

Making Sense of Gk. Words (for Word Studies)

Inflection/Morphology

Greek is an inflected language. This means that Greek words often change form (morph). There is a most simple, base form of a word that carries the basic meaning of the word. Certain letters and/or syllables (inflections/morphemes) can be added to this base form. These add information to or slightly modify the meaning of the resulting word. These inflections sometimes signify the function of the word in the sentence.

It is helpful to think of inflection like the old Mr. Potato Head™ toy. In this toy, there is a main body (potato) and all the other body parts – such as arms, feet, eyes, etc. – are interchangeable. This is a helpful illustration in that the potato represents the basic form of a word, and all the interchangeable parts represent the inflections. The basic potato head remains the same, but can be changed from happy to sad by interchanging a smile for a frown. In the same way, the word remains the same, but a certain nuance of the word meaning will change with inflection.



Inflections can add meaning to the basic word.

For example:

English indicates the idea of plurality by adding an “s” to the end of words:

“dog”	=	a furry companion that barks and drools
“dogs”	=	more than one dog
dog	+	-s
basic word form		marker of plurality

The addition of the morpheme “-s” to the end of the word in English is the marker of plurality in English. When this is added to a word, the basic meaning stays the same, but the additional information of “more than one” is added.

English indicates the idea of possession by adding “-’s” to the end of a word. The addition of “-’s” is a marker of possession that changes “boy” to “boy’s”, indicating something possessed by the boy.

English indicates past time action by adding “-ed” to the end of words (among other ways to indicate past action). “I jump” becomes “I jumped”, indicating the action took place in the past.

When English adds the inflection “un-” to the beginning of a word, it changes the meaning of a word to its exact opposite or negation. “loving” becomes “unloving”.

These are just a few of the ways that inflection happens in English.

Inflection occurs in a similar manner in Greek, but it is much more common in Greek than in English. The majority of Greek words are inflected in some way.

Example:

ἄνθρωπος = man

ἄνθρωποι = men

ἄνθρωπ- - basic word form meaning “human”

-ος - marker of singular -οι - marker of plural

We will see more examples of inflection in Greek in the sections below.

The point for now is not to memorize the inflections or understand what each inflection means. *The point is first to realize that Greek words inflect (change form), and a student needs to account for the changes in doing word studies.*

Dealing with Inflection

Inflected and Dictionary form

In working with inflections, it is necessary to distinguish two different forms of the word – the inflected form, and the dictionary form.

Inflected Form

There are a variety of possible inflected forms for many Greek words, but the term ‘inflected form’ will refer to the particular form it takes in the New Testament verse being studied. The author has inflected the word to give all the precise meaning nuances intended to be communicated in that particular use of the word.

Dictionary Form

The dictionary form is the most basic (uninflected) form of a word. Just as there will not be a separate dictionary entry for “dog” and “dogs” or for “jump” and “jumped,” there will be only one entry in a word study resource for all the possible inflections of any Greek word. It will listed under the most basic form – the dictionary form.

When studying a particular word, the student will not look up the inflected form, but the dictionary form. For some words (like “dog” and “dogs”), this is not an issue. But some words may be inflected to the point that the inflected form is not similar enough to the dictionary form to be easily found in a Greek dictionary unless the dictionary form is known.

Examples:

Inflected form: γραφήν

Dictionary form: γραφή

This should not be a huge problem to find in a dictionary

Inflected form: λήμψεσθε

Dictionary form: λαμβάνω

This one would be much more difficult to find from the inflected form alone

Inflected form: ὤφθην

Dictionary form: ὁράω

This one would be almost impossible to find (until you learn Greek) without a way to know the dictionary form from the inflected form.

This indicates that the difference between the inflected and dictionary forms is an important concept for the practical task of word studies.

Tools to deal with inflection

Fortunately there are ways to deal with the concept of inflection.

The more difficult way (which is best in the long run) is to take further classes and actually learn the Greek language. Not only will this (after the time consuming task of learning Greek) save time and energy in word studies, but will open access to many nuances of meaning that are just not available using word studies alone.

