The Verbal Aspect of the Historical Present Indicative in Narrative

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Introduction

The primary purpose of this article is to challenge the view of the historical present (HP) usage held by those claiming that Koine Greek does not grammaticalize tense. The varied use of the present tense-form has supplied some of strongest evidence against the traditional treatment of Greek as a tense-based language. Porter claims that the HP usage generates claims of prominence based upon the inherent prominence value of the tense-form itself, not based upon the pragmatics of the context. It will be demonstrated that the historical usage stands out based upon patterns of usage and how these influence reader's expectations. Koine Greek is best understood as a mixed tense-aspect verbal system, grammaticalizing both in the indicative. Furthermore, those claiming an aspect-only model have not demonstrated the absence of tense, but merely the predominance of aspect. Properly understanding the HP and how it brings about various pragmatic effects will also bring greater clarity to the function of each tense-form in narrative.

The explanation that follows is a functional and typologically-based approach to language. All languages need to accomplish a common set of discourse tasks. Though they all share similar tasks, there is great variety in that they are accomplished from one language to another. Redundancy, interruption and delay are devices commonly used to accomplish pragmatic tasks. The key to differentiating the various tasks lies in assessing the semantic need for the given element in the particular context. Readers and hearers strive to make

sense of a discourse. Writers and speakers seek to be clearly understood, and take steps to facilitate this. All rely on an apparently universal expectation that any given element in the discourse is *supposed* to be there[1]. This expectation can generally be summarized in the principle *choice implies meaning.*[2] In other words, if the writer has chosen to do something or include some element, it is assumed that some meaning is associated with it. For example, if I began telling a joke by introducing a one-legged man who owned a three-legged cat, you would be quite confused if this information proved irrelevant to understanding the punch line. People naturally expect that such details are somehow relevant.

I will begin by surveying the various claims made about the HP by traditional grammarians, by linguists, and most recently by those denying the presence of tense in Koine Greek. Most have treated HPs separately, but have failed to reconcile this fact with their overall description of the verbal system. Another element that has been missing is a theoretical framework which can reconcile the divergent claims made about the effects produced by the HP. These claims include marking the beginning or ending of a paragraph, prominence marking, and even that the HP does nothing more than offer a stylistic variation.

Descriptions of the historical present

Despite the view that the HP represents a vulgar usage since it is virtually absent in Luke,[3] Turner provides compelling evidence of its widespread use in "compositional" Greek that could not have been influenced by translation from other languages.[4] The HP debate hinges on how one reconciles this usage with the prototypical present. Four primary explanations describe

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[1] See Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Relevance: Communication & Cognition* (2nd ed.; Oxford, Blackwell, 1986), 50–64.

[2] Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek* (2nd ed.; Dallas: SIL International, 2000), viii.

[3] Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner and Robert Walter Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 167 (BDF hereafter).

[4] Nigel Turner, *Syntax* (vol. 3 of *A Grammar of New Testament Greek*; ed. James Hope Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963), 61 (MHT3 hereafter).

the grammatical function of the HP, each of which can be reconciled with the discourse processing hierarchy introduced in the third section. Special attention will be given to the implications of each explanation for our understanding of verbal aspect of the HP.

Dramatic use/vividness[5]

The dramatic use of the HP is the most common explanation offered by commentators ostensibly because of modern English usage. Since the present tense-form is believed to grammaticalize present time, the HP usage is believed to essentially transport a past event into the reader's present experience. Wallace states, "The *reason* for the use of the historical present is normally to portray an event *vividly*, as though the reader were in the midst of the scene as it unfolds."[6] In other words, it is the semantics of the verb form that create the effect rather than some other pragmatic means.

Despite the appeal of the vividness explanation in theory, significant problems arise in practice. The semantic classes of HP verbs most frequently found in the HP are verbs of speaking or motion, leading Buth to characterize the former as "haphazard."[7] Why would a writer portray such action as vivid? Campbell raises the problem of distribution, stating, "They are rarely clustered together, but often alternate with aorists."[8] Although isolated chains of HPs may be found, much more frequently they are found in isolation. Reynolds summarizes the situation well: "When in a given passage in the New Testament there are many changes back and forth from aorist to present, it would seem that there is no forgetting of time for vividness."[9] There is good

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[5] Cf. MHT3, 61; BDF, 167; Buist Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford Theological Monographs; Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), 226; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 527.

[6] Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 526 (emphasis original).

[7] Randall Buth, "Mark's use of the Historic Present," *Notes on Translation* 65 (1977): 7–13.

[8] Constantine R. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative: Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament* (Studies in Biblical Greek 13; New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 58.

[9] S. M. Reynolds, "The Zero Tense in Greek," *Westminster Theological Journal* 32

reason to believe that "temporal transport" is anachronistic to Koine Greek.[10] Brinton claims that the "vividness and excitement are a consequence of the text-organizing function of the historical present, not the primary function of the form."[11] In other words, it is a pragmatic effect of the usage, not a non-cancelable semantic characteristic.

We learn from the vividness explanation that the "historical" use of the present is deemed inappropriate for the discourse context because of the mismatch of temporal or "proximal" semantics of the tense-form to the reference time of the narrative. Vividness adherents reject that the HPs represent prototypical usage, recognizing instead that some other pragmatic function is intended. This leads us into our next point.

Tense reduction/zero aspect

In contrast to the vividness proponents, two divergent proposals attempt to treat the historical usage as within the semantic scope of the present tense. We begin with the tense-reduction and zero-aspect solutions before moving on to the aspect-only proposals in the second section. It is noteworthy that *all three* groups treat the HP separately from their description of "normal" present usage, a fact to which we will return later.

For those claiming that Koine grammaticalizes tense in the indicative mood, a standard proposal is that of *tense reduction*. This view rejects the understanding of HP verbs as true presents, viewing them instead as more of a sequential form like that found in Hebrew. Based on the fact that verbs of perception, motion and speaking are the most frequently occurring HPs, Battle offers the following proposal:

> Matthew and Luke-Acts, especially the former, nearly always connect the historical present to the aorist. Very seldom is it

(1969): 70.

[10] P. Kiparsky, "Tense and Mood in Indo-European Syntax," *Foundations of Language* 4/1 (February 1968): 30.

[11] Laurel J. Brinton, "Historical Discourse Analysis" in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (ed. Deborah Schiffrin, Deborah Tannen and Heidi Ehernberger Hamilton; Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2001), 143. This is consistent with the upper levels of the discourse processing hierarchy discussed in the third section.

tied to an imperfect. This fact can show either that the historical present is substituted for an aorist in what would normally be a chain of aorists, or that the historical present takes the place of the imperfect which would normally be used to break the monotony of continuous aorists. The first explanation seems simpler, and thus better.[12]

Battle understands the HP as a substitute for the aorist motivated by stylistic variation rather than by some definable discourse function. Such a view stands in stark contrast with traditional grammarians.[13] Winer states,

> Strictly and properly speaking, no one of these tenses can ever stand for another, as the commentators have in so many ways maintained: where such an interchange seems to exist, either it exists in appearance only, there being in point of fact some assignable reason (especially of a rhetorical kind) why this tense is used and no other; or else it must be ascribed to a certain inexactness belonging to the popular language.[14].

