

LESSON 11

Wishes

11.1. Wishes for the Future

Wishes for the future are regularly expressed by a verb in the Optative Mood. The usual Aspects are either Imperfect for continuous action or Aorist for momentary action. The Perfect Aspect is normally limited to verbs which are used in the Perfect with an Imperfect meaning. The Intensive ('Fut.') Optative is not used for wishes. Introductory particles often occur with this construction. The negative is μή.

11.1.1. Optative Alone

στέργοι δέ με σωφροσύνα, δώρημα κάλλιστον θεῶν· (E.Med. 636.)
*And **may** moderation, finest gift of the gods, **favour** me.*

εἰ δ' οἷδ' ἄμαρτάνουσι, **μὴ** πλείω κακὰ
πάθειεν ἢ καὶ δρῶσιν ἐκδίκως ἐμέ. (S.Ant. 927–928.)

*But if these men are making a mistake, **may they suffer no more** harm than they are unjustly causing me.*

Negative μή.

11.1.2. εἰ γάρ or εἴθε with Optative

The usual Epic spelling of these terms is αἶ γάρ and αἶθε. After Homer, εἰ γάρ is found mainly in tragedy and especially in responses.

εἰ γὰρ τύχοιεν ὧν φρονοῦσι πρὸς θεῶν
αὐτοῖς ἐκείνοις ἀνοσίοις κομπάσασιν· (A.Th. 550–551.)

***May they obtain** from the gods what they intend,
by reason of those very boasts <so> impious.*

ὧν = τούτων ᾗ.

αἴθ' οὕτως, Εὐμαιε, φίλος Διὶ πατρὶ **γένοιο**
ὥς ἐμοί, ὅττι μ' ἔπαυσας ἄλης καὶ οἰζύος αἰνῆς.
(Hom. *Od.* 15.341–342.)

*May you, Eumaeus, become so dear to father Zeus
as to me, because you stopped me from my wandering and my dreadful misery!*

11.1.3. εἶ or ὥς with Optative

The use of εἶ or ὥς with Optative is more restricted. εἶ alone occurs mainly in poetry, including Homer. An exclamatory use of ὥς also occurs in poetry, especially Homer.

εἶ μοι **ξυνείη** φέροντι μοῖρα τὰν
εὖσεπτον ἀγνείαν λόγων
ἔργων τε πάντων ... (S. *OT* 863–865.)

*May destiny be with me as I attain
reverent purity in all
words and actions ...*

ὥς ἔρις ἔκ τε θεῶν ἔκ τ' ἀνθρώπων **ἀπόλοιτο** ... (Hom. *Il.* 18.107.)
May strife perish from among gods and men ...

11.1.4. πῶς ἄν and τίς ἄν with Optative

Sentences, which are in form questions introduced by πῶς ἄν or τίς ἄν with the Optative, may function as wishes. The question 'How would I ...?' is equivalent to the wish 'May I ...'. And the question 'Who would ...?' is equivalent to the wish 'May someone ...'. The negative in these virtual wishes is μή, not οὐ as in genuine potential Optative constructions.

ὦ Ζεῦ, προγόνων προπάτωρ,
πῶς ἄν τὸν αἰμυλώτατον,
ἐχθρὸν ἄλημα, τοὺς τε δισ-
άρχας ὀλέσσας βασιλῆς,
τέλος **θάνοιμι** καὐτός; (S. *Aj.* 387–391.)

*O Zeus, forefather of my forbears,
may I, after destroying that most wily man,
a hateful trickster, and the jointly
ruling kings, <may I>
finally die myself.*

τίς ἂν δῆτά μοι, τίς ἂν φιλοπόνων
 ἄλιαδᾶν ἔχων ἀύπνους ἄγρας
 ἢ τίς Ὀλυμπιάδων
 θεᾶν, ἢ ῥυτῶν
 Βοσπορίων ποταμῶν,
 τὸν ὠμόθυμον εἴ ποθι
 πλαζόμενον λεύσσω
ἀπύοι; (S.Aj. 879–887.)

