor feminine”). This three-fold distinction of gender (compare
to the two-fold distinction of gender in Spanish, Italian or French) is the basis for the division of Modern Greek nouns in three major gender categories. Any Modern Greek noun must be either masculine, or feminine, or neuter. All nouns can have one and only gender, I mean they cannot be feminine here and masculine there. And absolutely no noun can be gender-free.

As part of grammatical information, gender is assigned to the right part of the noun:

(2) δρόμος (MASC.)  ώρα (FEM.)  βιβλίο (NEUT.)
    “street”    “hour”    “book”

Gender is also manifested outside the noun itself, in words like the definite article (a word equivalent of the English *the*):

(3) ο δρόμος (MASC.)  η ώρα (FEM.)  το βιβλίο (NEUT.)

Having these in mind, let’s make a table about the gender groups of basic Modern Greek nouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MASCULINE</th>
<th>FEMININE</th>
<th>NEUTER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>o δρόμος (&quot;street&quot;)</td>
<td>η ώρα (&quot;hour&quot;)</td>
<td>το βιβλίο (&quot;book&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o άντρας (&quot;man&quot;)</td>
<td>η ώρα (&quot;hour&quot;)</td>
<td>το παιδί (&quot;child&quot;)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o χάρτης (&quot;map&quot;)</td>
<td>η ζώνη (&quot;belt&quot;)</td>
<td>το πράγμα (&quot;thing&quot;)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2.1: Gender Groups of Basic Modern Greek Nouns.**

Nouns of the same gender share the same definite article, but not the same endings. It would be reasonable then to use this short word as a safe way to recognize a noun’s gender. This is what most dictionaries do, and this is what I am going to do from now on.

Dictionaries give information not only about a noun’s meaning but also about its gender. Some of them use abbreviations such as αρσ. (αρσενικό, “masculine”), θηλ. (θηλυκό, “feminine”), and ουδ. (ουδέτερο, “neuter”). Others register each noun along with the appropriate definite article (ο for masculine, η for feminine, το for neuter), usually following the noun (inside parentheses, or separated by a comma). Keep in mind that the definite article in Modern Greek always precedes the noun, never follows it. Dictionaries simply choose the final position for the article in order to make alphabetical classification easier. For example: δρόμος, ο / δρόμος (ο) (press here to see the real entry: http://www.greek-language.gr/greekLang/modern_greek/tools/lexica/triantafyllides/search.html).

Is gender predictable in Modern Greek? The answer is “no”. For Modern Greek, as for many
Indo-European languages, gender lies far from the idea of “natural” sex I used before just to explain what gender looks like. A chair in real life is definitely a neuter, but the word καρέκλα is not (it’s a feminine). Coffee, chocolate and tea might be related as non-alcoholic, usually hot drinks, but gender seems to disagree with our concept and treats them differently.

(4)  ο καφές    η σοκολάτα    το τσάι  
“coffee” “chocolate” “tea”

Personally, I see no reason why coffee is registered as masculine in Modern Greek, chocolate as feminine and tea as neuter. Equally I see no reason why a pencil, a marker and a quill pen do not share the same gender (which is which? Ask yourselves first and then check here: “pencil” is το μολύβι, “marker” is ο μαρκαδόρος, “quill pen” is η πένα.

There are some fields, though, where reason might help. Nouns typically associated with humans and animals are generally affected by sex. Males are usually masculine, while females are usually feminine:
(I)  ο άντρας (“man”)    η γυναίκα (“woman”)    ο Πέτρος (“Peter”)    η Κατερίνα (“Catherine”)    ο ταύρος (“bull”)    η αγελάδα (“cow”)

The same holds for professions as a property of humans:
(II)  ο δάσκαλος (“male teacher”)    η δασκάλα (“female teacher”)    ο γιατρός (“male doctor”)    η γιατρός (“female doctor”)

There are also some regularities in gender that should not be ignored. For example, most countries are feminine, simply because the word “country” in Modern Greek is feminine (η χώρα).
(III)  η Αγγλία (“UK”), η Γαλλία (“France”), η Ισπανία (“Spain”)

But even inside this group there are considerable exceptions:
(IV)  ο Καναδάς (“Canada”), ο Λίβανος (“Lebanon”), το Μεξικό (“Mexico”), το Ιράκ (“Iraq”)
Loanwords (words borrowed from other languages) are not uncommon in Modern Greek. When a loan noun becomes part of the Modern Greek vocabulary, it must definitely get a gender. Which one? The noun πίτσα (did you recognize pizza?) looks like a feminine because of its ending -α (compare to the noun ώρα of Table 2.1 on page 22). Therefore it is classified as a feminine (η πίτσα). Countries like Λίβανος or Μεξικό have gone through a similar classification project (the former looks like a masculine, the latter like a neuter).

