Verbal Aspect and Discourse Prominence Presentation

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A. Introduction: Porter's impact on discussions within NT Studies

1. **Contributions:**
   a. dispelled the notion of absolute tense in Greek by popularizing notion of verbal aspect,
   b. properly correlating tense-forms to aspects
   c. I fundamentally agree with him on these two points.

2. **Controversy**

Silva: "In general terms, I found Porter's *theoretical* framework more convincing than Fanning's… On the other hand, when it came to looking at their *implementation* of the principles, I had many more problems with Porter than with Fanning: time and time again I failed to see either the logic or the evidence for his interpretations."[1]

Despite such criticisms, Carson's statement has proven true that "a critic might disagree with many of Porter's brief exegeses without denting his theory in the slightest".[2] What has been lacking is a critique of the theoretical framework on which his planes of discourse model is built. I will demonstrate that the misgivings that Silva describes about implementation are a natural consequence of a flawed theoretical framework.

I will compare the claims Porter's theoretical model against those found in the linguistic sources he cites. My objective is to evaluate his claims on their own merits using only the sources Porter himself used. The critique is therefore not contingent upon how I might reformulate his model, but on how he has chosen to develop his. The claims considered are that:

- Greek verbs do not grammaticalize tense as time, even in the indicative mood.

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[1] Moises Silva, "A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 77 italics his.

[2] D. A. Carson, "An Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 24.

- Each tense-form plays a consistent grounding role (i.e. background aorist, foreground present, and frontground perfect), regardless of genre considerations.

B. Contrastive Substitution and the Nature of Tense

Porter relies heavily upon a linguistic test called contrastive substitution to disprove the presence of temporal reference in the Greek verb.

1. **His contention**
   a. If the present tense really encodes present time in the verb, then it should only be found in present-time contexts, and so on.
   b. Demonstrates that the aorist, present and perfect are each found in "wrong" contexts.
   c. Conclusion: "On the basis of contrastive substitution, it is clearly shown that tense forms in Greek are not primarily time based (i.e. tense is not grammaticalized in Greek) but that they are aspectually based."[3]

2. **The problems**
   a. Lack of support: Where he first mentions contrastive substitution, his citation makes it sound as though these sources support his claim:

   "…it becomes clear according to a principle of contrastive substitution (see Curtius, *Elucidations*, 209; Bache, *Aspect*, 1; cf. Collinge, "Reflexions," 89 n. 1, as well as several grammarians analyzed in chapt. 1)".[4]

      i. Sources make no reference to contrastive substitution or what can be legitimately concluded from it.[5]
      ii. No reference to linguistic discussions about contrastive substitution

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[3] Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament: With Reference to Tense and Mood*, 1 Studies in Biblical Greek (New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 107.

[4] Ibid., 79.

[5] Curtius here discusses subjective versus objective time, but draws no conclusion about the absence of tense. In fact, his discussion of time is a prelude to introducing what sounds very much like what Porter would likely call aspect as three different "kinds of time": continuous (imperfective), completed (stative) and *eintredende* (perfective). Bache makes no relevant comments, whereas the cited footnote from Collinge concerns case, not tense or time. The broader context makes some reference to the difficulty of nailing down the temporal reference of the perfect, but in Latin not Greek. It is unclear how these sources meaningfully contribute to Porter's argument. See Georg Curtius, *Elucidations of the Student's Greek Grammar*, trans. Abbott, Evelyn, Second, Revised and Corrected. (London: John Murray, 1875), 209; Carl Bache, *Verbal Aspect: A General Theory and Its Application to Present-Day English* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1985), 1; N. E. Collinge, "Some Reflections on Comparative Historical Syntax," *Archivum Linguisticum* 12 (1960): 89.

b. No engagement of counter arguments

    i. Contrastive substitution highlights complexity, not absence of tense.

Wallace: "The problems with the classical trinity [i.e. tense, mood and aspect, SER], as I shall detail in this section, are two. One, it is an arbitrary division of verbal semantics into compartments which are not quite as easily separable as one is led to believe. Time, aspectuality, and modality…are almost inextricably scrambled together."[6]

Lyons comments similarly, "… at this point there is not, and cannot be, in universal grammar any sharp distinction between tense and aspect, on the one hand, or between tense and modality, on the other."[7]

    ii. English manifests same problem: Is it tenseless too?