*May some one, then, some one of the hard-working
 fishermen maintaining sleepless searches
 or one of the Olympian
 goddesses, or of the rivers
 flowing into the Bosphorus,
 if seeing the savage-hearted man
 wandering somewhere,
 tell me.*

11.2. Unfulfilled Wishes for the Present and the Past

The negative in all the following constructions is μή.

11.2.1. εἰ γάρ or εἴθε with Indicative

This Indicative construction does not yet occur in Homer.

11.2.1.1. Wishes for the Present

Unfulfilled wishes for the present with εἰ γάρ or εἴθε use the Past Imperfect Indicative.

εἰ γάρ τοσαύτην δύναμιν **εἶχον** ὥστε σὴν
 εἰς φῶς πορεύσαι νερτέρων ἐκ δωμάτων
 γυναιῖκα καὶ σοι τήνδε πορσῦναι χάριν. (E.Alc. 1072–1074.)

*If only I had (now) enough strength to convey
 your wife to the light from the dwellings below
 and to provide this favour for you.*

εἴθ' εἶχε φωνὴν εὐφρον' ἀγγέλου δίκην ... (A.Ch. 195.)
If only it had (now) a kindly voice in the manner of a messenger ...

(Electra speaks about the lock of hair found at Agamemnon's tomb.)

11.2.1.2. Wishes for the Past

Unfulfilled wishes for the past with εἰ γάρ or εἴθε use the Past Aorist Indicative.

εἰ γάρ μ' ὑπὸ γῆν νέρθεν θ' Ἄιδου
 τοῦ νεκροδέγμονος εἰς ἀπέραντον
 Τάρταρον **ἤκεν** δεσμοῖς ἀλύτοις
 ἀγρίως πελάσας ... (A.Pr. 153–155.)

*If only, having savagely put me in inescapable bonds,
 he had sent me under the earth
 and beneath Hades, who receives the dead,
 to boundless Tartarus ...*

ὦ Λαΐειον ὦ τέκνον,
εἴθε σ' **εἴθε** σε
 μήποτ' **εἰδόμαν**. (S.OT 1216–1218.)

*Ah! O child of Laius,
 if only, if only
 I had never seen you.*

11.2.2. ὄφελον with Infinitive

Unfulfilled wishes for the present or the past may also be expressed by ὄφελον with an Infinitive. ὄφελον is first person singular Past Aorist Indicative of ὀφείλειν 'to owe'. The idiomatic English equivalent of ὄφελον is 'I ought'. 'Ought' is itself a past form of 'owe' in English, and functions as an Imperfect Subjunctive ('would owe'). In Homer, besides the Past Aorist Indicative ὄφελον, the Past Imperfect Indicative ὄφελλον occurs; both forms may appear without augment, ὄφελον, ὄφελλον. Other forms besides first person singular occur.

11.2.2.1. Wishes for the Present

Unfulfilled wishes for the present with ὄφελον use the Imperfect Infinitive.

ἀλλ' ὄφελε μὲν Κῦρος ζῆν· (X.An. 2.1.4.)
Oh, if only Cyrus were alive.

Lit. 'Oh, Cyrus ought to be alive'.

11.2.2.2. Wishes for the Past

Unfulfilled wishes for the past with ὄφελον generally use the Aorist Infinitive, rarely the Perfect Infinitive. If the reference is to past continuous or repeated action, the Imperfect Infinitive may be used.

ἔμπας τις αὐτήν ἄλλος ὄφελεν λαχεῖν. (A.Pr. 48.)
Nevertheless, if only someone else had obtained it.

λαχεῖν (Aor. Infin.) is the usual construction. αὐτήν refers to Hephaestus's τέχνη.

Ἄτρεΐδη κύδιστε, ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγάμεμνον,
 μὴ ὄφελος λίσσεσθαι ἀμύμονα Πηλεΐωνα,
 μυρία δῶρα διδούς· (Hom.II. 9.697–699.)

