Aspect and the Greek Verb

This is a Class Handout prepared for students in Greek at Southern Seminary. In preparation for the class with which this handout is associated, the students are required to read the following:


The handout and lecture seek to assess the contributions of the readings and provide a description of aspect in Hellenistic Greek.

1. Definitions:

Aspect is concerned with the differing portrayals of an event, either seen from without as a bounded whole (Perfective) or seen from within as an unbounded process (Imperfective). Aspect, then, may be defined as the relationship between an event and the frame within which it is portrayed or viewed. If the event is seen as a whole within the frame of the viewer, then it is perceived globally; conversely, if the boundaries of the event (either its beginning or end) extend outside of the frame of the viewer, then the event is perceived as an ongoing process. Aspect is generally grammaticalised in the language.
Aktionsart  Aktionsart is concerned with the procedural characteristics of the action or event, e.g. durative vs. instantaneous or punctiliar, inceptive or ingressive vs. terminative, progressive vs. non-progressive, characteristic or habitual, repeated vs. single. Aktionsart is generally lexicalised in the language and is also a function of pragmatic effect as opposed to grammaticalised semantic meaning.

[NB: In the literature there is confusion in regard to terminology. What is labelled ‘aspect’ here is referred to by some linguists as Viewpoint Aspect, and what is labelled Aktionsart here has been referred to as Situation Aspect or Phasal Aspect.]

2. Inflectional Categories and Aspect

Although Hellenistic Greek offers a choice of three different aspects, aspect selection by the speaker is a function of two sets of binary options:

[ASPECT1]  Fientive or Stative?

The first choice is to present the event or process as an action or as a state. The former is Fientive, the latter is Stative. Fientive is the default or unmarked selection.

[ASPECT2]  Perfective or Imperfective?

Once fientive is selected, the action may be portrayed either as Perfective or Imperfective. Perfective is the default or unmarked selection.

The inflection of the verb in Greek was divided along functional lines into two types: fientive and stative. In the first, the verb represents an action, event or process; in the second the verb represents a state. The first category, fientive, is the default or unmarked selection. The second category is grammaticalised as the Perfect (Pluperfect, Perfect, Future Perfect).

If the binary choice fientive is selected by the speaker, a second binary choice is available in terms of how the event may be portrayed: the speaker must select either Perfective or Imperfective aspect. Perfective is the default or unmarked selection. Using a line from Hallmark Greeting Cards, the Perfective is used “when you don’t care enough to send the very best.” The primary purpose in using the aorist is simply to say that something happened in a chain of somethings. Imperfective aspect, however, “sets the stage for the action that follows. Conversely, what follows
is rooted in the state of affairs set up by the imperfective.”¹ From a historical linguistic viewpoint, support for describing the system according to these two sets of binary options comes from the morphology of the personal endings. The personal endings for the Perfect/Pluperfect cannot be derived from the same set for the remainder of the conjugation patterns (Primary vs. Secondary and Active vs. Medio-Passive). The 1st sg. is an example.²

Scholars such as Constantine Campbell, T. V. Evans, and Stanley Porter present an opposite arrangement of binary options: first the speaker selects either Perfective or Imperfective Aspect (Aspect I in Porter and O’Donnell’s description of the Greek Verbal Network) and then the speaker selects the Imperfective or Stative as a sub-category of Imperfective. This proposal is considered erroneous; the approach advocated here is based upon Andrew Sihler, New Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin.

Porter in his book Idioms of the Greek New Testament is also incorrect in his description of three “planes of discourse” in which he describes the Perfective as background, Imperfective as foreground, and Stative as frontground.³ There is no particular prominence for the Stative aspect. There is only a default vs. marked binary opposition between Perfective and Imperfective.

3. Overview of Aspects Grammaticalised in Greek

a. Perfective
   (bounded) Aorist
   Finite verbs
   + Ptc. and Infin.

b. Imperfective
   (unbounded) Imperfect
   Finite verbs
   Present
   Finite Verbs
   + Ptc. and Infin.

c. Stative
   Pluperfect
   Perfect

¹ Private communication, Randall Buth, SBL, New Orleans, 2009. This provided the argument demonstrating that most historical presents are perfective in nature, since the subsequent action is not rooted in it, but simply follows sequentially. See S. Runge, “The Verbal Aspect of the Historical Present Indicative in Narrative,” Paper presented at The Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, 2009.