But what about the following nouns?

(V) φεστιβάλ (“festival”), κομπιούτερ (“computer”), γκαράζ (“garage”), Ιράκ (“Iraq”), ευρώ (“euro”)

The endings of these nouns do not match any of the three gender groups of Table 2.1. Therefore the nouns cannot be classified as masculine, feminine, or neuter. This kind of words all fall under the category of neuter, perhaps because the neuter is constructed on a “neither-nor” basis.

Cars

Gender draws an interesting distinction among cars.

- Everyday, average cars are usually neuter:

(VI) το Φίατ (“Fiat”), το Πεζό (“Peugeot”), το Σμαρτ (“Smart”)

- Luxury cars on the other side are usually feminine:

(VII) η Μερσεντές (“Mercedes”), η Φεράρι (“Ferrari”)

Why? Here is a possible answer: Expensive cars are usually beloved items (not tools, like ordinary cars), so people tend to humanize them. But then, why would a Ferrari become a “she” and not a “he”? The explanation goes beyond the scope of this grammar, so I will skip it, to focus on gender again.

If gender is unpredictable, then reason cannot help you with it. The safest way to handle gender is to use your memory and learn a noun’s gender along with its meaning (don’t leave it for later, you’ll get lost). And if those familiar with another gender language are looking for analogies to get some help, they should abandon the idea. A chair is feminine in Modern Greek (η καρέκλα), Spanish (la silla) and French (la chaise), but masculine in German (der Stuhl). I know that sometimes it can be frustrating, but there it is. If you need some motivation, keep in mind that the gender of nouns affects words that depend on them, such as adjectives, pronouns and numerals (see Chapters 5 on page 66 and 6 on page 82).
Considering that nouns of the same gender share the same endings (masculines for example all end in -ς, realized as -ος, -ας, -ης), one might conclude that guessing a noun’s gender from its ending is possible. This way may seem much easier than memorizing each noun’s gender (and in fact many teaching books are based on it), but it is not always efficient. As you will find out if you go on with Modern Greek, there are many words that share the same ending but not the same gender:

(VIII) ο δρόμος ("street"), η έξοδος ("exit"), το κράτος ("state")

2.1.2 Case

If you are familiar with case languages (like Russian, Turkish, Arabic or German), then you know what case is. For those who are not, I shall try to explain the basics of case using an elementary scenario. Imagine two Greek male students, Γιάννης and Πέτρος, who live together. This situation could be described by the following sentences:

(5a) Ο Γιάννης μένει με τον Πέτρο.  
"John lives with Peter."

(5b) Ο Πέτρος μένει με τον Γιάννη.  
"Peter lives with John."

(5c) Ο Γιάννης και ο Πέτρος μένουν μαζί.  
"John and Peter live together."

Μένει / μένουν are "lives" / "(they) live", με is "with", και is the Modern Greek "and". John and Peter of the above sentences are present in two different forms:

(6) "John" "Peter"  
ο Γιάννης o Πέτρος  
tον Γιάννη τον Πέτρο

The use of these forms is not random. I mean you are not free to replace one form with another. Why? The answer lies in syntax: Each one of these forms seems to hold a different role inside the sentence. Let’s take the forms τον Γιάννη / τον Πέτρο. These forms are used only after a preposition (με in this case). Modern Greek nouns then may vary according to their (syntactic) role, and this sort of variation is reflected in their case.

The above examples do not exhaust case in Modern Greek, which will be examined in the following chapter. What you should keep in mind for the moment is that nouns may vary accord-
ing to their syntactic role. And, if this variation sounds “exotic” for your linguistic standards, check the following example:

(7a) He lives here.
(7b) Peter lives with him.

This is an instance of case in English: *He* and *him* are two forms of the same personal pronoun (third person, masculine), and their use depends on syntax in a way similar to our examples.