*Most honoured son of Atreus, lord of men Agamemnon,
 if only you had not entreated the blameless son of Peleus,
 offering ten thousand gifts.*

Lit. '...you ought not to have entreated...'; λίσσεσθαι (Imperf. Infin.) alludes to repeated or continuous action in the past.

11.2.2.3. Introductory Particles with ὄφελ(λ)ον

εἰ γάρ or εἴθε may introduce a wish expressed by ὄφελον with Infinitive. ὥς is also often used in Homer and rarely in Attic poetry.

Δύσπαρι, εἶδος ἄριστε, γυναιμανές, ἠπεροπευτά,
 αἴθ' ὄφελος ἄγονος τ' ἐμέναι ἄγαμος τ' ἀπολέσθαι.
 (Hom.II. 3.39–40.)

*Bad Paris, excellent in appearance, mad for women, deceiver,
 if only you were unborn and had perished unmarried.*

αἴθ' ὄφελος (Past Aor. Indic.) with ἐμέναι (Infin. 'to be'), then with ἀπολέσθαι (Aor. Infin.), expresses an unfulfilled wish for the present, then for the past.

ὥς ὄφελον θανέειν καὶ πότμον ἐπισπεῖν
αὐτοῦ ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ· (Hom.Od. 14.274–275.)

*If only I had died and had met my fate
there in Egypt!*

ὥς ὄφελον (Past Aor. Indic) with θανέειν and ἐπισπεῖν (Aor. Infin.;
Imperf. ἐφέπειν).

Lit. ‘How I ought to have died...!’

...ὥς μ’ ὄφελ’ ἤματι τῷ ὅτε με πρῶτον τέκε μήτηρ
οἴχεσθαι προφέρουσα κακῇ ἀνέμοιο θύελλα
εἰς ὄρος ἢ εἰς κῦμα πολυφλοίσβοιο θαλάσσης ...
(Hom.II. 6.345–347.)

*...if only on that day, when first my mother bore me,
a bad squall of wind had carried me off and gone
into a mountain or into the swell of the loud-roaring sea ...*

ὥς ... ὄφελ(ε) (Past Aor. Indic.) with οἴχεσθαι (Imperf. Infin. with
Perf. sense).

Lit. ‘how a bad squall ... ought to have gone ...’

11.2.3. An Additional Homeric Construction

In Homer, although the constructions in §11.2.1 are not yet used, unfulfilled wishes for the Present are sometimes expressed by the Imperfect Optative. These wishes are usually introduced by εἰ γάρ or εἴθε.

εἴθ’ ὥς ἠβώοιμι βίη δέ μοι ἔμπεδος εἴη,
ὥς ὀπότε Ἕλίοισι καὶ ἡμῖν νεῖκος ἐτύχθη
ἀμφὶ βοηλασίῃ ... (Hom.II. 11.670–672.)

*If only I were thus young and my strength were firm,
as when a quarrel arose between the Eleans and us
over cattle-rustling ...*

11.3. Reported Wishes

Wishes may be reported in an Infinitive phrase after verbs such as βούλεσθαι, (ἐ)θέλειν and ζητεῖν. When the Subject of the Infinitive is the same as the Subject of the verb of wishing, it is usually not expressed in Greek. If it is expressed, it is Nominative as in §11.4, second example (where καὶ γώ = καὶ ἐγώ). When the Subject of the Infinitive is different to the Subject of the verb of wishing, it is expressed in the Accusative.

γράψαι δὲ **βουλόμεθα** καὶ ὡς δεῖ ὠπλίσθαι τὸν μέλλοντα ἐφ' ἵππου κινδυνεύειν. (X.Eg. 12.1.)

*And **we want to describe** also how the man, who is going to face danger on horseback, needs to have been armed.*

βούλεσθαι + Infinitive only.

οὐ γάρ **σε βουλόμεθα** οὐδὲν ἄχαρι πρὸς Ἀθηναίων **παθεῖν** ἔοντα πρόξεινόν τε καὶ φίλον. (Hdt. 8.143.3.)

*For **we do not want you to suffer** anything unpleasant from the Athenians, since you are our patron and friend.*

βούλεσθαι + Accusative and Infinitive.

