

Verbal Tense and Aspect

Introduction

Greek verbs generally have four different stems as indicated either through the opposition of different roots (e.g., in verbs with different roots like ἔρχομαι, ἦλθον, ἐλήλυθα, ἐλεύσομαι) or through stems formed from the same root through changes in vocalization or accentuation or through vowel lengthening or use of suffixes (e.g., λείπω, ἔλιπον, λέλοιπα, λείψομαι; βαίνω, ἔβην, βέβηκα, βήσομαι; λύω, ἔλυσα, λέλυκα, λύσομαι). Coincidentally, these stems are of the indicative and it is from them that other moods are deduced, such as the subjunctive or the imperative, the personal forms (by addition of the appropriate endings: λύω, λύεις, etc.), as well as the impersonal forms such as the infinitive and the participle.¹

From the time of the ancient Greek grammarians, these stems have been termed the present, aorist, perfect and future stems. At first glance, it may seem as though the stems indicate primarily time, i.e., when the action indicated by the verb is realized in relation to the moment the message is pronounced: now (present), before (past) and after (future) and a sort of hybrid between before and now (perfect). However, as we shall see, this is not the case: only the future stem truly indicates time—the future time—whereas the other three indicate aspect, i.e., *an indication of the time of the event under consideration in relation to the time being referenced to*.² That notwithstanding, various combinations exist, so much so that the verb system is in the end an irregular system that indicates either time (the future stem) or aspect (the other three stems) or time and aspect together (the combination of these stems with the “present tense”—through the use of primary endings— and “preterite tense”—through the use of secondary endings and the augment).

This can be seen in the following fact. The “present” stem is “present” time when only the “primary (tense) endings” (i.e., endings of present, future, perfect and future perfect indicatives) are used, e.g., λύ-ο-μαι (present stem + thematic vowel + primary ending); use the “secondary (tense) endings” (i.e., endings of aorist, imperfect and pluperfect

¹ The discussion in this introductory part is obtained mainly from Francisco Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, Manuales (Madrid: Gredos, 1992), 380–84.

² We shall discuss aspect in more detail further on.

indicatives) and/or an augment with the same stem and you are no longer in the “present time”, but in the “past”: the imperfect, e.g., ἐ-λυ-ό-μην (augment + present stem + thematic vowel + secondary ending). Similarly, the perfect stem used with the primary endings is in the “present time”, e.g., λέλυ-μαι, whereas when used with the augment and the secondary endings, it is in the past: the pluperfect, e.g., ἐ-λελύ-μην. The aorist stem is the only one that doesn’t have primary endings, for which reason it is always a preterite (since it always has the augment). The future stem, as we said, indicates primarily future time, yet there also exists a second future stem that indicates aspect as well: the future perfect, e.g., κεκλή-σ-ε-ται (perfect stem + future tense suffix + thematic vowel + primary ending).³

As we can see, not only is the system irregular since it combines the two categories of time and aspect, it is also expressed using confusing terms. We speak of “temporal stems” (present, future, aorist, perfect,) when in reality only the second one is really temporal, the rest are aspectual. In these aspectual stems, the time is usually marked by other elements, as we have seen in the previous paragraph (verbs with different roots solve the problem by using a different root for each stem e.g., λέγω, ἐρῶ, εἶπον, εἶρηκα or ἔρχομαι, ἐλεύσομαι, ἦλθον, ἐλήλυθα). Indeed, we are seldom told in the grammars that the present time is in fact that of the “present” and “perfect” tenses in the indicative, whereas the preterite time is that of the “imperfect” (the preterite of the present stem), the aorist and the “pluperfect” (preterite of the perfect stem).

