

## LESSON 32

# Temporal Constructions with *πρίν*

### 32.1. Introduction

In classical Attic Greek, *πρίν* introduces two basically different constructions, which express action subsequent to that of the leading clause.

When *πρίν* functions like a preposition and introduces an Infinitive phrase, it usually means ‘before’, and usually occurs in a positive sentence.

When *πρίν* functions as a conjunction and introduces a clause with a finite verb, it usually means ‘until’, and usually occurs in a negative sentence. *πρίν* may be preceded by a redundant *πρίν* (Homer) or by a redundant *πρότερον* or *πρόσθεν* (Attic) in the leading clause.

*πρὶν(...)*ἢ (‘earlier than’) is used with the same function as *πρίν*, mainly in Herodotus, and mostly with Infinitive; but Herodotus also uses *πρὶν(...)*ἢ with Indicative and with Subjunctive (without ἄν). Similarly, especially in Herodotus and Thucydides, *πρότερον(...)*ἢ may be used with Infinitive, or with Subjunctive without ἄν (mainly in Herodotus), or sometimes with Indicative.

### 32.2. *πρίν* with an Infinitive Phrase

The Subject of the Infinitive, if it is the same as the Subject of the leading verb, is normally not expressed; and if the Subject of the Infinitive has an adjective agreeing with it, or a Complement referring to it, the adjective or Complement is in the Nominative Case. However, sometimes an unexpressed Subject for the Infinitive is not the same as the Subject of the leading verb, but must be understood from the context. The Subject of the Infinitive, if it is different to the Subject of the leading verb, is normally expressed and is in the Accusative Case. Because *πρίν* denotes a chronological limit, it frequently introduces an *Aorist* Infinitive indicating a point of time.

... ἃ **πρὶν μολεῖν** δεῦρ' ἐκμεμόχθηκεν φράσω ... (A.Pr. 825.)  
 ... *I shall tell what she has struggled through **before she came** here ...*

πρὶν with Aorist Infinitive occurs in a positive sentence. The Subject of μολεῖν is not expressed, since it is the same as the Subject of the leading verb ἐκμεμόχθηκεν.

... **πρὶν ἔκπυστος γενέσθαι** προσῆλθε τῇ τῶν Μεγαρέων πόλει, λαθὼν τοὺς Ἀθηναίους ὄντας περὶ τὴν θάλασσαν ... (Th. 4.70.2.)

... ***before he was detected**, he approached the city of the Megarians, escaping the notice of the Athenians since they were near the sea ...*

πρὶν with Aorist Infinitive and Nominative Complement occurs in a positive sentence.

ὁ δὲ πεισθεὶς πορευομένους αὐτοὺς διὰ τῆς Θράκης ἐπὶ τὸ πλοῖον ᾧ ἔμελλον τὸν Ἑλλήσποντον περαιώσειν, **πρὶν ἐσβαίνειν** ξυλλαμβάνει ... (Th. 2.67.3.)

*And he was persuaded and, as they were travelling through Thrace to the boat on which they were intending to cross the Hellespont, he seized them **before they (could) embark** ...*

πρὶν with Imperfect Infinitive, whose unexpressed Subject is not the same as the Subject of the leading verb ξυλλαμβάνει (Hist. Pres.).

**οὐδ'** εἴ μοι τόσα δοίη ὅσα ψάμαθός τε κόνις τε,  
**οὐδέ** κεν ὥς ἔτι θυμὸν ἐμὸν πείσει Ἄγαμέμνων,  
**πρὶν** γ' ἀπὸ πᾶσαν ἐμοὶ **δόμηναι** θυμαλγέα λώβην.  
 (Hom.II. 9.385–387.)

***Not even** if he were to give me so much as the sand and the dust,  
**not even** so would Agamemnon yet persuade my spirit,  
**before** at least **he repaid** me (for) all the heart-rending dishonour.*

πρὶν with Aorist Infinitive occurs in a negative sentence.

... πολὺ πλείων ἐλπίς ἐστὶν ἕτερον ἀποστῆναι **πρίν** ἐκείνον ἐκπολιορκηθῆναι. (Isoc. 4.141.)

... *there is much greater expectation that another <may> revolt **before that <man> is forced-to-surrender-under-siege.***

πρίν with Accusative and Aorist (Pass.) Infinitive occurs in a positive sentence.

### 32.3. πρίν with a Finite Verb

#### 32.3.1. Definite

When πρίν with a finite verb refers to a definite time, the verb is in the Indicative Mood and is usually in the Past Aorist Tense.

... οὐδ' ἀπῆλθε, **πρίν** ... τοὺς βαρβάρους **ἔπαυσε** ὑβρίζοντας. (Isoc. 15.83.)

... ***nor** did he go away, **until** ... **he stopped** the foreigners (from) acting insolently.*

πρίν with Past Aorist Indicative occurs in a negative sentence.

