Contrastive Substitution and the Greek Verb
Reassessing Porter's Argument

Steven E. Runge
Stellenbosch

Abstract

One of the most compelling proofs Porter offers to substantiate his claim that Koiné Greek does not encode temporal reference in the verb is the test of contrastive substitution. The reasoning goes that if the different tense-forms can be used in the same temporal context, then these forms must convey something other than time, i.e., Greek lacks tense. Porter's primary literature makes clear that his claim is invalid, yet neither he or nor subsequent researchers engage or acknowledge these counterarguments. This raises troubling questions about the adequacy of interdisciplinary peer-review in NT linguistic studies.

Keywords

Interdisciplinary approaches to NT issues have become increasingly popular, utilizing insights from other fields to tackle nagging problems within our field. One of the more popular approaches in Koiné Greek is the application of linguistics to problems not adequately addressed by grammarians and philologists within the guild. However, interdisciplinary work is a double-edged sword: it can have (and has had) great benefits, but only as it is employed in methodologically sound ways. The split focus demands that the scholar be a specialist in multiple disciplines, and that there is rigorous peer-review from both fields. Inadequate engagement with the secondary field can have grave consequences.

Such appears to be the case in Stanley Porter's application of Systemic Functional Linguistics in his *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood* and his continuing work on verbal aspect

and discourse prominence. Despite the fifty page bibliography, Porter's seminal volume offers scant theoretical or methodological substantiation for the claims that are most crucial to his argument that the Greek verb does not encode temporal information. Porter introduces concepts like contrastive substitution, semantic weight, and frontground without providing the requisite theoretical grounding or discussion of methodological constraints governing their legitimate usage. This article is limited to contrastive substitution, but the comments that follow may be applied more broadly to his use of markedness and grounding.

Research conducted for a separate project identified a significant counter-argument from one of Porter's frequently cited articles that he fails to engage or even acknowledge. Skepticism about his claims leveled by Silva and others suggested that a thorough comparison of Porter's claims with the linguistic literature cited as support was called for. This comparison revealed his use of contrastive substitution to be nothing more than a straw-man argument against temporal reference in the Greek verb. In order to avoid anachronism, this critique weighs Porter's claims only against his cited literature to demonstrate his failure to develop a linguistically sound methodological framework. Reference to more recent linguistic work is reserved for demonstrating that knowledge of these issues has not fundamentally changed to lend any new credence to his claims. Thus the numerous warnings from Porter's primary literature against the veracity of his thesis that Greek verbs lack temporal reference are ignored rather than engaged.

1   Background

One of Porter's most significant claims is that the Greek tense-forms do not encode time. He states, "my formulation utilizes contrastive substitution to illustrate that absolute temporal categories (such as past, present and future) are not grammaticalized by the verb forms even in the indicative mood and that a particular verbal aspectual semantic feature is grammaticalized by a given verb form."[1] In later work—as well as in his published dissertation—the "absolute" qualifier unceremoniously drops out of use, leading to a much

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1   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) 32.

broader and unsubstantiated claim that Greek verbs do not convey any temporal meaning.[2]

Porter introduces the notion of contrastive substitution without much discussion or citation. He cites what he claims are contrastive examples from Greek and then draws his conclusions and moves on. Those who have followed after him have largely cited Porter's examples, summarized his conclusions, and also moved on.[3] There is no discussion of where this test originated, what parameters guide appropriate selection of contrastive examples, or what can legitimately be concluded from its application to the use of different tense-forms in ostensibly the same temporal context. Porter's claims have been accepted at face-value on the assumption that Porter has applied a methodologically appropriate linguistic proof.

Despite the generally broad acceptance of Porter's claims about Greek being a highly aspectual language, there has been a nagging reluctance among some to fully embrace his ideas.[4] Silva's comments are representative of the conundrum Porter's work presents, and serve as a point of departure for what follows: "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."[5] The misgivings that Silva describes about implementation appear to be a natural consequence of misapplying what are otherwise linguistically sound principles.

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2   See 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.

3   See Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect* (Studies in Biblical Greek 10; New York: Peter Lang, 2001) 34; David Matthewson, *Verbal Aspect in the Book of Revelation: The Function of Greek Verb Tenses in John's Apocalypse* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2010) 24.

4   See Moisés 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) 74-82; Schmidt, "Verbal Aspect in Greek"; Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 504-512; Kenneth Leslie McKay, "Time and Aspect in New Testament Greek," *NovT* 34 (1992) 209-228; Robert E. Picirilli, "The Meaning of the Tenses in New Testament Greek: Where Are We?," *JETS* 48, no. 3 (2005) 533-555; Jody Bernard, "Is Verbal Aspect a Prominence Indicator? An Evaluation of Stanley Porter's Proposal with Special Reference to the Gospel of Luke," *Filología Neotestamentaria* 19 (2006) 3-29.