All this confusion probably arises from the fact that the term “aspect” is modern and was not used in the ancient grammars. This, however, does not mean that the latter never considered the existence of aspect in the verb system. The terminology we use is mainly inherited from Latin grammars since in Latin the time element is more prominent.⁴ Ancient Greek terminology for these stems shows that they also had aspect in mind. Modern grammar has not changed this but rather only sought to make more evident the existence of aspect in the Greek verbal system. We shouldn’t, therefore, separate the two categories, nor downplay one in favor of the other, for instance, saying that aspect is but the modern way of considering time as anterior, contemporaneous and subsequent: these

³ See also the discussion in Nicholas J. Ellis, “Aspect-Prominence, Morpho-Syntax, and a Cognitive-Linguistic Framework for the Greek Verb,” in *The Greek Verb Revisited: A Fresh Approach for Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Steven E. Runge and Christopher J. Fresch (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 132–43.

⁴ See Archibald Thomas Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 3rd ed. (New York, NY: Hodder and Stoughton, 1919), 822.

are secondary meanings which, however, arise from the context. Wallace, for instance, seems to downplay the element of time in the Greek verb tense when he states that “aspect is the primary value of tense in Greek and time is secondary, *if involved at all*”⁵ and then goes on to define tense as “that feature of the verb that indicates the speaker’s presentation of the verbal action (or state) with reference to its aspect and, under certain conditions, its time.”⁶ We shall look into this in the following discussion on time and aspect.

Tense⁷

Tense (verbal or grammatical time) differs to some extent from real time. Modern grammarians call it *deictic* (using the analogy of pronouns) or *relative*, since it always points to *a certain point of reference*, usually *the moment of elocution*. However, this point of reference is not always necessarily the narrator’s “now”. Indeed, in a narrative, verbal time may have a reference point within the narrative itself (hence it is no longer the narrator’s “moment”). For instance, within the narrative—which is recounted, as usual, using the past tense—a character may be introduced performing certain actions, e.g., narrating a story, and the time of other verbs in the narrative may have this character’s moment as their point of reference. Greek language lacks morphological tools to mark out the verbs that do not have the moment of elocution as their reference point (think of the quotes in modern languages). Neither does it have mechanisms like Latin’s *consecutio temporum*. Only the context comes to the aide of the reader in Greek. For this reason, in order to differentiate the various “time” references in Greek, when speaking of tense, grammarians distinguish between “absolute time” and “relative time”. The former “concerns the location of an action in the past, present or future, *relative to the moment of speaking*” while the latter “concerns the location of an action in time *relative to another temporal reference point given in the context*” with the result that it is prior, simultaneous or posterior to that other temporal reference point.⁸

⁵ Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996), 496. The emphasis is ours

⁶ Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 496.

⁷ This section on Tense is based mainly on the discussion in Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 386–89.

⁸ Evert van Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek* (Cambridge, UK ; New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 404. See also Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 497.

For the most part, it is the mood of the verb that really indicates the time element in the tense. Indeed, only in the indicative mood is time really involved, for, except in indirect discourse, time is not involved at all in the subjunctive, optative, imperative and participle and infinitive moods.⁹ In what follows, we will discuss some concepts that are important to bear in mind when discussing verbal time in Greek.

Timeless time and neuralization of time

Verbal time (i.e., tense) is a mandatory category, since every stem is either present, preterite or future, so much so that if one of these stems is lacking, it is supplied by another verbal stem.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it can be neutralized if it is unknown by the speaker or he is not interested in it or simply by other elements such as the genre, lexeme, nature of the subject or object.¹¹ For instance, the present time can be used in a timeless manner to indicate a general fact, as is usually the case in proverbs (cf. 1 Cor 5,6; Gal 5,9: μικρὰ ζύμη ὅλον τὸ φύραμα ζυμοῖ). The same applies in the case of the so-called gnomic aorist, where it is probable that a certain fact actually happened (hence the aorist)—either in reality or in a parable—and has constituted a general truth (cf. Jas 1,11: ἀνέτειλεν γὰρ ὁ ἥλιος σὺν τῷ καύσωνι καὶ ἐξήρανε τὸν χόρτον, καὶ τὸ ἄνθος αὐτοῦ ἐξέπεσεν, καὶ ἡ εὐπρέπεια τοῦ προσώπου αὐτοῦ ἀπώλετο· οὕτως καὶ ὁ πλούσιος ἐν ταῖς πορείαις αὐτοῦ μαρανθήσεται). In some cases, the future time may also be neutralized in a similar way, i.e., while indicating that an action will happen, the context may at the same time indicate that the action will always happen, hence it is timeless (cf. Lk 17,37: ὅπου τὸ σῶμα, ἐκεῖ καὶ οἱ ἀετοὶ ἐπισυναχθήσονται).