### 2.2 The Grammar of Verbs

Modern Greek verbs seem to share the same internal structure as nouns:

(8) παίζω παίζεις
    “I play” “you play”

These forms share an identical left part (the stem), namely παίζ-, that bears the (lexical) meaning of the verb (“play”, in our example). The right part (the ending) is variable and bears grammatical information. In the case of παίζεις the ending -εις indicates, among other things, that the verb is in the second person singular.

Modern Greek verbs carry grammatical information not only about person and number, but also about tense, aspect, mood and voice. This sort of information is basically located in the ending of the verb, but may also be found in the middle of it, even in front of it, either as part of the verb itself or as a separate word (compare with the article in front of nouns). Thus, there is a lot to be said about the grammar of verbs, and this is what I am going to do in the following units.

#### 2.2.1 Person, Number, and an Optional Subject

I believe you are all familiar with the notions of person and number, so I will skip the explanation. What you must keep in mind in the case of Modern Greek, is that person (first, second and third) and number (singular vs. plural) are clearly manifested in the ending of the verb. This fact allows for an optional (not obligatory) subject in Modern Greek. Compare again some forms of the Modern Greek verb παίζω (“to play”) with the English verb *to play*.

(9) παίζω παίζουμε
    “I play” “we play”

Checking παίζω or παίζουμε I can “read” person and number inside the verb itself (consider *play*, which gives no such information). Therefore I do not need a subject-pronoun like “I” or “We” to tell me about person and number. So, if I had to say “I play basketball” or “We play
basketball”, I would skip “I” or “We” and go like this (the hyphen indicates the missing subject-pronoun in the Modern Greek sentences):

(10a)  (-) παίζω μπάσκετ.
       “I play basketball.”

(10b)  (-) παίζουμε μπάσκετ.
       “We play basketball.”

But what about the following sentences?

(11a)  ΕΓΩ παίζω μπάσκετ.
       “It’s me who plays basketball.”

(11b)  Ο ΠΕΤΡΟΣ παίζει μπάσκετ.
       “It is Peter who plays basketball.”

The English translation shows clearly that here we have a focus (contrastive) reading (check Unit 1.7.3 on page 17): It is Peter (not Catherine, for example) who plays basketball. And in this context the subject (either as a pronoun or as a noun) becomes necessary.

The focus sentences of 11a-11b are just an instance of contrast. Compare the following sentences:

(12a)  Είμαστε στο σχολείο. (-) παίζουμε μπάσκετ.
       “We are at school. We are playing basketball.”

(12b)  Είμαστε στο σχολείο. Εγώ παίζω βόλεϊ. Η Μαρία παίζει μπάσκετ.
       “We are at school. I am playing volleyball. Maria is playing basketball.”

The verb παίζουμε in 12a does not need a subject, because its subject is clearly identical to the subject of the first sentence. The verbs παίζω and παίζει in 12b do need a subject because the subjects now are not identical to the subject of the first sentence. I believe you all see some sort of contrast between subjects, which brings sentence 12b close to focus sentences such as 11a-11b.
Verbs must share the same person and number with their subject, either present or missing (but still presumed).

(IX)  
(Εγώ) παίζω.  
(Εμείς) παίζουμε.  
This is an instance of agreement (for other instances, check Chapter 5 on page 66).

At the moment nobody expects you to handle optional subject perfectly (unless you come from a subject-optional language like Spanish or Italian). The point of the unit is to develop your subject-optional awareness, and this is it. Remember that people will be delighted to hear you speak Modern Greek, and they will definitely not mind a pleonastic use of the subject.

Verbs are entered in dictionaries according to the first person singular of the present tense. So don’t look for “to be” or “to have” but rather for “I am”, “I have”. So the Modern Greek verb “to play” will be registered as παίζω. For a real entry press here: http://www.greeklanguage.gr/greekLang/modern_greek/tools/lexica/triantafyllides/search.html.

2.2.2 Tense and Aspect

Verbs basically describe events or states (in order to save time and space, I will use the term “action” instead). Actions may have a time reference like in the following sentences:

(13a)  
Παίζουμε μπάσκετ.  
“We play basketball.”

(13b)  
Παίξαμε μπάσκετ.  
“We played basketball.”

(13c)  
Θα παίξουμε μπάσκετ.  
“We will play basketball.”