More damning to Porter's argument is Wallace's application of the same model *to English*. By Porter's standards, the use of different tense forms in the same temporal context should prove that temporal reference is not a semantic component of the English verb, dispelling the widely accepted notion that English verbs express tense.[8] Here begins an extended quote:

> But 'present' and 'past' tenses are by no means free from meanings traditionally classified as modal. Note the pervasive existence of the 'historical present'… Observe further the polite or indirect use of the 'past' tense in English and French (Leech 11; Waugh 1975:463-5) where one might expect the 'present,' especially with regard to cognition and emotion. In English, for example, to say 'Did you want me?' with reference to a present desire is more tentative and thus more polite than to say abruptly 'Do you want me?'…
>
> The fundamental question therefore is: If 'present' and 'past' tense do not necessarily refer to present and past time, if the 'present' can refer to the past and the 'past' to the present, how are we justified in talking about tense and time with regard to these categories? …No reasonable person would deny that time is an important semantic property of the categories of tense. The moot point is whether or not it is a focal, central, neutral property…In fact, one wonders whether a language exists in which 'tense' refers only to time."[9]

    iii. Points to be made:

        1. English illustrates the complexity of the issue. "Wrong" usage brings about pragmatic effects, e.g. politeness.

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[6] Stephen Wallace, "Figure and Ground: The Interrelationships of Linguistic Categories," in *Tense-Aspect: Between Semantics and Pragmatics*, ed. Paul J. Hopper (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1982), 202.

[7] John Lyons, *Semantics*, vol. 2 (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 690.

[8] Note that the arguments against tense in English concern the future, advocating at past-nonpast distinction since the future is composed of helping verbs which are construed as modal forms. They do not argue against the presence of any tense whatsoever.

[9] Wallace, "Figure and Ground," 202-3.

2. Unlikely *any* language utilizes absolute tense as defined by Porter

c. Narrow claim to general conclusion:

Absence of absolute tense does not disprove presence of *any* tense. Schmidt notes that Porter shifts his claim from absolute tense specifically to a broader one about tense in general:

Schmidt: "The more accurate claim would appear to be: tense forms in the indicative do not grammaticalize absolute time, any more than they grammaticalize *absolute* aspect. But this is far short of demonstrating that tense in the indicative has no temporal dimension."[10]

This is no misunderstanding his unambiguous affirmations:

Porter: "Verbal aspect theory is the theory that tense-forms in Greek do not grammaticalize temporal relations, but another semantic category concerned with how a speaker or writer chooses to conceptualize and present a process. Contrastive substitution, as well as other determiners, shows that the tense-forms in Greek are not time-based, even in the indicative, but that temporal relations are established through other means. Instead, the tense-forms grammaticalize verbal aspect."[11]

Porter: "…temporal reference is not grammaticalized in either the indicative or the non-indicative mood-forms."[12]

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[10] Daryl D. Schmidt, "Verbal Aspect in Greek: Two Approaches," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. D. A. Carson and Stanley E. Porter (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 70, italics his.

[11] Stanley E. Porter, "Prominence: An Overview," in *The Linguist as Pedagogue*, ed. Stanley E Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press Ltd, 2009), 58-59.

[12] Stanley E. Porter, "In Defense of Verbal Aspect," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 34.

C. Grounding, Genre and Prominence

1. **Introduction**
    a. Concepts stem from art (background/foreground), psychology (figure/ground), literature (mainline/offline). Terms are used synonymously for the two ideas.
    b. Grounding is always treated as genre-dependent by his sources: changes in genre bring about changes in grounding role.

2. **Grounding as prominence**
    a. His claims:
        i. Tense-forms always fulfill the same grounding role, regardless of genre
        ii. Role conveys prominence relative to the other forms, semantic trait

Porter uses foreground/background to refer to "planes of discourse," which in his view are different levels of prominence.[13] After dismissing the notion that tense-forms have any temporal semantics, Porter claims:

> "Instead, the tense-forms grammaticalize verbal aspect, and these morphologically-based verbal aspects serve the discourse function of indicating various levels of prominence."[14]

Thus prominence is not derived from the discourse role in a given genre, but from the unchanging semantic characteristic of the aspect.

3. **The problems**
    a. Grounding roles vary by genre, prominence derived from the role played in genre:

Wallace: "Included in the foreground, for instance, are the more important events of a **narrative**, the more important steps of a **procedure**, the central points of an **exposition**, the main characters or entities involved in an episode. The background includes events of lesser importance, subsidiary procedures, secondary points, descriptions, elaborations, digressions and minor characters or things. This is not to say that background is unessential: merely to say *Vini, vidi, vici* 'I came, I saw, I conquered' means little unless it is embedded in a context which provides a relevant background. It is to say rather that people, when producing or comprehending linguistic discourse, lend more importance to some information than to other information."[15]

    b. Treats prominence (background, foreground, frontground) as distinct from advancement of discourse (mainline-offline). Listen to distinction:

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[13] Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 92-93.
[14] Porter, "Prominence," 57.
[15] Wallace, "Figure and Ground," 208, bolding mine.