5   Silva, "A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect," 77 (italics his).

2   Contrastive Substitution and the Nature of Tense

In *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament*, where Porter first employs contrastive substitution, his citation makes it sound as though the cited scholars support his claim: "Applying this to the Greek examples above, it becomes clear according to a principle of contrastive substitution (see Curtius, *Elucidations*, 209; Bache, *Aspect*, 1; cf. Collinge, 'Reflections,' 89 n. 1, as well as several grammarians analyzed in chapt. 1)—by which the identical form is used in different temporal contexts—that Greek does not grammaticalize absolute tense with the Present . . ."[6] A nearly identical citation is found only a few pages later as he introduces verbal aspect on the basis of a second set of contrastive examples—verbs of speaking and knowing—supported by the same reference to "Curtius, *Elucidations*, 209; Bache, *Aspect*, 1ff.; Collinge, 'Reflections,' 89 n. 1; and several grammarians [see chapt. 1]."[7] However, the cited pages are of little relevance to his claim about how to appropriately use contrastive substitution as a test, let alone what conclusions can be legitimately drawn from it. In other words, neither Porter nor these cited pages provide any methodological safeguards or constraints to protect against the fallacious or inappropriate use of this test.[8]

The page cited from Curtius falls in the midst of his argument for the Greek verb encoding two things: grade of time (past, present, future from the speaker's standpoint) and kind of time (continuous [i.e., Porter's imperfective], completed [i.e., Porter's stative] and *eintredende* [i.e., Porter's perfective]).[9] There is reference in a footnote on p. 208 to speaking of "timeless tense" for pedagogical reasons, ostensibly to help tense-oriented English students to gain facility

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6   Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament: With Reference to Tense and Mood* (Studies in Biblical Greek 1; New York: Peter Lang, 1989) 79.

7   Ibid., 83.

8   A survey of the grammarians from Chapter 1 reveals little of value to his argument; all treat the Greek verb as a mixture of temporal reference and kind of action. The discussion about Goodwin and Smyth mentions contrast, but not contrastive substitution (ibid., 24, 26). Brugman and Wackernagel reference the notion that Proto Indo-European verbs were once timeless, but this is to explain why some timeless uses exist. Both view Greek as having temporal reference (ibid., 29, 31). Wackernagel, Hartmann, Rijksbaron and Holt note the apparent semantic overlap of certain usages, e.g. aorist vs. imperfect, but this does not dissuade them from arguing in favor of temporal reference (ibid., 31, 33, 38, 40). Buttman, Green and Burton observe the same phenomenon as well, but none use this as a basis for arguing against the presence of temporal reference in Greek (ibid., 52, 53).

9   Georg Curtius, *Elucidations of the Student's Greek Grammar* (trans. Evelyn Abbott; 2d ed.; London: John Murray, 1875) 208-209.

in viewing Greek verbs as primarily aspectual, especially the non-indicative ones. But Curtius is quite adamant about the presence of temporal reference alongside what sounds like aspect.[10] Unlike Porter, Curtius does not contrast use of the same form in different temporal contexts. Rather his interest is in comparing the aorist, imperfect and pluperfect indicatives of γίνομαι to describe "another notion in addition to that of past time, and of quite a different nature," his kind of time.[11] So there is reference to contrast and opposition on pp. 209-210, but never to highlight use of the same form in different temporal contexts as Porter does. Curtius is in clear disagreement with Porter's assertion that Greek verbs do not encode temporal reference, and he does not employ contrastive substitution to apparently overlapping temporal reference.

The cited footnote from Collinge is something of a digression from the main text, where his primary focus is how to formulate an historical and comparative description of the Latin verb in the broader context of older Indo-European languages like Greek and Sanskrit.[12] The discussion within the footnote concerns case, not tense, and primarily Latin rather than Greek: "so in Greek sometimes acc. = dat. = gen . . . These considerations make it difficult to establish separate terms in the category of case unless there is a clear-cut formal difference. Otherwise even where there might be contrastive substitution this is very hard to be sure of; does *tota erras via* (Ter. *Eun.* 245) mean 'you err all along the line' (loc.), '. . . from the whole true course' (abl.), or '. . . by a whole street's length' (instr.)? Is there any point in trying to decide?"[13] His use of the qualifier "even where" in reference to contrastive substitution suggests he considers it insufficient evidence to erase a semantic (his "formal") distinction. However, he uses contrastive substitution in a much different sense than Porter; it is not

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10   "The older grammarians treated the aorist throughout, and the perfect also in part, as tenses of past time. But the analysis of the forms proves in the most striking manner [cp. pp. 105, 112] that language possesses no other means whatever to denote past time generally than the augment; and therefore the denotation of past time can only be primarily assumed where the augment stands—that is, in the imperfect pluperfect and indicative of the aorist, and therefore generally in the indicative only." Ibid., 207.

11   Ibid.

12   The footnote follows this statement: "On what evidential basis would a descriptive synchronic analyst of the classical Latin verb-system set up, as separate terms, the present-tense and past-tense *valores* of the perfect forms, when there is no formal distinction to be observed? Is such a separation any more defensible than the synchronic distinction of the instrumental from the ablative function within the formal bundle of the 'septimus casus' of the noun?" N.E. Collinge, "Some Reflexions on Comparative Historical Syntax," *Archivum Linguisticum* 12 (1960) 88-89.