Finite verbs  Finite Verbs
+ Ptc. and Infin.

Example:  θνήσκειν  to be in the process of dying
θανεῖν  to die
τεθνάω  to be dead

4. Tense

The verbal forms in the indicative mood / modality are marked for both tense and aspect. Fanning included tense in his system, but Porter completely excluded it from his. T. V. Evans has shown that Porter’s arguments concerning the augment are flawed. The augment is a morpheme signalling Past Tense. So, for example, the Present Indicative = Present Tense + Imperfective Aspect and the Aorist Indicative = Past Tense + Perfective Aspect. Thus ancient Greek in both the Classical and Hellenistic Periods has as many as five aspectual tenses: present, imperfect, aorist, perfect, and pluperfect. The future indicative is a special case because it lacks the aspect distinction Perfective vs. Imperfective. The future perfect would mark future tense plus stative aspect. Thus the Imperative, Subjunctive, and Optative have no tense or temporal reference whatsoever.

The Augment

For Porter, the verbal forms are marked for aspect and not tense. What, then, is the function of the augment? Clearly this is a morpheme attached to the verb. Schmidt and Silva are perplexed by Porter’s “complete disregard of the augment as morphologically significant.”

In Indo-European verbal systems, the augment is found only in Indo-Iranian, Armenian, and Greek. Originally an independent particle, it was attached at a later time to ‘past’ forms of the verb. Few examples are found in the Mycenaean Period. There is a mixture of augmented and unaugmented forms in Homer. In the Classical Period, the augment is a required feature of the imperfect, aorist, and pluperfect indicative forms. There is a parallel development in Sanskrit. Phonetic changes in the Hellenistic Period brought about a weakening of this requirement, but doubly augmented forms reveal a hypercorrection to show that the feature was still considered required (e.g. Ἰνέπξα). Shift from pitch to stress accent resulted in the loss of the augment in Modern Greek.

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The traditional view is that the augment marks past time. This view is unacceptable to Porter. Strangely his position contradicts his own conviction that a difference in form normally correlates with a difference in function.

An explanation for the mixture of augmented and unaugmented forms in Homer can easily be given: it is due to the artificial diction and demands of poetic metre. Homeric Greek is also dialectally heterogeneous. The evidence from Homer does not disprove the consensus view. Porter is relying on older outdated research on Homer. Each participant in the epic poetry is described by characteristic epithets and phrases. When one shifts from Nominative to Genitive or Dative, the metrical constraints may result in changing the dialect in which the characteristic epithet is expressed. Similarly metrical constraints allow innovations or require archaic forms and so the use or non-use of the augment may be easily explained. The feature of the augment can be construed as a past time marker attached to indicative forms in appropriate contexts and then later becoming systematised throughout the imperfect, aorist, and pluperfect indicatives. Evans notes that the introduction of the augment signals introduction of an additional value—which is interpreted here as temporal reference—to the semantic baggage of indicative forms. Its subsequent grammaticalisation does not indicate loss of that value from the indicative’s usual formal semantics, merely the loss of its special connection with the augment. The endings of verbal forms came to convey temporal value in addition to person and voice. Why are there seven verb-forms in the Indicative Mood and only three in the non-Indicative Moods? The answer is simple: the forms in the Indicative mark both aspect and tense (the future forms mark only tense and not aspect); outside of the Indicative they mark only aspect. Since there are only three aspects, there are only three verb-forms outside of the Indicative.

Alternative theories are not convincing. Campbell argues that the augment is a morpheme marking spatial reference. This is a possible proposal, but not a plausible interpretation of the actual data. The early evidence for development of the future tense and augment does not fit his ideas well.