Although Battle's proposal is to be rejected, his connection of the HP to the aorist indicative is significant. Grammarians have tended to classify HPs as though they were aoristic in nature rather than as a substitute for the imperfect.[15] Wallace presents a similar view:

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[12] J. A. Battle, "The Present Indicative in New Testament Exegesis" (ThD diss., Grace Theological Seminary, 1975), 128.

[13] See A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research* (Nashville: Broadman, 1934), 829.

[14] G. B. Winer, *A Treatise on the Grammar of New Testament Greek* (trans. W. F. Moulton; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1882), 331.

[15] See F. Blass, *Grammar of New Testament Greek* (2nd ed.; trans. Henry St. J. Thackeray; London: MacMillan, 1898), 188. Funk classifies the present as both punctiliar, durative and present time ostensibly based on HP usage. Viewing the HP as temporal transport for vividness explains the classification as "present time," and the preference for the aorist in a narrative context accounts for the aspect being "punctiliar." Robert W. Funk, *Beginning-Intermediate Grammar of Hellenistic Greek* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholar's Press, 1973), §312.2a. Robertson notes that there are exceptions: "The hist. pres. is not always aoristic. It may be durative like the imperfect. This point has to be watched. Blass considers that the historical present 'habitually takes an aoristic meaning,' but room has to be left for the durative

> The *aspectual* value of the historical present is normally, if not always, reduced to zero. The verbs used such as λέγει and ἔρχεται, normally introduce an action in the midst of aorists without the slightest hint that an internal or progressive aspect is intended. The historical present has suppressed its aspect, but not its time. But the time element is rhetorical rather than real.[16]

In claiming this, Wallace is not taking a reductionist view so much as he is reacting to the contextual factors. The context ostensibly expects an aorist form, with no semantic need for present tense or imperfective aspect. His claim about the usage being "rhetorical" rather than semantic evidences an understanding of markedness, even if unstated. His effort to minimize the aspect can reasonably be attributed to the HP's departure from expected norms.

Claims regarding vividness and tense reduction share a fundamental presupposition that the usage represents a marked departure from the expected norms for the present indicative. It differs both in terms of *aspect* and *tense*. Claims of zero-tense or zero-aspect are best understood as attempts to reconcile actual usage with prototypical usage for the particular discourse context.[17] We must not neglect factors that make these solutions appealing in the first place. These scholars are all attempting to account for the apparent substitution of a present form in a context that prototypically expects another tense-form, most typically the aorist.[18]

Aspect-only claims

In the last twenty years a proposal has been popularized that Koine Greek verbs do not grammaticalize tense in any mood, including the indicative.

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meaning also" (*Grammar*, 867).

[16] Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 527. See also Kiparsky, "Tense and Mood," 30–57; Reynolds, "Zero Tense," 71–72.

[17] For other problems which make this view untenable, see Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 59–61.

[18] McKay makes the keen observation that the HPs that introduce states of affair at the beginning of pericopes are all "presents in place of normal imperfects" (K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* [SBG 5; New York: Peter Lang, 1994], 42).

Porter takes the most aggressive position, claiming that whatever temporal distinction may be present is better explained as spatial rather than temporal in nature.[19] This view has consequences similar to those confronting the traditional grammarians.

Foregrounding prominence

Porter asserts that the HP stands out not because of the mismatch with the "historical" context, but based on the inherent markedness and prominence of the present tense-form compared to the background aorist and less-foregrounded imperfect. In response to Robertson's argument that the HP functions as a substitute for both the aorist and the imperfect Porter states:

> This theory need not be considered at length, since its linguistic imprecision is self-evident. Those who argue for this theory have placed temporal reference as primary, and hence confused the ability of the historic Present to appear in past contexts with aspectual synonymity . . . More importantly, this theory neglects the fundamental formal opposition of the Present/Aorist in Greek and negates the principle that meaning is choice.[20]

Robertson's claim deserves more consideration. First, Robertson is not equating the meaning of the present with these forms; he is simply describing the mismatch of the present tense to a context prototypically filled by an aorist or imperfect. As with Wallace, the critical observation is made that the present is used where an aorist is expected, and a rhetorical meaning is associated with the choice to use the "wrong" form. Far from negating the principle of choice implying meaning, Robertson and Wallace uphold it by treating the "historical" usage as distinct from prototypical use of the present.[21]

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[19] Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* (SBG 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1989), 239.

[20] Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 194.

[21] Robertson states, "In general one may say that in normal Greek when a certain tense occurs, that tense was used rather than some other because it best expressed the idea of the speaker or writer. Each tense, therefore, has its specific idea. That idea is normal and can be readily understood" (*Grammar*, 829).

In Porter's model, the inherent prominence of the present brings about the pragmatic effects, not the mismatch of the form to the context. Although he holds that "remoteness" is the key distinction between the present and imperfect tense-forms, Porter does not consider the lack of remoteness as contributing to judgments of the HP standing out in narrative contexts; it is the difference in distributional, semantic and morphological markedness compared to the aorist and imperfect forms.[22] He appeals to the foregrounding prominence of the present to explain the effects associated with the HP, not the contextual mismatch of the non-remote form in the remote context. This conclusion leads him to claim that the present tense-form is *always* inherently more marked than either the aorist or imperfect.

If this claim were valid, one should find similar prominence-marking claims made whenever the present is used alongside the aorist. Romans 1:21–27 provides a non-narrative example of such a chain, interrupted in v. 25 by a present indicative in the parenthetical blessing: ὅς ἐστιν εὐλογητὸς εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας, ἀμήν.[23] Far from prominently marking the most salient information of the pericope, the usage is more likely motivated by the semantic requirements of the context. However claims of such non-historical presents marking prominence are lacking in the literature, except by those applying Porter's model. The traditional grammarians restrict their claims to the historical usage alone.