Porter: "For the Greek speaker or writer, the aorist tense-form characterizes the mainline or storyline of the narrative discourse. Thus, in narrative sections of the Gospels, and other Greek narrative literature, the mainline of the narrative is usually carried by a string of aorist indicative verbs in primary clauses... The other tense-forms--the present/imperfect and perfect/pluperfect--are used for the foregrounding and frontgrounding of supporting material, including events but also evaluations and emotive statements (see below for further discussion of the Greek tense-forms)."[16]

For Porter's sources, foreground is synonymous with mainline, not a separate feature, they make no such distinction.

      c. No evidence for viewing stative as most prominent

Porter: "For Greek, a third category of frontground is also useful to introduce, as a means of introducing a more finely gradated cline of semantic grounding."[17]

In a footnote he states, "Note that the Greek verbal system is not bi-partite but rather tri-partite, with aorist, present and perfect tense-forms, one of the reasons for such a distinction."[18]

Many other languages *also* manifest three or more tenses, yet no comparable model is found.[19] It is not a matter of how many verb forms exist, but what they *do* w.r.t advancing the discourse.

    i. Stative is not foreground in any genre: claim arrived at via markedness, not grounding. None support view in any genre, let alone global.
    ii. No tripartite models
        1. Represents model as though it is representative, no evidence either provided or found.
        2. Wallace's reference to something more based on problematic absolutes, not need for a third. Scalar if anything.

Wallace: "Consequently, one should not expect simple all-or-none compartmentalization, but prepare to weigh numerous contributing influences."[20] Yet this is the very kind of categorization for which Porter argues, ignoring warnings about the complexities of genre, tense, mood and aspect.

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[16] Porter, "Prominence," 57.

[17] Ibid., 54.

[18] Ibid.

[19] For an argument in favor of adopting a scalar model of grounding, see Brita Wårvik, "What is Foregrounded in Narratives? Hypotheses for the Cognitive Basis of Foregrounding," in *Approaches to Cognition Through Text and Discourse*, ed. Tuija Virtanen (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), 99-116.

[20] Ibid., 216.

D. Conclusions:

Most interdisciplinary models that are applied to a new field typically resemble the incarnation from the original discipline. Porter's "planes of discourse" model of aspectual prominence finds no such counterpart in the linguistic literature.

1. Either fundamentally misunderstood or misrepresented foundational linguistic concepts:
    a. Contrastive substitution does not disprove tense; but highlights the complexity
    b. The grounding roles and prominence are context-dependent; they are not global.
    c. No linguistic support for tripartite model, nor for stative being most prominent.

2. He fails to engage counterarguments which undermine his claims.
    a. Absence of absolute tense does not disprove presence of any tense.
        i.   It is not clear that any language follows such absolutes.
        ii. Adopting Wallace's "trinitarian view" of tense, aspect and mood as distinct-yet-inseparable is more linguistically viable, and enjoys the tacit support of earlier grammarians like Robertson.
    b. Secondary set of terminology to describe the advancement of the discourse neglects the fundamental contradiction between his model and the linguistic literature he cites in support.

This paper has only highlighted the problems with Porter's theoretical framework, not the ramifications of these problems application to exegesis. From the outset Silva and others have questioned Porter's claims without awareness of the flaws inherent in his model. Two other factors also need further treatment. The first is his claim that various kinds of markedness quantitatively contribute to a form's "semantic weight," which seems to be a synonym for prominence. This matter will be handled in a future paper. The other significant issue concerns his "complete disregard of the augment as morphologically significant."[21] Discrediting the notion that Greek is tenseless calls for a reassessment of the augment's role

One must separate the notion of verbal aspect in language from Porter's erroneous assertions about its prominence. Koine Greek is indeed an aspect-prominent language, with kind-of-action regularly trumping matters of temporal reference in the indicative mood. Porter's basic definitions of aspect and classification of the tense-forms are consistent with the linguistic literature and to be accepted. But his claim that each tense-form is part of an unchanging cline of prominence or always conveys a particular plane of discourse is to be rejected.

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[21] Schmidt, "Verbal Aspect in Greek," 71.