13   Ibid., 89, n. 1.

a test but some kind of substitutionary usage. In the broader context Collinge makes some reference to the difficulty of nailing down the temporal reference of the perfect, but again this is with respect to Latin rather than Greek. It is unclear how these grammarians meaningfully contribute to Porter's point, or justify his linguistic methodology.

3   Selection of Contrastive Examples

Bache is the only linguist Porter cites as support for contrastive substitution, but the citation is limited to the introductory page of Bache's 1985 monograph, *Verbal Aspect: a General Theory and Its Application to Present-Day English*.[14] Unfortunately he does not cite Bache's discussion in §1.1 and §2.2 outlining linguistic principles that guide appropriate selection of contrastive examples, which Bache then applies to the study of verbal aspect in English and Russian. He also published an article in the same year which provides a concise summary of the same information, but this is not included in Porter's bibliography.[15] Bache divides contrastive examples into four different groups, based on whether the forms can be substituted for one another, and whether there is a truth-conditional distinction between them (i.e. whether the propositional meaning is changed, or simply the conceptualization of the proposition).[16]

Bache's first group consists of what he calls "-opposition," those forms that lack a viable counterpart, where substitution is not an option. In such cases the speaker has no choice regarding use of one aspectual form or another.[17] Where there is no choice, there is no special meaning that can be assigned to the usage.[18] Since Greek lacks a non-past tense-form corresponding to the aorist, we should not be surprised to find either the aorist or the present being used to fill in this gap.[19]

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14   Carl Bache, *Verbal Aspect: A General Theory and Its Application to Present-Day English* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1985). To be fair, Porter does use "1ff." in his second citation of Bache on p. 83, but it is difficult to see this as an intentional reference to Bache's subsequent discussion of contrastive substitution.

15   Carl Bache, "The Semantics of Grammatical Categories: A Dialectical Approach," *Journal of Linguistics* 21, no. 1 (1985) 51-77.

16   Bache, *Verbal Aspect*, 44.

17   Ibid., 37-38.

18   Bache, "The Semantics of Grammatical Categories," 64-65.

19   Russian and certain Romance languages also lack a present perfective form; see Martin Haspelmath, ed., *Language Typology and Language Universals: An International Handbook* (Walter de Gruyter, 2008) 561.

The second kind of contrastive examples have a counterpart—hence +opposition—but cannot be substituted with one another without creating an ungrammatical or unacceptable form in the context, hence they are -substitutable.[20] The action described by such verbs could be "sudden, instantaneous actions and punctual inceptions of states," which by definition disallows representation as imperfective due to their inherently perfective semantics. The converse could be disallowed as well where some "stative situations which are either vague or so extended in time that we often do not think of them as having a beginning or end resist perfective presentation".[21] Aubrey offers the following example from Ancient Greek to illustrate this category:

a. Ιουδας ἧκεν εἰς Οδολλαμ πόλιν.
    Judas arrived in the city of Odollam (2 Macc 12:38).
b. *Ιουδας ἧκεσεν(?) εἰς Οδολλαμ πόλιν.

"Throughout most of the history of Ancient Greek, this verb was only grammatically acceptable when used with the imperfective aspect, since it denoted both progress toward an endpoint as well as the endpoint itself, and thus naturally expressed the imperfective aspect's 'internal temporal constituency' (Comrie 1976). In both the case of the English and the Greek, the difference in choice involves grammaticality versus ungrammaticality."[22] So although theoretically there is a choice since there is a corresponding form available, the choice is not "free" since it is not grammatically acceptable in the context.[23]

Bache's third category of examples is described as +opposition, +substitutable and +distinctive, "where a replacement of aspect produces a very distinct change in meaning."[24] The choice of one member of this group over another is motivated by the speaker's wish: "to appropriately describe one world state rather than another, may force the native speaker to use a particular form."[25] The examples Porter uses on p. 83 at his introduction to verbal aspect fit into this +distinctive group:

20   Bache, *Verbal Aspect*, 41-42.
21   Ibid., 40.
22   Michael Aubrey, "The Greek Perfect and the Categorization of Tense and Aspect: Toward a Descriptive Apparatus for Operators in Role and Reference Grammar" (unpublished manuscript, November 30, 2012; forthcoming MA thesis, Trinity Western University) 44-45.
23   Bache, "The Semantics of Grammatical Categories," 65.
24   Bache, *Verbal Aspect*, 38.
25   Bache, "The Semantics of Grammatical Categories," 65.