In terms of function, Porter affirms nearly all of the uses traditionally claimed by grammarians including vividness. In this case the vividness is not based on transporting the past event to present time, but upon Porter's theorized background-foreground-frontground prominence model. While theoretically the present tense-form is always prominent, the HP usage seems to be particularly so. Consider Black's summary regarding the use in Matthew 4, applying Porter's model of verbal aspect:

> In Jesus' temptation in the wilderness, Matthew moves from
> fewer to more instances of the historic present in subsequent sec-
> tions of the passage to convey increasing drama as the narrative

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[22] Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 198–207.
[23] Barbara Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament* (4th rev. ed.; Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1993), 410.

builds to a climax. In the first exchange between Jesus and the devil, no present tense-forms are used; in the second exchange two appear; in the climactic third exchange, three present tense-forms appear. Intermixed with other tense-forms in a balanced structure, these make his storytelling more vivid.[24]

Porter makes similar assertions regarding the particular pragmatic effects associated with the HP, despite his claim that such effects should *always* be associated with the present tense-form use in contrast to the aorist on the basis of its purported markedness.[25]

The failure to recognize the mismatch in aspect and remoteness/tense leads Porter to describe the effects associated with the historical usage as prototypical. In many respects the pragmatic effects achieved by the historical usage provide the most convincing support for his claim about the inherent prominence of the present tense-form. Decker applies Porter's model to the usage in Mark, affirming the acceptability of the HP usage without consideration as to why it stands out other than to affirm Porter's view: "The reason the speaker chooses it relates primarily to discourse functions, the more heavily marked form (compared to the aorist) drawing attention to key steps in the course of events or argument."[26] Thus, Porter affirms the pragmatic effects associated with the HP, but simply attributes them to other factors.

In contrast, Campbell considers the mismatch of the present tense-form to the narrative context to be a decisive factor, noting that the imperfect indicative would be better suited both in terms of aspect and proximity for narrative proper: "The absence of remoteness is the feature that marks the present tense-form as a distinct choice as opposed to the imperfect."[27] Just as

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[24] Stephanie L. Black, "The Historic Present in Matthew: Beyond Speech Margins," in *Discourse Analysis and the New Testament: Approaches and Results* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Jeffrey T. Reed; JSNTSup 170; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 135.

[25] See Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 196–97.

[26] Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect* (SBG 10; New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 103.

[27] Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 65. Whereas Porter appeals to the inherent markedness of the present, Campbell accurately appeals to the mismatch of the proximity. Porter's discussion of the HP focuses on the inherent markedness of the form, not

the tense-reduction claim views the HP usage as a mismatch on the basis of tense, Campbell arrives at much the same conclusion in terms of proximity, *contra* Porter and Decker. However, though Campbell notes the correlation of the HP to the aorist by "zero-aspect" adherents like Kiparsky, he does not engage the issue of aspectual mismatch that motivates the claim. He only correlates the HP to the imperfect and not the aorist, leading him to propose a new solution to the problem.

"Spill" from reported speech

Campbell offers a new proposal to account for the apparent mismatch of the HP in narrative proper. He notes that current explanations cannot account for claims of prominence or paragraph marking since counter-examples are easily produced (e.g., HPs encoding mundane events or being found within a paragraph). On the basis of so many HPs being used to introduce reported speech, and the fact that the present tense-form is most often found in this context, Campbell proposes that these HPs "are simply the result of *spill* of the imperfective-proximate nature of the discourse that they introduce; they therefore do not indicate any special discourse function."[28] He cites Stephanie Black as another scholar who has reached the same conclusion.[29] While this claim is novel to say the least, it undermines Campbell's overall proposal regarding aspect.

There is no means of independently corroborating the validity of Campbell's *spill*. Questions regarding why it happens in one context and not in another are left unanswered, with no clear way forward. This proposal also seems to contradict his basic premise regarding choice, meaning and aspect. From a functional standpoint, this explanation is not too different from the reductionist solutions in that it essentially dismisses these uses from consideration. Although he explains their presence, Campbell neglects to

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the mismatch of context versus usage.

[28] Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 66 (emphasis original).

[29] Ibid., 66. Black does not characterize the usage as *spill*, rather she follows the earlier claim of Buth that "the use of the historic present in speech margins in Matthew, especially with λέγω, approaches that of a stereotyped idiom" (Black, "The Historic Present in Matthew," 126).

describe their function in a manner that is consistent with his other claims about the role of aspect in discourse. Note that the ostensive spill is not only of *aspect*, but also of *proximity*. Some examples are needed to illustrate the double mismatch of the HP to the discourse context.

The imperfect is used with verbs of speaking prototypically in three discourse contexts. The first is to introduce an ongoing state-of-affair, such as dialoging that occurs concurrently with or preceding the main action. The Pharisees discussion with Jesus's disciples exemplifies this in Example 1, as their speech is part of a series of circumstantial participles introduced by ἐγένετο recounting the meal held at Matthew's house.

Example 1: Matt 9:11

> Καὶ ἐγένετο αὐτοῦ ἀνακειμένου ἐν τῇ οἰκίᾳ, καὶ ἰδοὺ πολλοὶ τελῶναι καὶ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἐλθόντες συνανέκειντο τῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ. (v. 11) καὶ ἰδόντες οἱ Φαρισαῖοι ἔλεγον τοῖς μαθηταῖς αὐτοῦ, Διὰ τί μετὰ τῶν τελωνῶν καὶ ἁμαρτωλῶν ἐσθίει ὁ διδάσκαλος ὑμῶν;
> As Jesus was having a meal in Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with Jesus and his disciples. (v. 11) When the Pharisees saw this *they said* to his disciples, "Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" (NET)

The mainline aorist indicative resumes in v. 12, recounting Jesus's response to the state-of-affairs.[30] These verbs either introduce offline reported speech, or alternatively indirect speech as states-of-affair.

The second context is at the beginning of a long speech, with the imperfect indicative verb being classified as ingressive, inchoative, or inceptive. Consider the introduction of the Sermon on the Mount in Example 2.

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[30] Other similar examples are found in Matt 9:21, 34; 12:23; 14:4; 21:11; 27:41, 47, 49; Mark 2:16, 24; 3:21, 22, 30; 4:41; 5:8, 28, 30, 31; Luke 4:22; 9:31.

Example 2: Matt 5:2

> Ἰδὼν δὲ τοὺς ὄχλους ἀνέβη εἰς τὸ ὄρος, καὶ καθίσαντος αὐτοῦ προσῆλθαν αὐτῷ οἱ μαθηταὶ αὐτοῦ· (v. 2) καὶ ἀνοίξας τὸ στόμα αὐτοῦ ἐδίδασκεν αὐτοὺς λέγων,
> When he saw the crowds, he went up the mountain. After he sat down his disciples came to him. (v. 2) Then *he began to teach* them by saying (NET)

In such cases the action is cast more as a state-of-affair than a mainline event, preparing the reader for an extended speech.[31]

The third context is redundant mid-speech quotative frames as in Example 3.

Example 3: Mark 2:27

> καὶ ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς, Τὸ σάββατον διὰ τὸν ἄνθρωπον ἐγένετο καὶ οὐχ ὁ ἄνθρωπος διὰ τὸ σάββατον· (v. 28) ὥστε κύριός ἐστιν ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ ἀνθρώπου καὶ τοῦ σαββάτου.
> Then *he said* to them, "The Sabbath was made for people, not people for the Sabbath. (v. 28) For this reason the Son of Man is lord even of the Sabbath". (NET)

A verb of speaking is inserted into an ongoing speech, thus reintroducing the same speaker.[32] It is semantically redundant, but has the effect of segmenting a single speech into smaller parts.