11.4. Reported Wishes Instead of Direct Wishes

An unfulfilled wish for the present or the past is occasionally expressed by the Past Imperfect Indicative ἐβουλόμην with Imperfect Infinitive (referring to the present) or Aorist Infinitive (referring to the past). This idiom expresses the wish less directly and therefore more gently.

ἐβουλόμην μὲν οὖν καὶ τὴν βουλήν τοὺς πεντακοσίους καὶ τὰς ἐκκλησίας ὑπὸ τῶν ἐφεστηκότων ὀρθῶς **διοικεῖσθαι** καὶ τοὺς νόμους οὓς ἐνομοθέτησεν ὁ Σόλων περὶ τῆς τῶν ῥητόρων εὐκοσμίας **ἰσχύειν** ... (Aeschin. 3.2.)

*Well then, **I wish** that both the council of the five hundred and the assemblies **were** (now) **being properly organised** by those in charge, and that the laws which Solon framed concerning the proper behaviour of public speakers **were** (now) **in force** ...*

διοικεῖσθαι, ἰσχύειν: Imperfect Infinitive.

ἐβουλόμην, ὧ ἄνδρες, ὥσπερ Ξεναίνετος οὔτοσὶ δύναται ψευδῆ λέγειν θαρραλέως, οὔτω καὶ γὰρ τάληθη πρὸς ὑμᾶς περὶ ὧν ἀμφισβητοῦμεν εἰπεῖν **δυνηθῆναι**. (Is. 10.1.)

I wish, O men, that, just as Xenaenetus here can confidently tell lies, so I too could have told you the truth about the points on which we disagree.

δυνηθῆναι: Aorist Infinitive.

This idiom is made less direct by the use of ἄν with ἐβουλόμην.

ἐβουλόμην μέντ' ἄν αὐτοὺς οὔτω προθύμους εἶναι σῶζειν τὴν πόλιν, ὥσπερ οὔτοι ἀπολλύναι. (Lys. 12.86.)

But I wish that they were (now) so eager to save the city, as these men <are eager > to destroy it.

Lit. 'But I would (now) be wishing ...'

11.5. Interrogative Wishes Combined with Deliberative Subjunctive

Classical Greek uses a particular idiom corresponding to the English question: 'Do you want me to do this?' The verb of wishing is regularly second person (sg. or pl.) and the verb of doing is regularly first person (sg. or pl.). In prose, βούλεσθαι is used as the verb of wishing; in verse, both βούλεσθαι and (ἐ)θέλειν are used. The structure of these questions is coordinate (paratactic)—'Do you wish it? Am I to do it?'

βούλη τὸ πρᾶγμα τοῖς θεαταῖσιν **φράσω**; (Ar.Eq. 36.)

Do you want me to tell the matter to the spectators?

Lit. 'Do you want? Am I to tell ...?'

ὧ σεμνὰς πλάκας
ναίοντες ὀρέων, **θέλετε θηρασώμεθα**
Πενθέως Ἀγαύην μητέρ' ἐκ βακχευμάτων
χάριν τ' ἀνακτι θώμεθα; (E.Ba. 718–721.)

*O <you>, inhabiting
the holy plateaus of the mountains, **do you want us to hunt**
Agave mother of Pentheus from her Bacchic rites
and do a favour to our master?*

Lit. 'Do you want? Are we to hunt ...?'

References

Denniston (1954), *The Greek particles*, pp. 89–95 (εἰ γάρ).

Goodwin (1889), *Syntax of the moods and tenses of the Greek verb*, §§246, 287–288, 720–739.

Smyth (1956), *Greek grammar*, §§1780–1782, 1789, 1806, 1814–1815, 1832, 2156.

EXERCISE 11

Translate the following passages. All expressions which may have the function of a wish should be translated as wishes.

1. μηδάμ' ὁ πάντα νέμων
θεῖτ' ἐμᾶ γνώμα κράτος ἀντίπαλον Ζεὺς ...