Luke 21:10: τότε ἔλεγεν αὐτοῖς (then he was saying to them)
Luke 20:41: εἶπεν . . . πρὸς αὐτούς (he said . . . to them)
Acts 20:38: τῷ λόγῳ ᾧ εἰρήκει (the word which he spoke)[26]

Bache summarizes, "[I]n {+distinctive} constructions, the semantic differences between the aspects [that] emerge [are] very clear and easily identifiable,"[27] making them very appropriate for Porter's discussion here.[28]

The final category is +opposition, +substitutable and -distinctive, where substituting a form "only results in a change of the speaker/writer's view of the situation referred to and/or a slight stylistic change."[29] Elsewhere Bache claims it "results in a notional change of a propositionally more or less neutral kind," where the examples are essentially "saying the same thing *but in different ways*."[30] Rather than grammaticality or objective description of some state of affairs driving the speaker's choice, "the /-distinctive/constructions may be determined by the native speaker's overall organization of his or her message, and by expressive or stylistic factors."[31] One's description must be able to account for this fourth group, but description is only possible after the basic meaning and other contextual factors have been discretely accounted for.

Here is where the methodological fallacy arises with Porter's application. Examples from Bache's fourth "-distinctive" group—those which lack a clear semantic distinction—are used to disprove the presence of absolute tense in Greek, whereas examples from the +distinctive group provide the basis for his description of verbal aspect. In other words, Porter only considers the portion of the data that makes his point, without considering the remaining portion.

Here are the present indicative examples Porter cites:

Matt 8:25: Κύριε . . . ἀπολλύμεθα (lord . . . we are perishing)
Mark 11:27: καὶ ἔρχονται πάλιν εἰς Ἱεροσόλυμα (and they were coming again into Jerusalem)
Matt 26:18: πρὸς σὲ ποιῶ τὸ πάσχα μετὰ τῶν μαθητῶν μου (with you I am going to make the Passover with my disciples)

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26   Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 83.
27   Bache, *Verbal Aspect*, 46.
28   For a more specific discussion of why this +distinctive class of examples should be utilized for establishing the "basic meanings" of a tense or aspectual form, see Bache, "The Semantics of Grammatical Categories," 94-95.
29   Bache, *Verbal Aspect*, 41.
30   Bache, "The Semantics of Grammatical Categories," 65 (italics his).
31   Ibid., 66.

Matt 7:19: πᾶν δένδρον μὴ ποιοῦν καρπὸν καλὸν ἐκκόπτεται καὶ εἰς πῦρ βάλλεται (every tree not making good fruit is cut off and thrown into the fire)

2 Cor 9:7: ἱλαρὸν γὰρ δότην ἀγαπᾷ ὁ θεός (for God loves a joyful giver)[32]

These examples represent a collection of anomalies, with the exception of the first one. Mark 11:27 is an historical present, an intentional mismatch of tense and aspect with the narrative context to bring about certain pragmatic effects.[33] Matt 26:18 represents typical "non-past" usage of the present found in many Indo-European languages, and which Bache notes is prevalent in English.[34] "I am eating dinner with them [on Monday]" manifests the same kind of temporal ambiguity which is resolved by contextual indicators like temporal adverbs.[35] Both Comrie and Lyons treat the present indicative in Ancient Greek as a non-past, just as Gerhard Mussies did back in 1971.[36] The inappropriateness of treating the present indicative as though it must only refer to the immediate present should have been clear based on the literature Porter claims to have surveyed. His failure to adopt the more standard treatment of the Greek present as "non-past" effectively creates a straw man which enhances his argument. He does discuss the "non past-referring tenses," but not in the same sense; instead it refers to the use of the imperfect, aorist and present indicative for non-past reference, ostensibly to reinforce his claim that they lack any temporal reference.[37]

The final two examples draw attention to a hole in the Greek verbal system—lack of a present perfective—being filled by an available form. This hole was noted in the discussion of Bache's "–opposition" group, and Porter's

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32　　Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 75.

33　　Steven E. Runge, "The Verbal Aspect of the Historical Present Indicative in Narrative," in *Discourse Studies and Biblical Interpretation: A Festschrift in Honor of Stephen H. Levinsohn* (ed. Steven E. Runge; Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2011) 213-214.

34　　Bache, *Verbal Aspect*, 3. More specifically, he notes the departure from a past/present/future division to the more accurate past/non-past.

35　　For a thorough treatment of such temporal indicators in Greek, see Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb*.

36　　Bernard Comrie, *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems* (Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics; Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 53, 97; John Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1968) 306; Gerhard Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek, as Used in the Apocalypse of St. John: A Study in Bilingualism* (NovTSup 27; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971) 250-255.

37　　Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 188-239.

final two examples illustrate how Greek compensates for this missing form. Lyons notes that the present perfective is characteristically used for timeless or eternal statements, what NT grammarians have called atemporal or gnomic.[38] In Greek aorist or present indicative forms are typically used in such contexts, ostensibly depending upon whether the perfective aspect of the aorist or the non-past temporal reference of the present is more salient.[39] To put it in Bache's terms, timeless/gnomic statements represent a -substitutable situation where the writer did not have a non-past perfective option.