In contrast, HP verbs of speaking typically introduce direct discourse in contexts where they are semantically required, such as changes of speaker or at the beginning of shorter speeches. Few are found in the three prototypical discourse contexts of the imperfect verbs of speaking. More broadly speaking, HPs predominately recount mainline action rather than offline action characterizing the imperfect indicatives. Although "spill" explains a minority of the usage, it is preferable to construe all HP verbs as marked

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[31] Other examples are found in Mark 3:23; 4:2; Luke 3:7; 5:35; 6:20; 10:2; 12:54; 13:6, 18.

[32] Other examples are found in Mark 4:9, 11, 21, 24, 26, 30; 5:9; 6:4, 10; Luke 6:5; 14:12.

usage on the basis of mismatch of tense and aspect intended to accomplish some pragmatic purpose.

Discourse processing hierarchy

Various discourse functions including vividness, paragraph-marking, and prominence-marking have been attributed to the historical use of the present indicative. What is lacking is a theoretical framework that allows the exegete to objectively determine (or as nearly as possible) the discourse function in a given context. The discourse-processing hierarchy that follows provides such a framework. There is a general tendency to claim that a device cannot accomplish more than one discourse task at a time. This tendency runs counter to the actual usage observed in language. Languages are more likely to multi-task than to specialize. Rarely will one idiom only ever accomplish a single thing.

There is a rhyme and reason to how the tasks double up. Instead of creating an "either/or" dichotomy, the processing hierarchy posits that one function is entailed within another. In other words, the hierarchy is simply a prioritized list of assumptions which readers and speakers of a variety of languages appear to utilize in processing discourse. These assumptions have little to do with the specific idiosyncrasies of a given language, and instead seem based upon how human beings cognitively process the world around them. Here is how it works.

Language forms have meanings, including the present indicative. The meaning is shaped by readers forming an understanding of what is prototypical through their use of the language. At some point this understanding shifts from development to judgment, allowing the reader to recognize pragmatically-motivated departures from the expected norms. These norms are not necessarily statistically determinable, but are grounded in the core semantic meaning of the form. When a form like the present indicative is used in a context that fits expected usage, it is understood to be semantically motivated, intended to convey imperfective aspect and proximate temporal deixis. In terms of the processing hierarchy, the determination of an acceptable semantic function ends the quest for an explanation, and the reader moves on.

If a semantic explanation is not found, the quest for relevance moves the reader up the hierarchy to look for an alternative explanation. In the case of the HP, the mismatch of the historical usage with the narrative context leads the reader to judge that some pragmatic function other than conveying the semantics of the present tense-form is intended. The core semantic meaning of the form does not change; it is the reader's understanding of the writer's rationale for its use in the context that changes.

This processing path is evidenced by the attempts of zero-tense and zero-aspect proponents to make the HP more like the expected aorist form.[33] As Campbell notes, the present tense-form is expected in reported speech, not narrative proper. The departure from the expected norm stands out, leading the reader to search about for another explanation. The HP still plays a semantic role, but it is also doing something more.

The first "something more" in the hierarchy is the processing function. This function is accomplished by adding prominence to a discontinuity that was already present in the context. The added prominence moves the reader to segment the text at that juncture, which in turn aids in the organization of the discourse in their mental representation of it.[34] Judgments that HPs signal the beginning or end of a paragraph, or opens a new sequence, etc., are consistent with the quest for relevance described in the hierarchy. If this processing function provides an adequate explanation to the reader, there is no further movement up the hierarchy.

If the device is not needed for processing or represents overkill, then it is accomplishing something else: a discourse-pragmatic function. This function describes the overuse of a device in a series of clauses, like building to a crescendo. It also accounts for the isolated use in a context of relative continuity where the disruption of the discourse is out of place.[35] Using

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[33] It may be that a minority of HPs are used in place of imperfects, but there is no way to know. The goal here is to reconcile traditional claims made by seasoned grammarians. The explanation offered here would apply just as well to imperfects as to aorists.

[34] Knud Lambrecht, *Information Structure and Sentence Form* (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 43.

[35] Steven E. Runge, *Discourse Grammar of the Greek New Testament: A Practical Introduction for Teaching and Exegesis* (Bellingham, Wash.: Logos Bible Software,

redundant or unneeded devices effectively disrupts the flow of the discourse, often generating a sense of suspense or build-up which Longacre describes as a "zone of turbulence."[36] Such contexts may be of local interest, such as the introduction of a significant participant using a verb of motion or perception; they may also be used—even clustered with other devices—just before the climax of the discourse.

These components of the processing hierarchy are summarized in Figure 1. Beginning with the semantic function, hearers continue to move up the hierarchy until an acceptable explanation has been reached.

Figure 1   Discourse Processing Hierarchy

Discourse-pragmatic Function

which
entails

Processing Function

which
entails
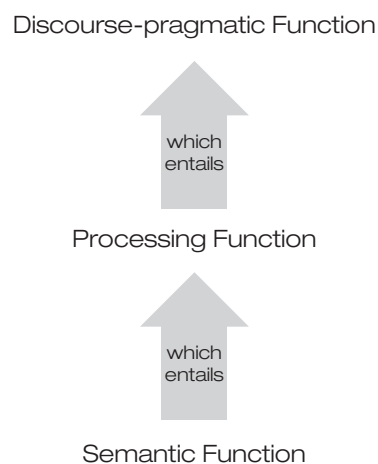
Semantic Function

The lower levels are entailed in the higher ones. For example, if a device is deemed to accomplish a discourse-pragmatic function, it still accomplishes semantic and processing functions.

Recall Porter's model which predicts that *every* present tense-form stands out in the "foreground" in comparison to the aorist based on the semantic, morphological and distributional markedness of the present. This explanation works well in describing the HP, but a rigorous application quickly reveals

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2010), Section 6.2.

[36] Robert E. Longacre, "Discourse Peak as Zone of Turbulence," in *Beyond the Sentence: Discourse and Sentential Form* (ed. Jessica R. Wirth; Ann Arbor: Karoma, 1985), 81–105.

its problems.[37] Significant actions are often expressed in the aorist, viz. the very mainline of the narrative itself. Within reported speeches, present tense-forms are quite natural, and lack the prominence that Porter claims. The processing hierarchy explains the intermittent success of Porter's model.[38] Prototypical usage fulfills the expected semantic function, eliminating the need to move further up the hierarchy for an explanation. If the usage fits expected norms for reported speech or non-narrative, there are no grounds for claiming special prominence.