Playing basketball may be a present (like in 13a), a past (like in 13b), or a future action (like in 13c). This is roughly what tense is about.

Notice that the present here basically coincides with the moment of speaking. So a past action is an action that happened before the moment of speaking. Accordingly, a future action is an action that will happen after the moment of speaking.
Tense in Modern Greek is marked by the endings of the verbs but also by independent words which precede the verb, like in the future tense (compare to the English will/shall):

(14) παίξαμε θα παίξουμε
    “we played” “we will play”

Perhaps you have already noticed that the stem of the verb is not the same everywhere. In order to explain this fact, I will have to introduce aspect. Check the following sentences:

(15a) Παίξαμε μπάσκετ.
    “We played basketball.”

(15b) Παίζαμε μπάσκετ.
    “We were playing basketball.”

Both sentences describe a past action. The first sentence describes it as a perfect (completed) action. The second sentence describes the same action, but this time as an imperfect (in this case ongoing) action. The different ways to view an action represent aspect.

Aspect in Modern Greek is clearly related to the stem of the verb, and not to its endings. The verbs in the above sentences share exactly the same endings, so, obviously, the difference in aspect is marked by the difference in stems (παίξ- vs. παίζ-). The first one, called perfective stem, combines here with endings of the past to form the Modern Greek simple past. The second one, called imperfective stem, combines here with endings of the past to create the Modern Greek past continuous. Aspect and tense then work together to produce the actual tenses of Modern Greek, in this case past simple and past continuous:

(16) παίξ-αμε      IMPERFECTIVE-PAST → PAST CONTINUOUS
    παίζ-αμε      PERFECTIVE-PAST → PAST SIMPLE

I won’t go into further details, so I will conclude this discussion here. What I want you to remember is this: These stems (perfective and imperfective) are basic for any possible form of any Modern Greek verb. To put it simply: As long as you know these stems (along with the appropriate endings), the Modern Greek verbal system will be really easy to handle.
How to learn these stems? It is very simple. The imperfective stem comes along with every new verb you learn, since it is the basis for the present tense. The perfective stem is the basis for other tenses such as the past and future simples, so you learn it when you learn either one of these tenses. In this book, information about the imperfective and perfective stems can be found in Chapters 4, 8, 9 and in the Appendix.

2.2.3 Modality and Mood

Let’s see the following sentences:

(17a) Παίζω μπάσκετ.
     “I play basketball.”

(17b) Μπορώ να παίξω μπάσκετ.
     “I am able to / I can play basketball.”

(17c) Πρέπει να παίξω μπάσκετ.
     “I have (I must/I should/I ought…) to play basketball.”

(17d) Μπορεί να παίξω μπάσκετ.
     “I might play basketball.”

All of the above sentences involve the same action: playing basketball. But there are considerable differences in the way the action is perceived. In the first sentence playing basketball is considered a fact. In the other three sentences playing basketball is considered not a fact but rather an ability, an obligation or a possibility. These are instances of modality.

Modality is the basis for mood distinctions in the Modern Greek verbal system: the indicative (παίζω) is the mood that refers to facts, while the subjunctive (να παίζω) refers to non-facts, such as abilities, obligations or possibilities. There are other moods which will be introduced later. For the moment keep in mind that subjunctive (which is roughly equivalent to the English infinitive) is as important as the indicative for communication and therefore a necessary part of levels A1-A2 (see Chapter 9).

2.2.4 Voice

Statements like I go home or I am coming from school are essential for everyday communication. Accordingly verbs meaning “to go” or “to come” are basic in language learning, and usually they can be found in the first chapters of any relevant teaching method. Here are the Modern Greek versions of these verbs:
These verbs represent voice distinctions in Modern Greek. Like gender divides nouns, so voice divides verbs into two major inflectional groups. Πάω represents the “active” voice. Έρχομαι represents the “passive” (or “medio-passive”) voice. Every Modern Greek verb must fall on either one of the two categories according to its ending in the first person singular of the present tense (as a dictionary entry, in other words).