The exceptional patterns of verbal usage which provide the basis for Porter’s theory are better taken as fossilised survivals of an older aspectual structure overlaid by the growing importance of temporal reference. Certainly Campbell does not offer a view that comprehensively accounts for development and history of the Greek language as a whole. Balanced views on aspect and tense will probably start to be restored when a theorist following Porter has the courage to move beyond the com-

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fort zone of the NT and actually seek to pinpoint when the grammatical category of tense becomes a factor in the history of Greek.

This discussion of the augment is not to say that there not other markers of tense or temporal reference in the language, but these arguments retain the notion that tense is grammaticalised through the augment and personal endings (primary versus secondary).

Constantine Campbell follows Porter in arguing that the forms of the verb in Greek are not marked for Tense.⁷

Examples from Campbell (e.g. to demonstrate Aorist as NOT past-referring)

Mark 1:11 καὶ φωνὴ ἐγένετο ἐκ τῶν οὐρανῶν· σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱός μου ὁ ἀγαπητός ἐν σοὶ εὐδόκησα.

And a voice came from heaven, “You are my beloved Son; in you I am well pleased.”

Campbell states: “Suffice to say that no one translates the last clause of this verse, “in you I was well pleased.” It simply doesn’t fit the theological or literary context to read the aorist that way. There are many such instances within the usage of the aorist where this so-called past tense is obviously not past referring.”⁸ (p. 36)

What is the difference between Campbell’s example and 1 Cor 1:21?

1 Cor 1:21 ἐπειδὴ γὰρ ἐν τῇ σοφίᾳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐκ ἔγνω ὁ κόσμος διὰ τῆς σοφίας τῶν θεῶν, εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σώσαι τοὺς πιστεύοντας.

For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe (NIV).

Campbell’s examples are unfair and untrue because he does not distinguish semantic meaning and implicature / pragmatic effect for them the way he does for the case examples given later in his work. By Campbell’s own analysis, there are probably only 10 - 15 % of instances where the Aorist does not seem to be past-referring. Why doesn’t he explore this as a result of implicature / pragmatic effect rather than as a

⁷ Constantine R. Campbell, Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 36-37.
⁸ Constantine R. Campbell, Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek, 36.
proof that there is no semantic meaning of past in the other 85%? Bernard Comrie, for example, in his fundamental work on tense, gives examples of the past in English used for non-past referring situations: “I just wanted to ask you if you could lend me a dollar.”\(^9\) This is an implicature in English and does not prove that the form is not a past tense.

Later in his work, Campbell provides categories for analysing verbs and distinguishing semantic meaning from implicature:

Campbell’s Categories for Analysing Verbs

1. Semantics
2. Lexeme
3. Context
4. Aktionsart

For the category “Lexeme,” Campbell’s approach to transitivity is based upon whether the action is effective or not and not upon formal categories supplied by the language itself. The category of “Context” is the slippery element in the equation as this category is vague and unprincipled in Campbell’s work.

5. Grammaticalisation of Aspect

Aspect may be grammaticalised by means of vowel gradation (apophony): e.g: \(\lambda\epsilon\pi\)– \(\lambda\iota\pi\)– \(\lambda\omicron\pi\)–. Aspect may be grammaticalised by means of morphemes affixed to verbal forms, e.g. sigma in the aorist.

6. Basic Aktionsarten (Lexicalised): durative and punctiliar

Every root is inherently, from its lexical nature, either durative or punctiliar. Thus Aktionsart is lexicalised. Aspect, however, is grammaticalised. We can illustrate this using the verbs ‘hit’ and ‘sing’ in English. The lexical nature of ‘hit’ automatically indicates something instantaneous whereas the lexical nature of ‘sing’ indicates a process occurring over time. Nonetheless, one can portray the action differently than the lexical nature suggests. For example, one can say, “they sang Handel’s Messiah.” We know this must have taken three hours, but the action is presented globally, and is viewed as a whole. Conversely, one can say, “he kept hitting me.” An action that is punctiliar is portrayed as a process. In the morphology of the verbal system in