Neutralization may also be partial, as is usually the case where a certain stem substitutes another: present for preterite or future, preterite for present, etc. Think for instance of the cases where the aorist is used for a factually present action: what we have then is a grammatically neutralized aorist, e.g., Lk 16,4 ἔγνων τί ποιήσω. This substitution usually occurs when the stem of the substituted time is not able to express a

⁹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 497; Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, 404–5.

¹⁰ For example, in Konié, the stem ὀρα- of the verb ὀράω would be used only in the present and perfect: ὀράω, ἐώρακα, thus for the aorist, the stem ἰδ- of the verb εἶδον would be used (in any case, this verb no longer had a present stem) and the stem ὀπ- would be used for the future (and the passives of the perfect and aorist): ὀψομαι, ὤμμαι, ὤφθην. Thus, the principal parts of the verb were ὀράω, ὀψομαι, εἶδον, ἐώρακα, ὤμμαι, ὤφθην

¹¹ See Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 386; Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 498.

certain characteristic which it can with the substituting stem.¹² In fine, grammatical time may also be used in a way that expresses two different times, one explicitly and the other elliptically (e.g., in Acts 17,21: Ἀθηναῖοι δὲ πάντες καὶ οἱ ἐπιδημοῦντες ξένοι εἰς οὐδὲν ἕτερον ἠὲ καίρου ἢ λέγειν τι ἢ ἀκούειν τι καινότερον, Luke states that at the time Paul was at Athens, the inhabitants would spend their time chatting and listening to new doctrines... they probably still continued to do so at the time he was writing the acts).

Fictive time

Neutralization is not the only explanation for the use of a certain tense where another would be expected. This is usually the case where the historic present is involved. Many proposals have been put forward to explain the use of the present where the preterite is expected. See for instance Jn 1,29ff, where the circumstances are all given in the preterite (as one would expect) but the main action, despite it being a narrative of past events, is given in the present tense.¹³ It is usually thought that authors would do this in order to make the narrative more vivid, and this is a fictive representation of time, i.e., the author presents the actions “as though” they were actually happening at the moment he was writing.¹⁴ Thus, Fictive times are “normal” times, their point of reference does not change: it is the actions that are transferred in a fictive way out of their times.

Uses of time that are not really temporal

It is also useful to note that occasionally, tenses may have a modal value, for instance, the use of the future tense to sometimes indicate the sense of finality, or the “unreal” use of the indicative imperfect and aorist (especially in condition clauses).¹⁵ At times, the tense is used normally from a grammatical point of view, but the pragmatic interpretation is totally different. An example is when the future is used and is pragmatically an imperative, e.g., Matt 21,3: καὶ ἐάν τις ὑμῶν εἴπῃ τι, ἐρεῖτε (you will say) ὅτι ὁ κύριος

¹² Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 387.

¹³ See Friedrich Blass, Albert Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 1961), § 321.

¹⁴ Levinsohn, however, explains convincingly that the historic present is rather an emphasis marker for the action that follows it, see Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2000), 200.

¹⁵ See Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 388; Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 696–97.

αὐτῶν χρειᾶν ἔχει (compare with Mk 11,3, which has the aorist imperative καὶ ἐάν τις ὑμῖν εἴπη· τί ποιεῖτε τοῦτο; εἴπατε (say)· ὁ κύριος αὐτοῦ χρειᾶν ἔχει).¹⁶

Aspect

As we have noted above, aspect has a temporal component since it is derived from the internal analysis of an action or verbal process (an event) in relation to time.¹⁷ This does not mean that an action has internal parts. We are rather considering the temporal phase(s) of the action which the speaker or writer holds to be relevant.¹⁸ It is usually expressed by means of the verbal stems. From these stems, the aspect can only be extracted by means of abstraction regardless of whether they bear certain endings or other, augments or no augments. (Certain) Tense(s) may lack in many languages, but aspect is (almost) always present.¹⁹

Modern linguistics frequently considers the perfective and imperfective as the principal aspects, i.e., those which tell us about the realization of an act.²⁰ A third aspect also exists, though its particular nature is still under discussion by scholars, since it appears to be a combination of these two aspects: the perfect aspect.²¹ Thus, generally speaking, the imperfective aspect is that in which the action is viewed as incomplete, the perfective is that in which the action is considered in its entirety and the combinative is that in which state of a completed action, whose effects are still relevant, is under consideration.²²

¹⁶ See Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 569; Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 388.

