

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:

Bache, Carl. "Aspect and Aktionsart: Towards a Semantic Distinction." *Journal of Linguistics* 18 (1982): 57-72.

Evans, Trevor V. *Verbal Syntax in the Greek Pentateuch: Natural Greek Usage and Hebrew Interference*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. Chapters 1-2.

Naselli, Andrew D. "A Brief Introduction to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 12 (2007): 17-28.

Porter, Stanley E. *Idioms of the Greek New Testament. Biblical Languages: Greek 2*. 2nd ed. Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992, 1994.

Porter, Stanley E. and Matthew Brook O'Donnell. "The Greek Verbal Network Viewed From a Probabilistic Standpoint: An Exercise in Hallidayan Linguistics," *Filología Neotestamentaria* 14 (2001): 3-41.

Wallace, Daniel B. *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996. pp. 499-512.

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

1. Definitions:

Aspect 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.

² See Andrew L. Sihler, *New Comparative Grammar of Greek and Latin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 454, 570-571.

³ Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament. Biblical Languages: Greek 2* (2nd ed.; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992, 1994), 23.

	Finite verbs	Finite Verbs + Ptc. and Infin.
Example:	θνήσκειν	to be in the process of dying
	θανεῖν	to die
	τεθνάναι	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 Augment⁴

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. ἠνέφξα). Shift from pitch to stress accent resulted in the loss of the augment in Modern Greek.

⁴ Argument here is based upon T. V. Evans, *Verbal Syntax in the Greek Pentateuch: Natural Greek Usage and Hebrew Interference* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45-51.

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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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-

⁵ J. A. J. Drewitt, "The Augment in Homer," *Classical Quarterly* 6 (1912): 44-59, 104-20.

⁶ See Francisco Rodríguez Adrados, *A History of the Greek Language: From Its Origins to the Present* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 89-91.

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 τὸν θεόν, εὐδόκησεν ὁ θεὸς διὰ τῆς μωρίας τοῦ κηρύγματος σῶσαι 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: λειπ- // λιπ- // λοιπ-. 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

⁹ Benard Comrie, *Tense* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 19.

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- (ε)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. φέρ-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-μαι

2)) Athematic: τί-θη-μι

c) Addition of nasal infixes

1) -v- : τέμ-ν-ω (ἔτεμον)

2) -αν- : ἁμαρτ-άν-ω (ἥμαρτον)

3) Both -v- and -αν- : λα-μ-β-άν-ω (ἔλαβον)

4) -νυ- : δείκ-νυ-μι (ἔδειξα)

5) -νε- : ἀφικ-νέ-ομαι (ἀφίξομαι)

d) Reduplication and nasal infix

1) ὑπισχ-νέ-ομαι (ὑπεσχόμην)

e) Infixes -σκ- / -ισκ-

1) used alone: γηρά-σκ-ω (ἐγήρασα)

2) with reduplication: γιγνώ-σκ-ω (ἔγνων)

[f] Infixes -θ- (from which likely derives the passive in -θ- + η)

Examples: πλῆ-θ-ω (πιμπλημι), πρῆ-θ-ω (πιμπρημι) φλεγε-θ-ω (φλέγω)]

2) Formations with suffixed -ι- (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 (φίλος)

3)) Morphology of particular formations cf.

a. Labial stems (π β φ)

κόπτω < κοπ-ι-ω	ἐκόπην
κρύπτω < κρυβ-ι-ω	ἐκρύβην
b. Voiceless velar and dental stems (κ χ τ θ)	
φυλάσσω < φυλακ-ι-ω	φυλακή
ὀρύσσω < ορυχ-ι-ω	ὀρυχή
ἐρέσσω < ερετ-ι-ω	ἐρέτης
κορύσσω < κορυθ-ι-ω	κόρυθος
[more rarely voiced velar: ἀλλάσσω < αλλαγ-ι-ω ἀλλαγήσομαι]	
c. Voiced velar and dental stems (γ δ)	
ἀρπάζω < αρπαγ-ι-ω	ἀρπαγή
γυμνάζω < γυμναδ-ι-ω	γυμνάδος
ἐλπίζω < ελπιδ-ι-ω	ἐλπίδος
d. Liquid stems (λ ρ)	
στέλλω < στελ-ι-ω	στελῶ
-αρ χαίρω < χαρ-ι-ω	χάρις
-ερ φθείρω < φθερ-ι-ω	φθερῶ
-ιρ οἰκτίρω < οικτιρ-ι-ω	
-υρ μαρτυρομαι < μαρτυρ-ι-ομαι	
e. Nasal stems (ν)	
-αν φαίνω < φαν-ι-ω	φανῶ
-εν τείνω < τεν-ι-ω	τενῶ
-ιν κρίνω < κριν-ι-ω	
-υν πλύνω < πλυν-ι-ω	
f. Sibilant stems (σ)	
τελέω < τελεσ-ι-ω	τέλος (τελεσ-)
g. Digamma stems (Ϝ)	
κλαίω < κλαϜ -ι-ω	ἔκλαυσα
[βασιλεύω < βασιληϜ -ι-ω	βασιλεύς]
h. Vowel stems (ε α ο) (use elongated stem vowel in non-durative stems)	
φιλέω < φιλε-ι-ω	φίλος
τιμάω < τιμα-ι-ω	τιμή
δηλόω < δηλο-ι-ω	δήλος

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.

-όω

δηλόω	make clear
θυρόω	equip with doors
θανατόω	provide with death i.e. put to death
δικαίοω	count as just/right
ζηλόω	regard with envy

-ίζω

σοφίζω	make wise
γνωρίζω	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.¹⁰ 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.

¹⁰ See article forthcoming by Robert E. Picirilli, "Time and Tense in the Circumstantial Participles of Mark and Luke."