παραπλήσια δὲ καὶ οἱ ἐπὶ τῶν νεῶν αὐτοῖς ἔπασχον, **πρίν** γε δὴ οἱ Συρακόσιοι καὶ οἱ σύμμαχοι ἐπὶ πολὺ ἀντισχούσης τῆς ναυμαχίας **ἔτρεψάν** τε τοὺς Ἀθηναίους καὶ ... **κατεδίωκον** ἐς τὴν γῆν. (Th. 7.71.5.)

*And those on the ships also were experiencing much the same as they <were>, **until** finally the Syracusans and their allies, after the naval battle had lasted for a long time, **put** the Athenians **to flight** and ... **vigorously pursued** them to land.*

πρίν with Past Aorist Indicative occurs in a positive sentence. This construction is much less common than Indicative in a negative sentence. γε δὴ ('finally') is literally 'at least indeed'.

### 32.3.2. Indefinite

#### 32.3.2.1. Primary Sequence

When πρίν with a finite verb refers to an indefinite time in Primary sequence, the verb is regularly in the Subjunctive Mood, and in Attic (especially in prose) normally has ἄν.

στερέας τ'  
**οὔποτ'** ἀπειλὰς πτήξας τόδ' ἐγὼ  
 καταμηνύσω, **πρίν ἄν** ἐξ ἀγρίων  
 δεσμῶν **χαλάσῃ** ποινὰς τε τίνειν  
 τῆσδ' αἰκείας **ἐθελήσῃ**. (A.Pr. 173–177.)

*and never,*  
*cowering before his harsh threats, shall I*  
*make this known, **until he releases** <me>*  
*from savage bonds and **becomes willing***  
*to make recompense for this maltreatment.*

πρίν ἄν with Aorist Subjunctive occurs in a negative sentence.

ὥστε χρὴ σκοπεῖν τινα αὐτὰ καὶ **μὴ** μετεώρω τῇ πόλει ἀξιοῦν  
 κινδυνεύειν καὶ ἀρχῆς ἄλλης ὀρέγεσθαι, **πρίν** ἢν ἔχομεν  
**βεβαιώσώμεθα** ... (Th. 6.10.5.)

*And so one should examine them [= the points just mentioned] and **not***  
*think it right to put the city at risk when it is at sea and to reach for another*  
*empire, **until we make secure** the one which we have ...*

πρίν and Aorist Subjunctive (without ἄν) occurs in a negative sentence (μὴ). Homer does not yet use ἄν or κε in this construction. The Subjunctive without ἄν occurs occasionally in Herodotus, Thucydides and Attic drama.

τῇ πόλει ... κινδυνεύειν: lit. 'to run a risk to (the disadvantage of) the city'. μετεώρω is metaphorical.

ὄλοιο **μὴ** πω, **πρίν μάθοιμ'** εἰ καὶ πάλιν  
 γνώμην μετοίσεις· (S.Ph. 961–962.)

*May you perish—**not** yet, **until I learn** whether you will actually change*  
*your mind again.*

In this negative sentence (μὴ), πρίν and Optative (without ἄν) depends on an Optative of Wish in the Main clause ('assimilation of Mood').

### 32.3.2.2. Past Sequence

In Past sequence, πρίν and Optative (without ἄν) occurs only in suboblique constructions—that is, where the Temporal clause is included in reported discourse (whether in a clause introduced by ὅτι or ὡς, or in a phrase with Infinitive or Participle), or depends on another Optative clause (cf. §32.3.2.1. Primary Sequence, last example). Vivid constructions with πρίν or πρὶν ἄν and Subjunctive also occur in Past sequence, but again only in suboblique constructions. All the following passages contain negative expressions antecedent to the πρίν clauses: ‘not ... until’.

... οὐχ ἠγοῦντ’ οὐδὲν οἰοί τ’ εἶναι κινεῖν τῶν καθεστώτων, πρὶν ἐκποδῶν ἐκεῖνος αὐτοῖς γένοιτο. (Isoc. 16.5.)

... they did **not** think that they were able to make **any** change in the constitution, **until** that <man> **got** out of their way.

πρίν and Optative (without ἄν) depends on the Nominative and Infinitive construction of reported thought after a negated Main verb.

παρανίσχον δὲ καὶ οἱ ἐκ τῆς πόλεως Πλαταιῆς ἀπὸ τοῦ τείχους φρυκτοὺς πολλοὺς ... ὅπως ἀσαφῆ τὰ σημεῖα τῆς φρυκτωρίας τοῖς πολεμίοις ἦ καὶ μὴ βοηθοῖεν, ... πρὶν σφῶν οἱ ἄνδρες οἱ ἐξιόντες διαφύγοιεν καὶ τοῦ ἀσφαλοῦς ἀντιλάβοιντο. (Th. 3.22.8.)

*But the Plataeans in [lit. ‘out of’] the city also raised-in-answer from the wall many beacons ... in order that the enemy’s beacon-signals might be unclear, and that ... they [= Thebans] might **not** come to help, **until** their own [= Plataeans’] men who were going out **escaped** and **reached** safety.*

πρίν and Optative (without ἄν) depends on a negative Purpose clause with Optative.