The use of the present in narrative proper is quite a different matter. Despite its frequency of usage in Mark and John, it nonetheless is processed as somehow marking something. The usage does not fit the expected semantic function, due to the mismatch of tense/proximity and aspect with the discourse context. The fact that these pragmatic effects are associated with only the historical usage argues for describing this use of the present as marked, not prototypical. To claim that the historical use of the present indicative is prototypical grossly misrepresents its core semantic value. Porter and Decker have demonstrated that the present is used in a variety of contexts, but they have erred in the effort to roll all such uses into the core meaning for the form.

To summarize, if the element is semantically required, nothing more can be claimed about its discourse function. If the element is perceived as redundant or out-of-place, the reader moves on to the processing function. The usage highlights a discontinuity in the discourse to ensure that it is properly processed. Again, if this explanation accounts for the presence of the element in the context, nothing more can be claimed. If the marking of the

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[37] See Jody A. Bernard, "Is Verbal Aspect a Prominence Indicator? An Evaluation of Stanley Porter's Proposal with Special Reference to the Gospel of Luke," *FN* 19 (2006): 3–29.

[38] Bernard concludes, "With regard to the pronouncement stories it was discovered that many of the prominent points or climactic sayings employ the present tense or sometimes the perfect tense, which is entirely consistent with Porter's proposal. It was also observed, however, that some of these so-called foreground and frontground tenses occur in background contexts. Furthermore, it became evident that Porter's system does not adequately account for certain restrictions upon aspectual choice, which reduces the likelihood that Luke was invariably free to choose verbal aspect" ("Verbal Aspect," 28–29).

discontinuity is more frequent than is needed for simple processing or viewed as excessive based on the relative continuity of the context, the reader moves further up the hierarchy to pragmatic highlighting. This highest function still draws attention to a discontinuity, still plays a semantic role; but in addition to these it draws attention to a significant speech or event which follows.

The discourse processing hierarchy is extrapolated from solid cognitive research from diverse languages regarding the first two levels.[39] The third is based upon consistent anecdotal claims made by linguists, exegetes and anthropologists regarding the perceived pragmatic effects achieved by excessive discontinuity.[40] The consistency of these judgments is further corroborated by the *ad hoc* conclusions reached by NT scholars regarding the HP. This processing hierarchy provides a typologically sound theoretical framework for reconciling the divergent claims associated with the HP. The HP always accomplishes one thing: highlighting a discontinuity in the context that was already present. The claims of paragraph marking, vividness and cataphoric highlighting are better understood as pragmatic effects attributable to how humans process discontinuity.

Reconsidering the aspect of the historical present

Proponents of both tense-based and aspect-based models have consistently acknowledged that the HP seems to be an irregular usage to say the least. There has been a corresponding effort by both groups to somehow normalize the HP. This was seen in the tense-reduction explanation of the traditionalists. The argument by Porter and Decker that the HP does not grammaticalize time is itself a normalization effort. In their view, the highlighting effects achieved by the HP derive from the inherent prominence of the form itself, not by its mismatch with the narrative context.

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[39] Readers expect active participants to be minimally encoded. Various empirical and descriptive studies have claimed that such over-encoding is processed in various languages as a marker of discontinuity. See Steven E. Runge, "The Effect of Redundancy on Perceptions of Emphasis and Discontinuity" (Paper presented at the Linguistics and Biblical Hebrew Section of the annual meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, New Orleans, La., November 22, 2009), 6–7.

[40] Steven E. Runge, "Discourse-Functional Description of Participant Reference in Biblical Hebrew Narrative" (DLitt diss., University of Stellenbosch, 2007), 182–87.

The verbal aspect of the HP is the crux of the tense-aspect debate, in my opinion. The efforts to normalize the usage have only obscured the bigger picture, for both sides have quashed the fact that the HP usage is actually irregular. The claims regarding its discourse functions are a direct result of the marked departure from expected usage. There are significant ramifications for Porter's model if the HP indeed represents marked usage. Before considering the distributional implications, it is important to understand the basic role played by each indicative tense-form in narrative proper.

Asymmetrical description of narrative tense-forms

There is a significant terminological clarification that needs to be made between Porter's use of the terms *foreground* and *background* and the way they are prototypically used in general linguistics.[41] The distinction between *figure/ground, mainline/offline,* and *background/foreground* is typically used to differentiate two aspects of discourse. The foreground is understood to be the main event line of the narrative, one that often forms something of a connected chain of events. These foreground events advance the plot of the narrative. In contrast, background information does not advance the story; instead it fleshes out needed detail. This function has led some to characterize it as offline information. This binary distinction conceives of the action as linear in nature, likely due to the strong correlation of temporal progression with the narrative mainline. Foreground events are the mainline and advance the plot; background information is offline and represents a pause or interruption of the plot.[42]

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[41] Porter describes his usage as though it were representative stating, "Recent work by linguists in the analysis of discourse differentiates the planes of discourse into three (see Chapter 21): background, foreground and frontground" (*Idioms*, 23). However, he inverts the meaning of foreground and background because of his interest in prominence, thus casting more of a 3-D picture rather than a linear portrayal of the action. My research within linguistic literature revealed no usage of the term *frontground* relating to aspect, action or anything of the type. Instead computer programmers use it as the antonym for background (ostensibly based on the front/back opposition). The only usages I found consistent with Porter's usage were either by Porter himself, or those applying his model in NT studies.

[42] Foley and Van Valin correlate the semantics of certain verb classes with grounding.

Foley and Van Valin note a significant natural correlation between verbal aspect and the foreground/background distinction.[43] The perfective aspect portrays the action "*as a whole*"[44] or as "a complete and undifferentiated process."[45] Since the perfective conceptualizes the action as complete or as a whole, it is not surprising that completed, past-time events are most often portrayed using perfective aspect. This is not to say that perfective action is always past tense, but simply notes the natural correlation. In contrast, imperfective aspect portrays the action as *incomplete*, but without the same kind of natural correlation with time. The imperfective aspect allows the writer or speaker to establish a state of affairs in which perfective action takes place. This could be in a past- or present-tense context.[46]

Campbell provides a useful description of the relationship between background information and the mainline:

The verbs that portray a high degree of transitivity, where agents are acting upon or "doing things" with other things, are most often the mainline/foreground events. In contrast, less-transitive verbs describing states or activity are strongly associated with background/offline information. William. A. Foley and Robert D. Van Valin, *Functional Syntax and Universal Grammar* (Cambridge Studies in Linguistics 38; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 371. See also Levinsohn, *Discourse Features*, 171–72.

[43] Foley and Van Valin, *Functional Syntax*, 371. See Levinsohn, *Discourse Features*, 171–72. Hopper makes a similar point in comparing the correlation of perfective aspect to mainline or foregrounded events, whereas imperfective aspect is associated with support, amplification, or comment on the narration. See Paul J. Hopper, "Aspect and Foregrounding in Discourse," in *Syntax and Semantics* (vol. 12 of *Discourse and Syntax*; ed. Talmy Givón; New York: Academic Press, 1979), 215.