Such -distinctive examples need to be addressed in a discussion of tense, but not to the exclusion of +distinctive examples where a meaningful temporal distinction clearly exists. Compare the meaningful temporal distinction created between the two states of affair in the following example. Both represent the action as imperfective, but differ in the temporal relation of the action to the speaker's own frame of reference:

> Matt 13:13 ὅτι βλέποντες οὐ *βλέπουσιν* καὶ ἀκούοντες οὐκ ἀκούουσιν (seeing, they are not seeing and hearing they are not hearing).
> Acts 9:8 ἀνεῳγμένων δὲ τῶν ὀφθαλμῶν αὐτοῦ οὐδὲν *ἔβλεπεν* (his eyes being open, he was not seeing)

Instead of considering both kinds of examples, Porter begins and ends his discussion of temporal semantics using only -distinctive examples and proceeds on the assumption that this is correct.

Bache warns against this kind of oversimplification of linguistic complexity—like Porter's use of absolute categories—by referencing the historical problem of describing Russian aspect, a language which incidentally utilizes separate morphological marking for "tense" and "aspect."[40] Russian does not have overlapping tense-aspect markers like Greek. This suggests that Greek potentially represents a more complex situation than Russian. Nevertheless, Porter does not adopt or even discuss the methodological considerations provided by Bache.

Porter's misapplication of contrastive substitution is directly attributable to his failure to adopt a linguistically informed theoretical framework, one that would safeguard against drawing such fallacious conclusions. The citation of Collinge, Curtius, and page 1ff. of Bache proved meaningless in light of Bache's methodological discussion later in the cited volume. Porter's use of -distinctive

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38   See Lyons, *Introduction to Theoretical Linguistics*, 306.
39   Runge, "The Verbal Aspect of the Historical Present Indicative in Narrative," 215-216.
40   Bache, *Verbal Aspect*, 92.

examples to argue against absolute tense contrasts sharply with the +distinc-
tive examples he uses to highlight aspectual distinctions. The absence of any
guiding linguistic framework enabled him to select tokens that best suit his
purposes in the given context.

Example selection aside, there are more significant questions that still
remain unanswered. What exactly does the application of contrastive substi-
tution to the apparent semantic overlap between tense and aspect tell us? Can
it really demonstrate the absence of tense? How does Porter's application of
this test compare to that found in the field of linguistics?

4   Claims from Contrastive Substitution

Although the methodological fallacies have been presented regarding the
kinds of examples Porter selected, the question of what can be legitimately
concluded from properly applying contrastive substitution remains unan-
swered. The review of his cited literature reveals another relevant discussion
on what can legitimately be concluded from it. Stephen Wallace, whose semi-
nal work on grounding is foundational to Porter's background-foreground
model, uses a *reductio ad adsurdum* argument that demonstrates the limited
value of Porter's claims regarding absolute tense.[41] Porter's frequent refer-
ence to Wallace's work creates the sense that he is intimately familiar with it.
The first five pages of his twenty-three page article discuss the same kind of
-distinctive tense usages as Porter, but are used to reach the opposite conclu-
sion. Wallace's contrastive examples are drawn primarily from English, though
there is reference to Ancient Greek. He makes much the same point as Bache
by showing what cannot be concluded from less-prototypical examples. Porter
does not engage Wallace's discussion of what can reasonably be concluded
from applying contrastive substitution.

Porter claims that "it becomes clear according to a principle of contras-
tive substitution (see Curtius, *Elucidations*, 209; Bache, *Aspect*, 1; cf. Collinge,
'Reflections,' 89 n. 1, as well as several grammarians analyzed in chapt. 1)—by
which the identical form is used in different temporal contexts—that Greek

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41   See 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) 201-223.

does not grammaticalize absolute tense with the Present..."[42] Compare this with Wallace's discussion of tense in English:

> The problems with the classical trinity [i.e. tense, mood and aspect], 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—the semantic fields to which the formal categories of tense, aspect, and mode [mood] are supposed to refer—are almost inextricably scrambled together.[43]

Wallace claims that it is nearly impossible to neatly separate tense from aspect at the level of semantics. He uses "trinity" in an ostensibly technical sense to describe things that are distinct-yet-inseparable. A similar claim is found in another oft-cited work, that of John Lyons: "...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."[44] Bache too has something to say on the matter: "Thus, in our metalanguage we must specify aspect, tense and Aktionsart as separate categories and the distinctive intersection between them as intercategorial relations."[45] All three linguists refer to the same cross-linguistic problem: what seems like a clear distinction in theory gives way to fuzzy boundaries in practice. Their comments are not directed toward a specific language, but to a more pervasive problem, i.e. that few features of language fit neatly into absolute categories. Nevertheless, this is precisely how Porter treats tense—as though it must always have the same temporal reference—in order to consider it present in a language.