In the meantime, while the student is just beginning to learn about the Biblical languages, there are tools and skills that will give them access to Greek word studies, including inflection. These will be outlined in detail in the future handouts. The tools and approaches to find the dictionary form are described in the handout entitled “Finding the Greek or Hebrew Word.”

Types of Inflection

Prefix – sometimes a morpheme is added to the beginning of a word.

Example:

θεός = “God, god”

ἄθεος = “without God, one who denies God”

“α-” is a prefix of negation.

Suffix – sometimes a morpheme is added on to the ending of a word.

Example:

ἀκούω = “I am hearing”

ἀκούεις = “You are hearing”

ἀκούει = “He/she/it is hearing”

“ω”, “εις”, and “ει” are all suffixes indicating who is doing the action (the subject) of the verb.

Infix – an Infix is a morpheme added into the middle of the word.

Greek does not have any true infixes, but because Greek can use more than one prefix or suffix, it often appears that something in the middle of a word has changed.

Example:

ἀκούω = “I am hearing”

ἀκούσω = “I will be hearing”

“σ” is a suffix that indicates future time, which is added to the end of the root “ἀκού-” and before the (other) suffix “-ω” (marker of subject “I”).

Stem/root change – sometimes the basic word changes form in certain circumstances. Often what was once a separate word replaces an inflection of the word. For instance, in English, the feminine form of “prince” is “princess”, but the feminine form of “king” is not “kingess”. Rather a separate word (“queen”) has replaced the feminine inflection of “king”. Likewise in Greek, sometimes the basic form changes, but it changes in predictable ways.

Example:

ἐρχόμαι = “I am going/coming”

ἦλθόν = “I was going/coming”

“ἦλθ-” is considered to be the past tense form of “ερχ-” even though it technically comes from a different word.

Greek can use multiple inflections on the same word to change the meaning in a variety of ways.

Example:

ἀκούω = “I am hearing”

ἀκούσω = “I will be hearing”

ἤκουσα = “I was hearing”

ἀκούσθην = “I will be heard”

At this point, *don't worry about the different forms of inflections and their meanings. There are word study tools which will tell you all the inflections. The handout on Greek grammar will help you account for the ways in which these inflections change the meaning of the word* (once the tools tell you how the word is inflected).

Functions of Inflections

Inflections can add or modify the basic meaning of a word in a variety of ways. The functions of the various inflections will be covered in much more detail in the Greek Grammar outline. This section is just to introduce the kinds of functions that the various inflections can signify. These are just examples in two general categories, and don't cover all the possible functions of different inflections of different varieties of words.

Nouns (and words with similar functions)

Greek nouns inflect for three general categories that are abbreviated **GNC**, which stands for gender, number and case.

Gender

Masculine – male people and animals, but objects and concepts are sometimes characterized as masculine

Feminine – female people and animals, but objects and concepts are sometimes characterized as feminine

Neuter – objects and concepts that are not categorized as either masculine or feminine

Number

Singular – only one

Plural – more than one

Case

Inflection for case marks the function of a word in the sentence. This is rare in English, but does occur in pronouns. For instance, in using pronouns to refer to myself, I would use the form “I” if it indicated the one doing the action (“I am seeing my friend Brian”) and the form “me” if it indicated the one receiving the action (“Brian is seeing me”). In English, two different words are used for these functions, but in Greek, a different inflection of the same word would be used. All Greek nouns inflect for function, and there are five possible cases. The names of the cases are *nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, and vocative*. The cases and their function will be explained in more detail in the Greek grammar section, but at this point, just be aware that Greek case inflection highlights the function of the word in a sentence. This is extremely helpful for exegesis, as will be explored later.

Inflection Suffixes

GNC are all indicated with the same inflection. In other words, there is not one inflection to indicate gender and another to indicate case. The same inflection shows GNC.

Examples:

λόγος = “word” (masculine, singular, subject case)

λόγοι = “words” (masculine, plural, subject case)

γραφή = “writing” (feminine, singular, subject case)

γραφαί = “writings” (feminine, plural, direct object case)

γραφῶν = “of writings” (feminine, plural, relational/possession case)

The Word study tools will tell you the GNC of a word, and the Greek Grammar outline will help you to understand the significance of this inflection.