[44] Hopper, "Aspect and Foregrounding," 215.

[45] Porter, *Idioms*, 21.

[46] Foley and Van Valin comment on the natural correlation between foreground/background and perfective/imperfective aspect:

> [T]he perfective aspect is the primary aspectual category found in the temporal structure of narrative discourse in a number of languages and imperfective aspect is primary in durational/descriptive structure (Foley and Van Valin, *Functional Syntax*, 373).

> This finding [the statement on p. 373] is not surprising, since perfective aspect codes completed actions and events and imperfective incomplete events and actions and the former fit more naturally into the temporal structure of narrative, the latter into durational/descriptive structure (*Functional Syntax*, 397).

> The mainline of the narrative text is concerned with the major events, actions, and developments that project the narrative in the direction it is going. Without the sequence of mainline events and actions, offline information, such as supplemental information, inside information, speech and so forth, will not make sense; these require the mainline to provide context and to enable the reader to understand how the narrative arrived at the location where such offline material is meaningful. Offline material is contingent and dependent upon the mainline events.[47]

In this way, the mainline events represent the foreground of the narrative, whereas the offline information typically represents a pause in the advancement of plot.

In terms of the Greek verbal system, the aorist tense-form is understood to encode perfective aspect, portraying the action as a complete and undifferentiated whole.[48] Most scholars—regardless of their view on tense—associate the aorist with the mainline events of the narrative, as expected from cross-linguistic usage. Robertson states, "The aorist . . . is not the only way of expressing indefinite (undefined) action, but it is the normal method of doing so."[49] Decker states, "The aorist is the tense normally used to carry the storyline of the narrative—it moves the account along by specifying the basic events."[50] Campbell echoes this sentiment, claiming that the aorist grammaticalizes perfective aspect and is used for mainline material.[51] Porter is in basic agreement as well, if one takes into account his resignification of the terminology.

The aorist has traditionally been associated with the past tense, which makes sense based on its depiction of the action as an undifferentiated whole. The nature of the aspect correlates to completed events, but does not demand it.[52]

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[47] Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 116.

[48] Porter, *Idioms*, 21.

[49] Robertson, *Grammar*, 831.

[50] Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, 107.

[51] Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 116.

[52] This is an important distinction overlooked by Campbell. Although he rejects the association of tense with aspect, he nonetheless asserts that "the semantic value of remoteness is also encoded within the aorist indicative" (*Verbal Aspect*, 117).

Since there is no other proximate perfective tense-form in Greek, the aorist must play double duty. This explains the use of the aorist in varied temporal or atemporal contexts. In terms of an asymmetrical model of markedness, the aorist is taken as the default tense-form against which the others are described. As Robertson states, "the aorist is the tense used as a matter of course, unless there was special reason for using some other tense."[53] The frequency of aorist forms is thus understood here as a natural consequence of being the most basic form. By virtue of the discourse task perfective verbs perform in narrative, they prototypically occur in high frequency across languages. So while there is apparent agreement with Porter regarding the aorist form being the default tense, I do not draw the same conclusion regarding its prominence.[54]

The imperfect and present tense-forms are understood to encode imperfective aspect, portraying the action as *incomplete.*[55] The imperfect tense-form is associated with past tense for those accepting the presence of tense,[56] and with remoteness for those using an aspect-only model.[57] The cross-linguistic association of the imperfective aspect with offline or background information is general rather than unequivocal. Campbell aptly notes that although there is a strong correlation between the imperfect tense-form and offline information, "imperfects are also able to function within the mainline of narrative proper alongside the aorist, which is the dominant mainline tense-form."[58] Just as the aorist has been heavily associated with past tense, there seems a similar

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This connection of perfective action to past-tense or deictic remoteness is better explained as a natural consequence of its nature and usage rather than as a semantic constraint that it encodes.

[53] Robertson, *Grammar*, 831.

[54] Porter's view presupposes a cause-effect, inversely-proportional relationship between frequency and discourse prominence. In his view, the aorist is the least prominent form due in large part to its high frequency. This leads him to refer to it as the *background* tense, based on its diminished discourse prominence in his model.

[55] See Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, 107; Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 77; Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 89.

[56] See Robertson, *Grammar*, 882.

[57] See Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, 107; Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 77; Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 89.

[58] Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 96. He cites Luke 2:7; 24:30 and John 4:30 as examples of this usage.

propensity for too strongly correlating the imperfect with offline events. Again, the association is best understood as a natural consequence of the discourse role played by the tense-form rather than as a semantic quality. This is exemplified in the parable of the prodigal son in Example 4.

Example 4: Luke 15:14–16

> v. 14 δαπανήσαντος δὲ αὐτοῦ πάντα *ἐγένετο* λιμὸς ἰσχυρὰ κατὰ τὴν χώραν ἐκείνην, καὶ αὐτὸς *ἤρξατο* ὑστερεῖσθαι. (v. 15) καὶ πορευθεὶς *ἐκολλήθη* ἑνὶ τῶν πολιτῶν τῆς χώρας ἐκείνης, καὶ *ἔπεμψεν* αὐτὸν εἰς τοὺς ἀγροὺς αὐτοῦ βόσκειν χοίρους, (v. 16) καὶ <u>ἐπεθύμει</u> χορτασθῆναι ἐκ τῶν κερατίων ὧν ἤσθιον οἱ χοῖροι, καὶ οὐδεὶς <u>ἐδίδου</u> αὐτῷ.
>
> v. 14 Then after he had spent everything, a severe famine *took place* in that country, and *he be*gan to be in need. (v. 15) So he went and *worked for* one of the citizens of that country, who *sent* him to his fields to feed pigs. (v. 16) <u>He was longing</u> to eat the carob pods the pigs were eating, but no one <u>gave</u> him anything.

Most of the actions of the prodigal are encoded using aorists (indicated by italics), even the two verbs of being in v. 14 describing the famine and his need. The actions are viewed as an undifferentiated whole. The imperfects (indicated by bolding) in v. 16 describe ongoing states of affair rather than whole events. These states of affair set the stage for disclosing his decision to return home in v. 17. His decision was not made in a vacuum, but in response to his ongoing need and neglect.

The present tense-form functions as the proximate imperfective counterpart to the imperfect. Although it shares the same aspect, the present is associated with concurrent action by those using a tense-model,[59] and with deictic proximity by those advocating a tense-less model.[60] Decker describes present tense-forms as "often used for various facets of present time reference. This may be in reference to an activity presently in progress . . . or to a condition presently in existence."[61] Campbell provides a compelling case for the strong

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[59] E.g., Robertson, *Grammar*, 864.

[60] Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 207–8.

[61] Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, 99.

association of the present tense-form with direct discourse, ostensibly due to speech being closely related to the speaker in time and/or space.[62] The strength of this correlation provides the impetus for his proposed explanation of the HP representing "spill" from reported speech.