There are indeed languages like Burmese or Chinese which lack the characteristic tense markers on the verb itself; this is precisely what we see in the non-indicative moods of Greek. In such cases writers and speakers rely instead on other devices to convey this information. However, if Greek verbs truly lack any temporal reference as Porter claims, we would expect to find more typologically attested characteristics, e.g., having the imperfective aspect construed

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42   See also Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 79; Porter, "In Defense of Verbal Aspect," 34; Stanley E. Porter, "Prominence: An Overview," in *The Linguist as Pedagogue* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell; Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2009) 58-59.

43   Wallace, "Figure and Ground," 202.

44   John Lyons, *Semantics* (vol. 2; Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) 690.

45   Bache, *Verbal Aspect*, 94.

as present-referring and the perfective aspect as past-referring.[46] Greek does not fit this profile on several counts, the most compelling of which being that the indicative mood attests two tense-forms conveying imperfective (present and imperfect) and stative (perfect and pluperfect) aspect. The meaningful distinction between these two forms has always been understood—by linguists and grammarians alike—as temporal reference. There is also the matter of the epsilon augment in the indicative that is absent in the non-indicative moods, which has led linguists like Lyons and Wallace to treat Greek as tensed on the basis of verbal morphology.[47] Thus, something more sophisticated than an absolute division between tense and aspect is called for, with particular attention given to the interplay between the two.

More damning to Porter's application of contrastive substitution to Greek is Wallace's *reductio ad adsurdum* argument drawn from his application *to English*. By Porter's standards, the use of different tense forms in the same temporal context should conclusively demonstrate that temporal reference is not a semantic component of the English verb, dispelling the widely accepted notion that English verbs encode temporal reference. Wallace states:

> But "present" and "past" tenses are by no means free from meanings traditionally classified as modal. Note the pervasive existence of the "historical present"—the "present" tense used to narrate past events—in languages such as Greek, Latin, English, French, Georgian, and Bulgarian (Comrie 1976:73-8; Bennett 169; Goodwin 269). The effect of such usage is supposedly to make the narrative more "lively" or "vivid" (but see Wolfson). 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?"…

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46   For a discussion of the characteristics of tenseless languages, see Comrie, *Aspect*, 82-84; Lyons, *Semantics*, 682-687; D.N. Shankara Bhat, *The Prominence of Tense, Aspect, and Mood* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1999) 15, 28-31; Carlota S. Smith, "Time With and Without Tense," in *Time and Modality* (ed. Jacqueline Guéron and Jacqueline Lecarme; Dordrecht: Springer, 2008) 161-182.

47   Lyons, *Semantics*, 704; Wallace, "Figure and Ground," 202; for a thorough discussion of the augment, see Trevor Vivian Evans, *Verbal Syntax in the Greek Pentateuch: Natural Greek Usage and Hebrew Interference* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

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? At least to me it would seem that when authors talk about the "imaginative use of tenses" (Babbitt 264) or the "illusion of presentness" (Comrie 1976:74), they are no longer talking about time but something else. *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.*[48]

Several important points can be drawn from Wallace's discussion.

First, Wallace does not claim that temporal reference is absent in English on the basis of contrastive substitution. He concludes instead that it illustrates the complexity of the issues. Less-prototypical use of a tense-form is shown to accomplish a pragmatic effect normally associated with modality. Even a highly time-oriented verbal system like English does not grammaticalize uncancelable, absolute temporal reference.[49] In fact, he seems incredulous that such a thing is even possible. Yet this is the standard to which Porter holds the Greek indicative tense-forms, and not surprisingly finds them wanting. From a linguistic standpoint, Porter's claim that Greek indicative tense-forms do not grammaticalize absolute tense is both valid and meaningless. Wallace's use of the same kind of evidence from English exposes the fallacy of Porter's claim.

In Rodney Decker's application of Porter's non-temporal view of the verb to the book of Mark, he defends Porter's application of contrastive substitution by providing what he considers to be a comparable example from English:

> As an English example of the method, consider this sentence: 'Casey is stealing second.' Assuming the context of a radio announcer narrating a baseball game in progress, the semantic force of the verb can be evaluated by asking what change would result from substituting the verb 'stole'

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48   Wallace, "Figure and Ground," 202-203 (emphasis added).

49   This calls into question how the notion of "cancelability" has been applied in recent discussions of the Greek verb. For a recent application of this concept to a timeless view of the verb see Constantine 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) 26-27.

in the same sentence. Because English is a tensed language, changing a present tense for a past tense changes the meaning of the sentence from a present time reference (the announcer describing the action of the base runner in progress as he speaks) to a past reference (appropriate only in reference to a previously stolen base). Porter's argument is that this would not necessarily be true in Greek—different forms could be substituted without necessarily changing the time reference. He demonstrates this by citing examples with different forms that have the same time reference and the same form having different time references (see above).[50]

Decker avoids the messiness noted by Wallace by using +distinctive examples from English while accepting Porter's -distinctive examples from Greek. His example also contrasts a present imperfective "is stealing" with a past perfective "stole." The same methodological inconsistency is observed here as was noted in Porter's examples. Comparing different portions of the +distinctive/-distinctive data as though it was equivalent obscures what should have been revealed from a proper linguistic analysis. Had perfective verbs been used for both of Decker's examples, the non-past "Casey steals second" would have been construed as an historical present. Both would be understood as having past temporal reference; the temporal semantics of the present perfective would not have vanished. Instead, the past temporal context would have evoked pragmatic implicatures associated with the historical present.