Grammar terminology might be misleading at this point (I guess you all had to go through exercises on the passive voice in English), so I must make the following point: The term “voice” as used in this context is related to form, not meaning. The verb έρχομαι is a “passive” verb because of its ending, not because of its meaning (personally, I see nothing “passive” in a motion verb). And the same holds for other verbs of this category like the following:

(19) είμαι (“to be”) / θυμάμαι (“to remember”)

Your main concern at levels A1-A2 will be “active”, not “passive” verbs. Nevertheless you cannot avoid basic “passive” verbs like είμαι, έρχομαι, θυμάμαι. Considering “passive” verbs, keep in mind the following:

- “Active” and “passive” verbs are structured along the same grammatical features. Like “active” verbs, “passive” verbs also contain information about person, number and the rest. Like “active” verbs again, “passive” verbs are structured along an imperfective and a perfective stem. So what was said in Units 2.2.1 on page 26 -2.2.3 on page 30 holds for the “passive” voice as well.
- The endings of the two groups seem to be totally different, but in fact they are not. As you will find out by the end of levels A1-A2, the Modern Greek verbal system is based on economy: It “recycles” endings, changing other parts of the verb (such as the stem, check 15a-15b on page 29) in order to produce a great variety of forms. Therefore the Modern Greek verbal system is a field which addresses reason rather than memory. As long as you understand some basic rules and memorize a few models, you will be able to do things properly.
Street Food

Street food is here to remind us of gender distinctions in Modern Greek: A masculine (ο γύρος), a feminine (η τυρόπιτα) and a neuter (το κουλούρι) represent the basic trio of Modern Greek street food.

Κουλούρι and τυρόπιτα stand for a late breakfast (most Greeks have only coffee in the morning and then they eat something around 11 a.m.). Κουλούρι, a ring made of bread dough with sesame sprinkled on top (it looks somewhat like the New York bagel), is sold at stands on the street or in bakeries. Τυρόπιτα is the most famous instance of a series of πίτα, which is basically a baked sandwich of flat pastry dough or strudel leaves and various fillings that give every πίτα its name (for example, σπανακόπιτα is a pie filled with spinach). All sorts of πίτα are sold in bakeries or specialized shops (the name is τυροπιτάδικο, because τυρόπιτα is the queen of such pies).

Unlike κουλούρι and τυρόπιτα, γύρος is preferred for lunch or dinner. Γύρος basically consists of slivers of roasted meat cut from a huge meat loaf on a vertical spit that goes around next to the fire (γύρος derives from γυρίζω, a verb meaning “to go round”, “to turn”). Γύρος is served in a πίτα (here flat bread dough) usually with tomato, sliced onion and τζατζίκι (a thick sauce made of Greek yoghurt, cucumber, vinegar, olive oil, and lots of garlic). Γύρος is sold in specialized shops (the most common word for such shops is σουβλατζίδικο).

Whatever your taste in street food is, keep in mind the following: Τυρόπιτα and κουλούρι are morning food, γύρος is afternoon and evening food. You are perfectly entitled to have a κουλούρι in the afternoon and a γύρος in the morning, but they will not be as fresh and delicious as they are when the time is right.

SUMMARY

Apart from their (lexical) meaning, Modern Greek verbs and nouns carry lots of grammar inside them, basically as part of their endings. Chapter 2 introduces main grammatical features of nouns and verbs, such as gender and case (for nouns), or tense and aspect (for verbs).

KEY WORDS

nouns, verbs, inflection, stem/ending, grammatical features, number, person, gender, case, aspect, tense, modality/mood, voice, optional subject
EXERCISES
1. After the animal world, let's visit the world of fruit, vegetables and roots. Match the following nouns with the pictures.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. η ντομάτα</td>
<td>a.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. η πατάτα</td>
<td>b.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. το καρότο</td>
<td>c.</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. το μπρόκολο</td>
<td>d.</td>
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<td>5. η μπανάνα</td>
<td>e.</td>
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<td>6. το σπανάκι</td>
<td>f.</td>
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<td>7. το λεμόνι</td>
<td>g.</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. ο ανανάς</td>
<td>h.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Here are some basic Modern Greek verbs. Check the sentences and then match the verbs with their meaning.

- τρώω φρούτα
- ακούω μουσική
- γράφω μέιλ
• παίζω κιθάρα
• πίνω καφέ
• πάω σινεμά

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. τρώω</td>
<td>a. “to play”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. ακούω</td>
<td>b. “to eat”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. γράφω</td>
<td>c. “to drink”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. παίζω</td>
<td>d. “to go”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. πίνω</td>
<td>e. “to listen”, “to hear”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 πάω</td>
<td>f. “to write”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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