To summarize, the aorist tense-form is understood to be the default form for narrative proper, prototypically used for mainline events to advance the storyline. In contrast, the use of the imperfect marks the action as imperfective in nature, often providing offline description or states-of-affair, but not advancing the narrative. The imperfect has an almost exclusive association with past time reference, whereas the usage of the aorist is less consistent.[63] The present tense-form is differentiated from the aorist by virtue of its aspect, and from the imperfect tense-form by virtue of its tense/proximity.

Mismatch of historical present in narrative proper

The characteristic use of the aorist indicative for mainline events affects the reader's expectations. Using something other than the aorist implies that a meaning is associated with this choice. If a writer wants to portray a narrative action as imperfective, the preferred tense-form is the imperfect. It matches the context in terms of tense/proximity, but contrasts in terms of aspect. If this is the case, what is the relationship of the HP to this system of narrative tense-forms.

We have already noted that the HP is primarily associated with perfective actions rather than with imperfective ones. The present tense-form contrasts with both the aorist and imperfect. It is understood to mark some discourse feature that the aorist or imperfect forms would *not* mark. If the HP was simply intended to mark imperfectivity, there would be no distinction between it and the imperfect form.

There are no claims of prominence, tense-reduction, etc., associated with the use of the imperfect. Hence the HP represents a mismatch of aspect compared to the perfective aorist. The HP also stands out in narrative proper because of its tense/proximity. Mainline narrative events are prototypically past time or

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[62] Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 37–48, 50–52.

[63] Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, 104–6.

remote. The use of a present or proximate form thus represents a mismatch of both tense and aspect in the discourse context. If the HP somehow lost its imperfectivity or proximity, the mismatch would be diminished.

I contend that the use of the present tense-form in narrative proper is *always* intended to mark the presence of a pragmatic feature of discourse, namely highlighting the presence of a natural discontinuity. Regardless of whether the verb is one of propulsion or speech, the usage is construed as intentionally marking this feature. Use of the present tense-form in narrative proper is a non-default usage of the form. In contrast, those advocating a tense-less description of the verb system have described this widespread use of the present as conclusive evidence for the *absence* of tense. Such a claim both misrepresents the usage and the temporal distribution of the forms.

Impact of HP usage as marked on temporal distribution of tense-forms

The aspect-only model of the verbal system claims that what has typically been expressed as a temporal distinction between the tense-forms is better understood as deictic in nature. Furthermore, this deictic distinction is primarily spatial in nature rather than temporal. Nevertheless, Porter acknowledges regarding the distinction between present and imperfect that "it is as this juncture alone that tense forms in Greek—the Imperfect and Pluperfect—approach time-based tense forms."[64] Decker too recognizes the fine distinction between deictics and tense: "Despite the nearly exclusive use of the imperfect form to express past time in Mark, this does not require that the semantic value of the imperfect be defined as that of past time."[65] After referring to the deictic explanations of Porter, Millhouse and Decker, Campbell states "the temporal reference of the imperfect indicative is difficult to disprove, since it is quite consistently past-referring."[66]

If a stronger case could be made for distributional consistency of the tense-forms, then the need to appeal to spatial rather than a temporal

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[64] Ibid., 207

[65] Ibid., 106.

[66] Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, 86.

deixis would diminish as well. Porter and Decker rely upon distributional information for support. They also rely heavily upon their portrayal of the HP as prototypical usage.

Statistics can be a double-edged sword, as their interpretation is heavily affected by presuppositions. As presuppositions change, so do the conclusions yielded by the data. I illustrate this by reconsidering Decker's data regarding the temporal distribution of the three primary indicative tense-forms found in narrative proper.[67] Table 1 contains Decker's figures from Mark that treat the HP as though it were representative use of the present.[68]

Table 1	**Aorist**	**Present**	**Imperfect**
Past	88.6 %	38.8%	97.5%
Present	1.6%	34.2%	Ø
Undefined	9%	6.6%	2.5%
Future	0.8%	20.4%	Ø

At first blush, only the imperfect appears to show a high degree of consistency, exceeding 95%.

Porter and Decker have compellingly shown that Greek is not primarily tense-based. If, however, Greek is a mixed tense/aspect system as the traditional grammarians and typologists have claimed, we should expect to find a strong temporal consistency in the distribution, with the possible exception of the aorist. As noted earlier, the aorist lacks a proximate perfective counterpart, and could thus be expected to manifest more variation. If the language is mixed tense/aspect, one could also expect aspectual considerations to trump temporal ones in certain contexts, leading to something less than 100% consistency.

Since the HP is marked both on the basis of its tense/proximity and aspect, the data cannot legitimately be included in the prototypical description; it must be treated separately. To do otherwise is to misrepresent the core meaning of the present tense-form. It would ignore the fact that the pragmatic effects associated with the HP are only claimed for the historical usage in narrative

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[67] The usage of the perfect indicative in Mark is too limited to be considered here.

[68] Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, 95, 99, 104–6.

proper, not those found in non-narrative contexts like reported speech. In order to truly understand the core semantic meaning of the forms, pragmatically marked usage must be excluded from the overall count.

Another factor is the treatment of temporally undefined data. Due to its atemporal reference, the usage is likely motivated by the core aspectual meaning of the form, as suggested by Smythe[69] rather than by its temporal reference. If this use is part of the core meaning of the form, it should either be included with the core use of the form, or excluded altogether. With respect to the temporal discussion, undefined usage does not prove anything one way or the other.

Table 2 excludes the HP data from the present on the basis that they are not prototypical. In the first column under each tense-form, the "undefined" data is added to the prototypical on the basis that these tokens represent aspectual considerations overriding temporal ones. The second column removes the undefined altogether from consideration. Viewed in this way, they neither prove nor disprove temporal distribution since there is no temporal basis on which to judge.

Table 2	**Aorist**		**Present**		**Imperfect**
	With undefined	Without undefined	With undefined	Without undefined	With/ without undefined
Past	97.4%	97.6%	Ø	Ø	100%
Present	1.7%	1.6%	83.75%	89.2%	Ø
Future	0.08%	0.8%	16.25%	10.8%	Ø

This exercise illustrates that statistical conclusions greatly depend upon one's presuppositions. Changing the presuppositions impacts the conclusions drawn. Understanding the HP usage as non-prototypical significantly impacts the data. For a language which does not grammaticalize temporal information, distributional data approaching or exceeding the 90% seems implausible. The undefined data in each category is reasonably understood as

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[69] H. W. Smythe, *A Greek Grammar for Colleges* (New York: American Book Company, 1920), 412.

aspectually-driven, where the aspectual considerations override the temporal ones. Reclassifying the HP and undefined references clarifies the distributional picture. Although one would hardly expect 100% consistency in the usage, Decker's modified data is approaching that in all but the present. We are now in a position to describe the verbal aspect of the present tense.