Wallace demonstrates that the supposedly overlapping usage is not semantically redundant, but instead brings about pragmatic effects such as politeness (e.g., "Did you want me?").[51] Such examples highlight the complexity and messiness of language, something which Porter appears unwilling to acknowledge. Although he notes the role implicature plays in differentiating semantic meaning from contextual effects—citing the work of Comrie, Lyons and Grice—he fails to apply same principle to analysis of his contrastive examples.[52]

Porter's frequent reference to Wallace's work omits what can reasonably be concluded from contrastive substitution or from the claim that a language lacks absolute tense. Wallace's account of semantic overlap as pragmatically motivated to bring about nuanced meanings is consistent with Bache's work.

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50   Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb*, 183, n. 37.
51   For a similar point made by a NT scholar, see Picirilli, "The meaning of the tenses in New Testament Greek," 544.
52   Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 82-83.

Far from disproving the presence of temporal meaning in the tense-form, a linguistically informed application of contrastive substitution highlights the *complexity* of the system.

It is not just tense that can be misused; aspect and mood may be similarly employed for certain contextual effects. In English, progressive aspect is perfectly acceptable for events, e.g., "It is raining." However, a disingenuous effect can be created by using a progressive form to describe a quality or state, e.g., "John is being nice."[53] States typically are or are not present, i.e., "John is nice." Stating the same information using a progressive form carries an added implicature: that John being nice may not always hold true. Wallace notes comparable implicatures achieved by using progressive aspect with verbs of cognition: "'I am hoping you'll come' is less certain than 'I hope you'll come.'"[54]

The merit of Porter's claim is made clear if we apply the same reasoning to the "misuse" of tense or aspect in English. His insistence on absolute categories contrasts sharply with Wallace's insistence that the pragmatic interplay of tense and aspect is too complex for absolutes. Current linguistic treatments of tense, aspect and mood have dropped absolute categories, opting instead for functional descriptions that better model actual language data, but as noted above the linguists Porter cites were already aware of such issues.[55]

There is one final matter to address regarding Porter's claim about absolute tense. Schmidt calls attention to Porter's subtle expansion from claiming that the Greek indicative lacks "absolute" tense to claiming it lacks *any* temporal reference.[56] "This seems to make it an over-generalization that is more difficult to support. 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."[57] Porter thus moves from a claim that would apply to most languages of the world (lack of absolute tense) to one that

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53   See Vladimir Zegarac, "Relevance Theory and the Meaning of the English Progressive," *University College London Working Papers in Linguistics* 1 (1989) 19-31.

54   Wallace, "Figure and Ground," 204.

55   See also Bhat, *The Prominence of Tense, Aspect, and Mood*; Maria Napoli, *Aspect and Actionality in Homeric Greek: A Contrastive Analysis* (Materiali Linguistici 54; Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2006) 24-28; D.O. Moomo, "The Meaning of the Biblical Hebrew Verbal Conjugation from a Crosslinguistic Perspective" (D.Litt. dissertation, University of Stellenbosch, 2004) 120-192.

56   Cf. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 77 with 78.

57   Schmidt, "Verbal Aspect in Greek," 70-71.

would apply to relatively few (complete absence of temporal reference in the verb), yet without providing any justification for doing so.[58]

The unqualified claim in his *Verbal Aspect* volume does not appear to be an accidental imprecision. Unambiguous assertions in subsequent work also lack the "absolute" qualification. Consider the sweeping claim from the 1992 "Porter/Fanning debate," *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*:

> In the period since my initial work on verbal aspect, and after having pursued much further research in this area, I believe now more than ever that I was essentially correct in my analysis of the Greek verbal structure as a coordinated system of three verbal aspects grammaticalized by three major tense-forms, in which temporal reference is not grammaticalized in either the indicative or the non-indicative mood-forms.[59]

Another is found in his 2009 article on prominence from *Linguist as Pedagogue*:

> 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.[60]

Porter only provides argumentation for claiming the absence of absolute tense in the Greek verb. He then broadens it to exclude any temporal reference in the verb. Wallace's work exposes the fallacy of both claims, arguing instead for a more sophisticated account of the interplay between tense and aspect.

5   Conclusion

Interdisciplinary studies have an important role to play in resolving open questions within our field, but simply adding a secondary field will not guarantee

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58   For a discussion of the characteristics of tenseless languages, see Comrie, *Aspect*, 82-84; Lyons, *Semantics*, 682-87; Bhat, *The Prominence of Tense, Aspect, and Mood*, 15, 28-31.

59   Porter, "In Defense of Verbal Aspect," 34.

60   Porter, "Prominence," 58-59.

the results. Some linguistic studies have significantly advanced our under-standing of Greek grammar. Porter is to be commended for his work in popu-larizing the importance of verbal aspect for understanding Koiné Greek verbs. Nevertheless, his contention that verbs do not convey any temporal reference has taken us backward rather than forward.

