

The Alpha-privative Prefix

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§1. ALPHA-PRIVATIVE PREFIX. The so-called alpha-privative is a prefix that is used to form adjectives. In Greek this prefix has two forms. The simple vowel α - is used when the prefix is added to stems beginning with a consonant; the sequence $\alpha\nu$ - is used before stems beginning with a vowel.

§2. Types of formations. The alpha-privative prefix is found in two different types of formations, both of which produce adjectives.

§2.1 α -/ $\alpha\nu$ - + ADJECTIVE. Type 1 involves the formation of adjectives by means of prefixing the alpha-privative to an existing adjective stem. The basic rule of formation is as follows:

α -, $\alpha\nu$ - + adjective ==> adjective
 α - + δυνατός, -ή, -όν "possible" ==> αδύνατος, -ον
 α - + βατός, -ή, -ον "passable" ==> άβατος, -ον

The meaning contributed by the alpha-privative prefix can be broadly defined as one of NEGATION. This can be formulated as

X (= meaning of adjective) ==> "not X, unX, imX"

Thus the meaning of αδύνατος, -ον can be rendered as "impossible", and the meaning of άβατος, -ον as "impassable".

§2.1.1 EXERCISE. Complete the following exercise. Based on the meaning of the adjective in the left-hand column, determine the meaning of the adjective with the alpha-privative prefix.

πιστός, -ή, -όν "faithful, trustworthy"	άπιστος, -ον
νοητός, -ή, -όν "conceivable"	άνόητος, -ον
καυστός, -ή, -όν "burnt"	άκαυστος, -ον
άξιος, -α, -ον "worthy"	άνάξιος, -ον
όσιος, -α, -ον "holy"	άνόσιος, -ον
χρηστός, -ή, -όν "useful"	άχρηστος, -ον

§2.2 α -/ $\alpha\nu$ - + NOUN. The second type of privative formation involves the derivation of adjectives from nouns. These formations typically function as POSSESSIVE adjectives. Thus, for the adjective άψυχος, -ον, which is formed from the noun ψυχή "spirit", the basic

meaning is "having no spirit" or "lacking spirit". The basic rule for this formation is given below:

ἀ-, ἀν- + noun ==> adjective

ἀν- + ἄριστον "breakfast" ==> ἀνάριστος, -ον "without breakfast"

The formula for interpretation is

X (= meaning of noun) ==> "having no X, possessing no X, lacking X, without X"

Most of the adjectives that have been encountered thus far are built from adjectives or nouns belonging to the 1st or 2nd declensions. Although alpha-privative adjectives built to other stem types are less frequent, they do occur. The adjective ἀσθενής, -ές "possessing no strength, weak" is an s-stem adjective built from an s-stem noun σθένος 'strength'. The adjective ἄφρων, ἄφρονος (gen sg) "having no sense, delirious" is built from the n-stem φρήν.

§2.2.1 EXERCISE. Determine the nouns from which the following adjectives are derived. Give the meaning of the adjective forms.

ἄθεος, -ον
ἄθυμος, -ον
ἄνοδος, -ον
ἄσιτος, -ον
ἄγλωττος, -ον

§2.3. DECLENSIONAL CLASS. If you go back to exercises §2.1.1 and §2.2.1 and look at the declensional classes of the alpha-privative adjectives you'll note that all of the adjectives built from them belong to the 2nd declension type where the FEM gender forms are exactly the same as the MASC. Thus, one important feature in the formation of adjectives with the alpha-privative prefix is the change in the declensional class for the a-stem feminine gender forms, e.g. γλῶττα 'tongue' ⇒ ἄγλωττος (M/F), -ον (N).

§2.4. ACCENTUATION. Before concluding our discussion of these adjective formations, it is necessary to say something about the position of the accent. It should not have escaped your notice that the forms given in EXERCISES §2.1.1 and §2.2.1 have the accent on the antepenultimate syllable, which is in many cases the privative element, regardless of where the accent is on the noun or adjective from which they are built, e.g., πείρα 'trial' ⇒ ἄπειρος, -ον 'without

trial'. The placement of the accent on the leftmost syllable permitted by the quantity of the ultima is to be viewed as an important part of the formation of these adjectives.

§2.4.1 EXERCISE. Form the alpha-privative adjectives from the following nouns and give the meaning(s) of these formations. Be careful to use the appropriate inflectional endings and be careful of the placement of accent.

φωνή "voice"
φίλος "friend"
νόσος "sickness, illness"
πόνος "labor, toil"
φόβος "fear"