Aspect and tense of the present indicative

The only distributional anomaly remaining is the use of the present tense-form for both present and future reference. Gerhard Mussies offered a proposal in 1971 which is suggestive. Rather than classifying the present as communicating present time, he classified it instead as grammaticalizing *non-past* reference. Porter and Decker acknowledge this usage, but see it as further evidence for the disassociation between Greek tense and time. Comrie also describes the Ancient Greek verbal system as using a past/non-past distinction.[70] It is important to understand exactly what is meant by "non-past."

The present tense-form often functions as an unmarked form for non-past reference. Comrie states, "Past versus non-past is . . . the basic tense split in many European languages, with sub-divisions within non-past (especially future as opposed to present) being at best secondary."[71] In English this is exemplified in the ambiguity of the present progressive form. Consider the following example.

Example 1:

Unmarked reference	Explicit future reference
I am going to the store.	I will go to the store.
	I am going to the store on Friday.

The future reference of the present tense-form is also found in Finnish, German, English, Old English, Old French, Latin, and Ancient Greek. So in classifying the present as "non-past," Mussies and Comrie are describing the potentially ambiguous non-past reference of the present. If the writer wants

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[70] Bernard Comrie, *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 53, 97.

[71] Bernard Comrie, *Tense* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 49.

to explicitly mark something as future, the future tense-form or a temporal deictic marker can be used to make the temporal reference explicit.

Lyons also maintains that the present is best construed as non-past, not on the basis of the progressive, but based on the timeless or gnomic usage. "Whereas the past tense does typically refer to 'before-now,' the non-past is not restricted to what is contemporaneous with the time of utterance: it is used for 'timeless' or 'eternal' statements (The sun rises in the east, etc.) and in many statements that refer to the future ('after-now')."[72] More recent studies could be produced discussing this phenomenon, but the work of Comrie and Lyons is cited because their ideas are part of the foundation Porter assembled to support his prominence-based theory of aspect.[73]

To deny the presence of tense in a language based on its ability to refer to more than one temporal sphere ignores the more widespread function and description of tense. It is not only the present tense-form that functions as non-past, but also the perfect. Mussies and Comrie both treat the perfect as non-past. Understood in this way, they form a very elegant system. In the same way that the past-referring imperfect functions in opposition to the present, the past-referring pluperfect functions in opposition to the perfect in the stative.

Table 3	**Imperfective**	**Stative**
Past	Imperfect	Pluperfect
Non-past	Present	Perfect
Future	Future	Future Perfect

The usage of the perfect in Mark is too limited for Decker's data to be useful, other than to note that it primarily has present reference, with a few future

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[72] John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), 306.

[73] See T. Parsons, "The Progressive in English: Events, States and Processes," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 12/2 (1989): 213–41; M. Fludernik, "The Historical Present Tense in English Literature: an Oral Pattern and its Literary Adaptation," *Language and Literature* 17 (1992): 77–107; Nesselhauf, N., and U. Römer, "Lexical-Grammatical patterns in Spoken English," *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics* 12/3 (2007): 297–333.

references. The discussion of the perfect is intended to illustrate the heuristic value of such typological-tested concepts like "non-past." Far from disproving the presence of tense in Greek, the use of the present and perfect conform to expected usage for a mixed tense-aspect system. These factors leave the claim that Greek does not grammaticalize tense difficult to accept.

Conclusion

Porter has done a great service in advancing our understanding of the role of aspect in the Greek verbal system. His threefold classification of the tenses into perfective, imperfective and stative is consistent with the descriptions provided by Robertson and Winer regarding the relationship between the tenses and "kind of action" they express. The aspectual description is also consistent with the cross-linguistic discourse functions of aspect, notwithstanding Porter's resignification of background and foreground. Alongside these advances, however, setbacks were introduced by presupposing that Koine Greek does not grammaticalize tense. At the heart of this was the analysis of the historical present.

I have demonstrated that the HP is best construed as non-typical usage. The pragmatic effects associated with its use in narrative proper[74] are conspicuously missing in regard to reported speeches and epistolary literature, since the latter usage is construed as prototypical. Only those applying Porter's model make such claims, they are not found in earlier grammars or commentaries. The prominence that Porter assigns to the present by virtue of its inherent markedness is likely derivative of the marked rather than default usage. The pragmatic effects derived from the historical use of the present tense-form in Greek are also consistent with HP usage in older Indo-European languages, making Porter's claims of the present's global prominence all the more implausible.[75] Including the historical usage in the prototypical description of the present has confused the description of the verbal system rather than clarified it.

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[74] To narrative proper I would add apocalyptic material, as it is often conveyed as first-person narrative, utilizing historical usage for pragmatic purposes just as in narrative. John's use of the HP in Revelation provides manifest examples of this.

[75] One must also ask whether Porter's proposal is typologically consistent with a tense-less language. See Comrie, *Tense*, 50–53.

Reclassifying the historical usage of the present has a dramatic effect on the distributional picture of the verbal system, bringing about the kind of distributional consistency one would expect from a mixed tense-aspect system. The only other missing element was the recognition that future reference of the present and perfect tenses represents not only acceptable, but possibly expected usage for an Indo-European language. The notion that these are non-past tenses predates the work of McKay or Porter, but was not given due consideration. In terms of the distributional data, my proposal explains more than 95% of the usage for the major tenses, based on the data available from Decker's work in Mark.

It is impossible to draw any definitive conclusions from this study on the basis of Mark's usage alone. As stated earlier, one would not expect 100% consistency in the temporal reference in a mixed tense/aspect language. The impact of tense and aspect on Greek usage is indeed complex, but it is not unknowable. The remarkable consistency exemplified by the distributional data calls for a wider analysis of the usage not only in the NT, but more broadly in Koine. Decker states, "an approach which attempts to minimize semantic exceptions and which simplifies grammatical explanation (without sacrificing precision) is to be preferred."[76] The outline of the verbal system sketched above provides an elegant description that reconciles traditional claims with typological expectations from modern linguistics. The idea that the core semantic meaning of the tense-forms are non-cancelable is also upheld. The marked usage of the HP cancels neither tense nor aspect. It is these very things that make it stand out as marked in the first place. Efforts to cancel either the tense or aspect resulted from failing to treat the marked usage as non-prototypical.

Porter suggests three criteria for evaluating a theory. It must be:[77]

1. Inclusive: able to explain the largest amount of the data,
2. Rational: able to analyze and evaluate the data,
3. Productive: able to provide a foundation for further work.

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[76] Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, 39.
[77] Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 5.

While the conclusions drawn here are necessarily limited due to the application to Mark, the simplicity with which 95% of the data can be explained suggests that it will indeed provide a productive base for further research. The limited goal of this paper was to demonstrate the potential payoff of a typologically grounded model in addressing the conundrum of the Greek verbal system. There is indeed a way forward in the debate, but it necessitates reformulating current explanations of the historical present.

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