Porter has faced an uphill battle in arguing for a timeless Greek verb. Most every grammarian and linguist on whom his research depends understands the tense-forms to convey a combination of tense and aspect. If any *had* agreed with his timeless view, we could reasonably expect Porter to have brought it to our attention. This holds true even of the older grammarians, if their com-ments are properly read in their historical context. Their discussion of "kind of action" sounds remarkably like aspect. The problems with their descriptions might be better attributed to the absence of a suitable descriptive framework than to their fundamental misunderstanding of the verbal system. Most (not all!) were aware that an absolute view of tense was untenable, as attested by the numerous caveats and qualifications to be found in their discussion of tense.

This lack of explicit support for a timeless view of the verb necessitated that a logical case be built. The contrastive examples which differed in only subtle ways—the very kind grammarians themselves had struggled to explain long before Porter—provided a compelling basis for questioning the simplistic treatment of tense equaling time. The valid linguistic claim that Greek lacked "absolute" tense provided compelling evidence to tip the rhetorical scales toward a timeless view, but only if one ignored the linguistic principles gov-erning these issues. The expansion of this claim from absolute tense to any temporal reference went largely unnoticed and unchallenged.

The linguistic classification of Greek as a mixed tense-aspect system warned against arguing for a tenseless view, particularly since the linguists who held this view were the same ones Porter depended upon for his understanding of tense and aspect. The existence of comparable "-distinctive" contrastive exam-ples in English, French and many other languages demonstrated the illegiti-macy of claiming that this semantic overlap logically disproved the presence of temporal reference; in reality it provided linguistic evidence of its presence. Furthermore, the parameters established by Bache and Wallace should have made clear the methodological error of using -distinctive examples for one claim and +distinctive examples for another; the flawed results were a natu-ral consequence of a flawed theoretical framework. Instead of developing the kind of nuanced description of the tense-aspect interface that has been sorely lacking in NT studies, a timeless model was developed that contradicts the very literature on which it is based.

Insufficient background from the secondary field of linguistics has resulted in the propagation of deeply flawed notions by Porter and those interdisciplinary scholars building on his work. The methodological and evidentiary problems described above have also survived 20 years of scrutiny from the field of NT studies. This suggests Porter's writings have been treated as primary literature, not as secondary literature that is to be critically tested against that primary literature on which it is based. The excitement about a new linguistic claim being made must give way to a sober critique of how it reconciles with the broader field of linguistics. If it claims something not attested in any other language, it deserves thorough review. Two issues need to be addressed.

First, the subsequent work which was based on the false premise of a timeless Greek verb needs to be reevaluated by properly qualified specialists from the field of linguistics, providing linguistic peer-review comparable to that found in Classical Studies, Hebrew Bible and modern language study. Had this kind of qualified critical review been conducted 20 years ago when the ideas were initially formulated, they would not have been perpetuated.

Second, there are two other parts of Porter's linguistic model of verbal aspect that deserve the same level of scrutiny as his use of contrastive substitution: his claims about the inherent semantic prominence of the tense-forms (i.e., background, foreground and frontground) and his correlation of markedness with semantic weight.[61] Preliminary research suggests a similar incongruity between these claims and the primary literature he cites as support for them. Porter claims that his "planes of discourse" prominence model (i.e., aorist as background, present as foreground, perfect as frontground) applies unilaterally regardless of genre; his primary sources make only limited, genre-specific claims, and in no genre is the perfect treated as the most prominent.[62] His misapplication of linguistic principles may thus not be isolated to contrastive substitution.

It seems fitting to close with what should have served as a warning: Buist Fanning's response to Porter at the 1992 SBL panel discussion on verbal aspect:

> I disagree with Porter's strict insistence that the Greek verbal forms carry no temporal value at all, and I do not think that his view of this offers the kind of ground-breaking contribution to the field that he has claimed for

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61   For a cursory overview of these issues, see http://www.ntdiscourse.org/on-porter-prominence-and-aspect/.

62   Steven E. Runge, "The Perfect, Markedness, and Grounding" (presented at the SBL Annual Meeting, Baltimore, MD, 2013).

it. I believe Porter has made the best case for this view that anyone can make, but it is not persuasive. It is true that time is not as important for Greek tenses as for English ones and that the aspect values of viewpoint or conception of the process are of central importance in all the forms of the Greek verb (except the future). But the linguistic evidence is overwhelming that in the indicative forms the tenses carry a double sense of time and aspect together.[63]

Twenty years later we are back at the same crossroads, facing the same overwhelming linguistic evidence against Porter's model of a timeless Greek verb. It is hoped that this time there will be a willingness to respond appropriately to this evidence by rejecting his assertions.

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63   Buist M. Fanning, "Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek: Issues in Definition and Method," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research* (ed. Stanley E. Porter and D.A. Carson; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993) 58.