Greek, if a punctiliar root is taken as the point of departure, certain changes can be introduced morphologically to produce a stem marking Imperfective Aspect, and conversely, if a durative root is taken as the point of departure, certain changes can be introduced morphologically to produce a stem marking Perfective Aspect. Most students are familiar with the latter process as it entails the sigmatic aorist. Students are not, familiar, in general with the former process as it describes the way present stems are formed from roots that usually entail Second Aorists.

a. Changes made to durative stems for Perfective Aspect: regular verb
   e.g. λυ- (e)λυσα [λελυκα]

b. Changes made to punctiliar stems for Imperfect Aspect:
   1) Non -y- formations
      a) Root stems (i.e. present stem = form arising directly from the root)
         1)) Thematic formations e.g. φερ-ο-μεν (cf. φορ-ο-ς in nouns)
         2)) Athematic formations e.g. ἴ-μεν
   b) Stems with vowel gradation and reduplication
      1)) Thematic: γί-γν-ο-μαί
         2)) Athematic: τί-θη-μι
   c) Addition of nasal infixes
      1) -v- : τέμ-ν-ω (ἐτεμον)
      2) -αν- : ἀμαρτ-άν-ω (ήμαρτον)
      3) Both -v- and -αν- : λα-μ- β-άν-ω (ἐλαβον)
      4) -vν- : δείκ-νυ-μι (ἐδειξα)
      5) -νε- : ἀφικ-νέ-ομαι (ἀφιξομαι)
   d) Reduplication and nasal infix
      1) ὑπισχ-νέ-ομαι (ὑπεσχόμην)
   e) Infixed -σκ- / -ισκ-
      1) used alone: γηρά-σκ-ω (ἐγήροσα)
      2) with reduplication: γιγνό-σκ-ω (ἐγνων)
   [f] Infixed -θ- (from which likely derives the passive in -θ- + η)
      Examples: πληθ-θ-ω (πιμπλημι), πρηθ-θ-ω (πιμπρημι) φλεγεθ-θ-ω (φλεγω)

2) Formations with suffixed -i- (produces Imperfective Aspect)
   1) May be added to verbal roots which are inherently punctiliar to produce
      imperfective aspect e.g. στέλλω < στελ-ι-ω
   2) May be added to nominal roots to make (denominative) verbs
      e.g. φιλέω < φιλε-ι-ω (φιλος)
   3) Morphology of particular formations
      a. Labial stems (π β φ)
κόπτω < κοπ-1-ω  
κρύπτω < κρυβ-1-ω

b. Voiceless velar and dental stems (κ χ τ θ)
φυλάσσω < φυλάκ-1-ω
φυλακή

[more rarely voiced velar: ἀλλάσσω < ἀλλαγ-1-ω  ἀλλαγήσωμαι]

c. Voiced velar and dental stems (γ δ)

d. Liquid stems (λ ρ)
στέλλω < στελ-1-ω
στελώ

e. Nasal stems (ν)
-αν φαίνω < φαν-1-ω
φανώ

f. Sibilant stems (σ)

7. Semantic note:

Since the -ι suffix was heavily used for the forming of denominatives (i.e. for making nouns and adjectives into verbs) many formations have a clear factitive-causative force and some became especially productive in that capacity. E.g.
δηλόω  make clear
θορόω  equip with doors
θανατόω  provide with death i.e. put to death
dικαιώω  count as just/right
ζηλόω  regard with envy

-ίζω
σοφίζω  make wise
gνωρίζω  make known

-αίνω
μελαίνω  make black
ξηραίνω  make dry
θερμαίνω  make hot
λευκαίνω  make white

8. The Participle

The Participle is marked only for Aspect and has no Tense, time, or temporal reference whatsoever. It may be that the Perfective Aspect lends itself to time prior to the main verb and Imperfective Aspect to time concurrent or subsequent, but the adverbial participle does not in itself, signal either Tense or Relative Time. This is different, however, from saying that event indicated by the participle has relative time. When a participle is subordinated to a finite verb in the Present Tense, the temporal reference of the participle is Present, When, however, that same participle is subordinated to a finite verb in the Past tense, the temporal reference of the participle is Past. One has to keep clearly distinct (a) the marking of a form and (b) what information is derived from the context or logic of the action in question.

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