Deciphering GNC in resources

Different resources list the GNC in different ways. Sometimes they change the order (e.g. CGN instead of GNC) or use slightly different abbreviations. With just a little care, there should be no problem figuring these out. For example, καρδίαν is listed as:

acc. sg. f. n.	in Perschbacher’s Analytical Lexicon
acc. sing.	In Moulton’s Analytical Lexicon
noun accusative feminine singular	in Bibleworks
nasf	in PC Study Bible
noun accusative singular feminine	in Logos
ASF	on greekbible.com

Verbs (and words with similar function)

Greek verbs inflect for five general categories that are abbreviated **TVMPN**, which stands for tense, voice, mood, person and number.

Tense

Tense in Greek is similar in some ways to English tense but different in others. Like English, Greek tense sometimes (not always) tells the time of the action. Greek tense can also signify the type of action, whether it is an ongoing, continuous action, or not. Greek has five major tenses, *present*, *future*, *imperfect*, *perfect*, and *aorist*, all of which will be explained in more detail in the Greek outline section. In word studies, it is important to notice, not only the meaning of the action, but also when and how the author is telling the action takes place. This means that accounting for tense is part of responsible word studies.

Voice

The voice of a verb tells the relationship of the subject to the action of the verb. For instance, voice tells whether the subject does the action (active voice) or receives the action (passive voice). There are three voices in Greek, *active*, *passive*, and *middle*. The meaning of the sentences “Brad hit” and “Brad was hit” are not the same, so inflection for voice is part of what the author indicates.

Mood

The mood of a verb tells its relationship to reality/actuality. Mood tells whether the action happens or might happen, or is desired to happen, etc. Greek verbs have four possible moods: *indicative*, *subjunctive*, *imperative* and *optative*. It makes an obvious difference in meaning whether the author is saying that an action takes place, an action might take place, or an action is commanded. Therefore, inflection for mood is an important part of communication, and should be noticed in word studies.

Person

The person of a verb tells the relationship of the subject of the verb (the one doing the action) to the speaker or author. Greek verbs (unlike English) indicate who or what is doing the action as part of the inflection of the verb itself. There are three possible categories of person: *1st*, *2nd*, and *3rd* person. First person indicates that the author is the one doing the action. “I am running. We are running” Second person indicates that the author is speaking to the one doing the action. “You are running.” Third person indicates that someone other than the author or reader is doing the action. “He is running. She is running. They are running.”

Number

The number of a verb (in conjunction with person) tells who or what is doing the action of the verb (the subject). Just like with nouns, the two possibilities are *singular* and *plural*.

Greek verbs do not inflect for gender. Therefore, in Greek “he is speaking” and “she is speaking” would have the exact same form. The gender of the subject can be found in the noun functioning as the subject or in the wider context, but is not indicated by the verb inflection.

Deciphering TVMPN in resources

Different resources list the TVMPN in different ways. Sometimes they change the order (e.g. PNTVM instead of TVMPN) or use slightly different abbreviations. With just a little care, there should be no problem figuring these out. For example, λήμψεσθε is listed as:

2 pers. Pl. fut. Mid. Dep. Indic.	in Perschbacher
verb indicative future middle deponent 2 nd person plural	in Bibleworks
vifd2p	in PC Study Bible
verb future middle indicative second person plural	in Logos
verb 2 nd future middle indicative plural	on greekbible.com

Various other types of inflections for other words will be covered in the Greek Grammar outline. Already this probably seems like an overwhelming amount of information. Remember that *the point is not to remember and recognize all the possible inflections, but to be exposed to the possible ways that a word may inflect and the fact that these changes are significant for meaning and should not be ignored.*

The importance of inflection

Just like “jump” does not have the same exact meaning as “jumped”, the meaning of any Greek word is somehow changed with each inflection. *In order to know the meaning of any Greek word, the basic dictionary meaning and the various inflections must all be taken into account in order to form the correct understanding of the meaning of any Greek word in the New Testament.*