¹⁷ See Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 389; Christopher J. Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” in *The Greek Verb Revisited: A Fresh Approach for Biblical Exegesis*, ed. Steven E. Runge and Christopher J. Fresch (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016), 16, 26–27.

¹⁸ Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, 405; Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” 35.

¹⁹ Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 389.

²⁰ Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” 18–28; Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 390.

²¹ Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 501; Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, 406; Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 397, 456–57.

²² Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, 406.

The scholar Alexander V. Isačenko in his work on the Russian language illustrated the distinction between the two principal aspects using the analogy of a parade.²³ According to Isačenko, when one uses a perfective verb, his perspective can be compared to that of a person watching a parade from a stand: he is outside the event and can see the whole of it from beginning to end, *as it passes in front of him*. On the other hand, when one uses an imperfective verb, his perspective can be compared to that of a participant of a parade, one who does not experience the complete event because he cannot see its beginning or end. In this way, we see that the term “imperfective” is used in reference to a form that is used only when the temporal boundaries of a situation are positively excluded.

This analogy is often cited in many NT grammars though with variations that make it different from what Isačenko wanted to say.²⁴ In Wallace, for instance, the person observing from the stand represents the imperfective, whereas the perfective is represented by a person watching the parade from a helicopter. The difference arises from the fact that for Isačenko, aspect has a time element, whereas for Wallace it does not. In other words, for Isačenko, aspect is what can be observed of the parade as it progresses in time, whereas for Wallace, it is now represented by what one can be seen of the parade at a particular moment.

The aspects usually receive different names in different grammars. The imperfective is also usually called “durative”, “atelic”, “continuous” or “progressive”, the perfective is at times called “punctiliar”, “complexive” or “constative”, and the perfect as “stative”, “perfective-stative” “retrospective” or “combinative” (to avoid confusion between the perfective and perfect aspects, we shall henceforth use the term combinative for the perfect aspect). What can we say about all these opinions regarding the aspects of the present, aorist and perfect stems? To begin with, it is worth noting that with the present tense, it is very frequent that the action be conceived simultaneously as durative and lacking a specific end (atelic). This is probably because the action signified by the verb itself may be either telic or atelic by nature, so much so that it doesn’t really matter whether the stem is present or aorist. Take for instance the verb “to give”: it always needs an end for its meaning to be complete: something has to change hands. Thus *διδόναι*, *δοῦναι*, *δεδώκέναι* all imply something changes hands. Not so however with a verb like

²³ Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” 20–24.

²⁴ See for instance, Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics*, 500.

“to carry”. Indeed, the present stem φέρω rarely ever indicates the conclusion of the action, i.e., whether the action has an end or not (only the context will tell), whereas the aorist stem ἤνεγκα indicates by itself that the action arrived at its end.²⁵