μηδαμά	<i>never</i> (accent affected by elision)
νέμειν	<i>to control, to manage</i>
γνώμη, -ης, ἡ	<i>will</i> (here with Doric spelling)
ἀντίπαλος, -ου	<i>in opposition to, against</i> (+ Dat.) (here predicative)

2. εἰ γὰρ γενοίμην, τέκνον, ἀντὶ σοῦ νεκρός.
3. Ζεῦ πάτερ, αἴθ' ὅσα εἶπε τελευτήσειεν ἅπαντα
Ἄλκίνοος·

Ἄλκίνοος, -ου, ὁ	<i>Alcinous</i>
------------------	-----------------

4. ὦ τέκνα τέκνα, πῶς ἄν, εἴ τις ἔντοπος,
τὸν πάντ' ἄριστον δεῦρο Θησέα πόροι;

ἔντοπος, -ον	<i>at hand</i>
πάντ(α)	neut. pl. adj. as Acc. of Respect
Θησεύς, -έως, ὁ	<i>Theseus</i>
πορεῖν (Aor.)	<i>to bring (usually, to provide)</i>

5. ὦ πάτερ πάτερ,
τίς ἄν θεῶν σοι τόνδ' ἄριστον ἄνδρ' ἰδεῖν
δοίη, τὸν ἡμᾶς δεῦρο προσπέμψαντά σοι;

διδόναι	<i>to grant, to allow (+ Dat. and Infin.)</i>
προσπέμπειν	<i>to conduct (to) (+ Dat.)</i>

6. εἴθ' ἦν ἑμαυτὸν προσβλέπειν ἐναντίον
στάνθ', ὡς ἐδάκρυσ' οἶα πάσχομεν κακά.

εἶναι	<i>to be <possible></i>
ἐναντίος, -α, -ον	<i>opposite</i>
στάνθ'	στάντα (Acc. sg. masc.)
ὡς ἐδάκρυσ(α)	<i>so that I might lament (Unfulfilled Purpose clause with Indic., dependent on unfulfilled wish [Smyth, 1956, §2185.c; Goodwin, 1889, §333]).</i>

7. εἴθ' ἠϋρομεν σ', Ἄδμητε, μὴ λυπούμενον.

8. ... αἴθ' ὤφελλες ἀεικελίου στρατοῦ ἄλλοῦ
σημαίνειν ...

ἀεικέλιος, -α, -ον	<i>inferior</i>
σημαίνειν	<i>to be in command (of) (+ Gen.)</i>

9. καὶ μηδὲ σαυτῆς γ' ἐκμαθεῖν ζήτηι πόνοους.

μηδέ	<i>not ... either</i>
πόνος, -ου, ὁ	<i>trouble</i>

10. Astyages, wishing the boy to dine as pleasantly as possible, was setting all sorts of foods before him.

<i>Astyages</i>	Ἄστυάγης, -ους, ὁ
<i>to dine</i>	δειπνεῖν
<i>to set (Acc.) before (Dat.)</i>	προσάγειν
<i>all sorts of</i>	παντοδαποί, -αί, -ά
<i>food</i>	βρῶμα, -ατος, τό

11. And I [would] wish, O council, that Simon had the same attitude as I ...

<i>I [would] wish</i>	Use Past Imperf. Indic. of βούλεσθαι with ἄν.
<i>Simon</i>	Σίμων, -ωνος, ὁ
<i>same ... as</i>	αὐτός, -ή, -όν (+ Dat.)
<i>attitude</i>	γνώμη, -ης, ἡ

12. Do you [pl.], therefore, want me ... to converse with you to the accompaniment of the flute?

<i>to converse (with)</i>	διαλέγεσθαι (Mid.; also Aor. Pass.) (+ Dat.)
<i>to the accompaniment of</i>	ὑπό + Acc.
<i>flute</i>	αὐλός, -οῦ, ὁ

This text is taken from *Intermediate Ancient Greek Language*,
by Darryl Palmer, published 2021 by ANU Press, The Australian
National University, Canberra, Australia.