

Toward an Open Digital Tutorial for Ancient Greek v. 2.0

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Abstract

At the meeting of the Digital Classics Association in April of 2013, I described my work-in-progress on a digital tutorial for Ancient Greek. My goal is to create a self-guided computer tutorial that people can use to learn Ancient Greek on their own in the the same way that those studying a modern language can use programs such as Rosetta Stone, Duolingo, Babbel.com, Mango Languages, etc. This article briefly details the work that has been completed since 2013, describes some of the ways that the tutorial has been successful, and explores challenges that remain to be addressed for the tutorial.

INTRODUCTION

At the meeting of the Digital Classics Association in April of 2013, I described my work-in-progress on a digital tutorial for ancient Greek. This tutorial is built around a late nineteenth-century textbook — John Williams White's *First Greek Book* — and it provides a complete introductory curriculum for Ancient Greek. It is available online for free to any interested user at <http://daedalus.umkc.edu/FirstGreekBook>. I also use the tutorial in conjunction with the Blackboard Learning Management System for my Ancient Greek courses at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

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At the time that I first presented this work, the tutorial was 50%-60% complete, and the first cohort of UMKC students was completing a three-semester sequence of Ancient Greek with the tutorial as their primary textbook. This article describes the current state of the tutorial, explores some of the ways that the tutorial has been successful, and discusses challenges that remain to be addressed for the tutorial.

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THE CURRENT STATE OF THE TUTORIAL

In its current form, the tutorial consists of eighty static HTML pages that contain drill and practice exercises for the vocabulary, grammar, and translation activities in each chapter. Users track their progress through the tutorial by earning virtual “drachmas” for completing the drill and practice exercises. These drachmas fade over time, helping users track when they should review the material that they have previously studied.^[1]

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Because the tutorial is freely available online, it has reached a much broader audience than I ever would have obtained with a traditional textbook. In 2014, 15,178 unique individuals used just over 58,000 pages in the tutorial. In 2015, the audience grew to 25,810 users who viewed just over 77,000 pages. My recent study of the usage patterns in the tutorial from 2014 identified four types of users for the tutorial: a large number of casual browsers who view the first pages of the tutorial and decide not to use it further, a substantial portion of users who begin the tutorial and trail off someplace around chapter 15, a small group who completes about half of the tutorial, and an even smaller collection of users who complete the entire program.^[2]

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The tutorial is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License that allows anyone to download and repurpose any of the material in the tutorial. All of the vocabulary and grammatical paradigms are available for download as tab-delimited Unicode text files so that students and colleagues can incorporate the material into their own learning management systems or use the material as the basis for new digital

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pedagogical tools.

The creation of the tutorial has also allowed me to generate a more sustainable model for ancient language instruction that helps interested students pursue the study of Ancient Greek. Prior to the introduction of the tutorial, I taught our three-semester introductory Greek course sequentially. This meant that students could only start taking Greek once every three semesters and those who wanted to continue had no opportunity to step away from their studies for a semester. The digital tutorial allows us to offer all three Greek courses in parallel online every semester so that students can begin at any time during their academic career and take a semester off if necessary. This structure has raised our overall student headcount in Greek courses and allowed us to provide a more flexible way to meet the needs of students in our program who want to study Greek.

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LOOKING FORWARD

As the tutorial enters its third year, user feedback, student comments, and usage patterns suggest several areas that will be productive for continued work in the future: creating more robust introductory material that introduces students to the fundamentals of Greek and English grammar, building exercises that help illustrate the connections between ancient Greek and contemporary English, and — most importantly — adding audio recordings for the vocabulary and translation exercises.

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Because the Greek tutorial is based on a textbook that was originally published in the late nineteenth century, the source material begins with the assumption that students have had some exposure to Latin and have a basic understanding of case grammar. When I reimagined White's textbook as a digital tutorial, I added some additional material to more fully explain case grammar, but no formal exercises beyond those already in the book. Students with limited formal training in English grammar sometimes struggle connecting Greek forms like the dative case with ideas such as the English indirect object. Several recent print books have addressed this need to explain ancient grammatical structures in the context of contemporary English grammar for students of both Classical and Biblical Greek, but there are few supplementary grammatical materials openly available online.^[3] I would like to create an open-access series of exercises for my students to take either before they begin the tutorial or as supplementary material in case they find themselves struggling once they begin the work.

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In addition to the need to connect ancient and contemporary grammatical structures, students and other tutorial users have also expressed an interest in material that will help them gain a broader understanding of the connections between Ancient Greek and contemporary English vocabulary. There are several excellent textbooks that accomplish this in print, particularly for medical terminology.^[4] Most Greek textbooks including White's mention the relationship between Greek and English vocabulary, but these etymological notes are generally presented as a separate element or in footnotes. I would like to create exercises in the tutorial that integrate English vocabulary more closely with Ancient Greek vocabulary.

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Finally, the tutorial needs to include audio material. Since students and tutorial users are working on their own, they repeatedly express frustration with the lack of guidance for the pronunciation of words and phrases that they would get from an instructor in a face-to-face classroom. I point these students to existing resources such as the pronunciation guide and audio recordings associated with Donald Mastronarde's *Introduction to Attic Greek*, the excellent audio CD associated with the Joint Association of Classics Teacher's *Reading Greek* series, and the recordings hosted by the Society for the Oral Reading of Greek and Latin.^[5] Ideally, the tutorial itself would contain audio resources with readings of every vocabulary word and sentence that is available for translation. Usage data suggests that this work, at least in an initial stage, would be most profitably focused on comprehensive coverage of the first fifteen chapters with recordings for the later chapters coming later.

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These audio recordings are my current top priority for future work on the tutorial. My hope is that I can work with students at UMKC to create an "Ancient Languages Workshop" on the model of the Manuscripts, Inscriptions, and Documents Club at the College of the Holy Cross that allows undergraduate students to engage in research for the Homer Multitext project^[6] or the Linothorax Project undergraduate research at the University of Wisconsin at Green Bay

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that is attempting to reconstruct a type of ancient Greek armor.^[7]

In this model, work would be distributed among cohorts of undergraduates who could record the vocabulary and translation exercises, format the recordings for long-term preservation in the sound archive at UMKC, and encode the audio links into the tutorial. Augmenting the existing tutorial with a comprehensive set of audio recordings of every sentence and vocabulary word would result in a sound library containing approximately 1,000 individually spoken words and some 1,600 spoken sentences of Ancient Greek. This audio library would bring the tutorial closer to parity with resources such as Duolingo, Babel, Mango Languages, etc. that are available for independent learners of modern languages. It would hopefully also take advantage of the accessibility provided by open-access publication to further expand the number of people who are able to independently study Greek with this tutorial.

Notes

[1] A full description of the tutorial can be found in [Rydberg-Cox 2013].

[2] See [Rydberg-Cox 2016].

[3] See [Mondi and Corrigan 2013] and [Mounce 2013].

[4] See [Green 2014]; [McKeown and Smith 2016]; and [Dunmore et al. 2004].

[5] See [Joint Association of Classical Teachers 2007]; [Joint Association of Classical Teachers 2008]; and [Mastronarde 2013]. See also the recordings provided by the Society for the Oral Reading of Greek and Latin at <http://www.rhapsodes.fl.vt.edu>

[6] See <http://wp.chs.harvard.edu/surs/2014/08/01/homer-multitext-project/>

[7] <https://www.uwgb.edu/aldreteg/Linothorax.html>

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