εἶπον μηδένα τῶν ὀπισθεν κινεῖσθαι, πρὶν ἂν ὁ πρόσθεν ἡγήται ... (X. Cyr. 2.2.8.)

*I said that **none** of those at the rear was to move, **until** the one in front <of him> **led the way** ...*

πρὶν ἄν and Subjunctive in a Vivid construction depends on a negative reported command.

... ἐποίησαντο νόμον τε καὶ κατάρην **μὴ πρότερον** θρέψειν κόμην Ἀργείων **μηδένα, μηδὲ** τὰς γυναῖκάς σφι χρυσοφορήσειν, **πρὶν** Θυρέας **ἀνασώσωνται**. (Hdt. 1.82.7.)

... *they made a law and a curse that **no one** of the Argives would grow his hair, **nor** their women wear gold **any earlier, until** they recovered Thyrae.*

πρὶν and Subjunctive (without ἄν) in a Vivid construction depends on a negative reported command with anticipatory πρότερον.

## References

Goodwin (1889), *Syntax of the moods and tenses of the Greek verb*, §§621–661.

Smyth (1956), *Greek grammar*, §§2430–2461.

## EXERCISE 32

Translate the following passages.

1. βασιλεὺς δὲ Δαρεῖος, πρὶν μὲν αἰχμαλώτους γενέσθαι τοὺς Ἑρετριέας, ἐνείχέ σφι δεινὸν χόλον, οἷα ἀρξάντων ἀδικίης προτέρων τῶν Ἑρετριέων·

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Ἑρετριεύς, -έως, ὁ	<i>Eretrian</i>
ἐνείχειν χόλον	<i>to harbour a grudge (against) (+ Dat.)</i>
σφι (enclitic)	<i>them (Dat. pl.)</i>
οἷα (adverbial)	<i>inasmuch as (+ Partc. phrase)</i>

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2. ὦ σχέτλι', ἣ ἵτολμήσατ' ἀντ' ἐμοῦ τι  
δοῦναι τὰ τεύχη τὰμά, πρὶν μαθεῖν ἐμοῦ;

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σχέτλι(ε)	<i>scoundrel (Voc.)</i>
ἵτολμήσατ'	<i>ἵτολμήσατε (pl. despite Voc. sg.)</i>
τεῦχος, -ους, τό	<i>(mostly pl.) weapon(s)</i>

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3. οὔτοι γὰρ πρὶν ἢ Σκύθας ἀπικέσθαι ἦρχον τῆς Ἀσίας.

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Σκύθης, -ου, ὁ	<i>Scythian</i>
ἀπικνεῖσθαι	<i>to arrive</i> (Ionic π for Attic φ)

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4. καὶ Μεσσηνίους μὲν πολιορκοῦντες οὐ πρότερον ἐπαύσαντο, πρὶν ἐξέλαβον ἐκ τῆς χώρας ...

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πολιορκεῖν	<i>to besiege</i>
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5. οἱ δὲ Ἕλληνες τὴν τε ἵππασίαν ἐθαύμαζον ἐκ τοῦ στρατοπέδου ὀρῶντες καὶ ὃ τι ἐποίουν, πρὶν Νίκαρχος Ἀρκὰς ἦκε ...

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ἵππασία, -ας, ἡ	<i>cavalry manoeuvre</i>
ἀμφιγνοεῖν	<i>to be doubtful about</i> (+ Acc.; here with double augment)
Ἀρκὰς, -άδος, ὁ, (ἡ)	<i>Arcadian</i> (proper adj.)

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6. οὐκ ἔστιν αἴκισμ' οὐδὲ μηχανήμ', ὅτω προτρέψεταιί με Ζεὺς γεγωνῆσαι τάδε, πρὶν ἂν χαλασθῇ δεσμὰ λυμαντήρια.

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αἴκισμα, -ατος, τό	<i>torture</i>
προτρέπειν	<i>to impel</i> (Act. and Mid.)
γεγωνῆσαι	<i>to declare</i> (Aor. Infin. ending on Perf. stem with Imperf. meaning)
λυμαντήριος, -α, -ον	<i>torturous, excruciating</i>

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7. Well then, *I shall go out of the way of this disaster, before Agaue comes to the house.*

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<i>out of the way</i>	ἐκποδών (adv. + Dat.)
<i>Agaue</i>	Ἀγαύη, -ης, ἡ

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8. Do not groan until you [sg.] learn [this].

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<i>to groan</i>	στενάζειν
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9. ... I decided not to make the voyage secretly,  
until I (had) told you [sg.] ...

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<i>to make</i>	ποιεῖσθαι (Mid.)
<i>voyage</i>	πλοῦς, πλοῦ, ὄ (contracted from πλόος)
<i>secretly</i>	σῆγα (lit. 'in silence')
<i>to tell</i>	φράζειν, Aor. φράσαι

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