This latter example also shows that some of the variations of use that depend either on the semantic of the verb or on the context or on both, can be reduced to the perfective value included in the end of an action. Indeed, with regards to the aorist, scholars usually speak of an *ingressive* aorist, βασιλεῦσαι “he began to rule”, *punctiliar* βῆναι “he took a step” and *effective* or *resultant*, πείσαι “he persuaded”. Beside these they usually speak of a *neutral* or *constative* or *complexive* or *factive*, i.e., that which expresses the action in its totality. However, strictly speaking, the *perfective* aorist (which indicates simply the realization of an action) is inseparable from the *complexive*, i.e., from that which indicates that though an action is presented with the aorist stem it has nevertheless lasted for a certain duration of time. Indeed, only the context or semantic facts (like the meaning of a verb) or both, gives a durative value to a perfective aorist. No verb in the aorist can have a durative value without at the same time having a perfective one. Analogously, neither can we speak of a *punctiliar* aorist nor of a *resultant* aorist which is not at the same time a perfective aorist. Whether an aorist is punctiliar or resultant depends largely on our interpretation of a passage. Indeed, ἦλθεν can be a simple consideration of an action “he came” or a punctiliar action “he has just come” or resultant “he arrived”. In short, the aorist indicates the end of a process. Grammar in itself will not indicate if it is punctiliar or constative or resultant; for that, semantic or context will be necessary. As a matter of fact, even the *ingressive* aspect, is obtained from an interpretation of the context, it is not marked grammatically: ἐβασίλευσε can be both “he began to reign” or simply “he reigned” depending on what the context tells us. Thus, the *perfective* value i.e., a *completed action*, is the only general one when it comes to the aspect of the aorist.²⁶

We should, therefore, bear the following in mind when discussing aspect:²⁷

- i. Aspect is an open category, i.e., despite the fact that it is present in many languages, aspect in one language does not wholly coincide with that in another: the aorist is not exactly the same as the past in English or the remote past in Spanish...

²⁵ See Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 395.

²⁶ This paragraph summarizes the one in Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 395–96.

²⁷ Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 390.

- ii. Like in the case of tense, neutralizations also occur in the category of aspect. This is because since it is also a mandatory category, a speaker had to have recourse to neutralization in those situations where aspectual differences were irrelevant to him. Typical examples are the present with the meaning of a perfect, e.g., ἤκω “I have arrived”, νικῶ “I am triumphant, a winner”, when used in the present without their imperfective meaning but rather with either the perfective meaning of an aorist (the historic present) or with no aspect at all.

These two points clarify further that aspect, which—with regard to its development—refers to time, does not reproduce a physical reality. Rather, it refers to facts that have been reinterpreted linguistically. It is therefore quite (not totally) a subjective reality, i.e., the aspect of the verb will depend on the choice the author makes with regards to how he/she wants to represent an action in relation to the reference time.²⁸ Indeed, the very same action can be expressed using the present or aorist tense depending on the writer or speaker’s interest, for instance in Jn 8,25 Ἐλεγον οὖν αὐτῶ· σὺ τίς εἶ; εἶπεν αὐτοῖς ὁ Ἰησοῦς· τὴν ἀρχὴν ὅτι καὶ λαλῶ ὑμῖν; Here, perhaps the first case of λέγω is in the imperfect so as to underline the fact that they were insisting in their speech, whereas the second case underlines the accomplished fact. Similarly, we can find actions that in physical time must certainly have lasted for a certain duration of time presented using the aorist tense (usually thought to represent “punctiliar” action) rather than in the imperfect (which has the durative aspect of the present stem), for instance, in Lk 9,16 λαβῶν δὲ τοὺς πέντε ἄρτους καὶ τοὺς δύο ἰχθύας ἀναβλέψας εἰς τὸν οὐρανὸν εὐλόγησεν αὐτοὺς καὶ κατέκλασεν καὶ ἐδίδου τοῖς μαθηταῖς παραθεῖναι τῷ ὄχλῳ. Here, the action of blessing is definitely not “punctiliar” as that of breaking may be, but the author has given it in the aorist probably to present it as a completed action. In fact, in many cases, it is the context (e.g., presence of adverbs) that will indicate whether an action is to be interpreted as punctiliar or not. As such, the aorist in such a case is not insisting on the duration of an action, but rather in its completeness, its integrity. Context thus aides a lot.²⁹

This discussion on aspect has underlined the fact that aspect is first and foremost indicated by the stem of the verb, is very much related to time and is often subjective (i.e., depends on the choice of the author). Its interpretation however will largely depend on

²⁸ See Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” 32–33.

²⁹ See Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 391–92.

the context. This final point is due to the fact that one can never find an isolated tense form of a verb: it is always accompanied by lexical, grammatical and contextual elements, elements which have to do with what we will now discuss, i.e., the *Aktionsart*.

Aktionsart

Aktionsart (pl. *Aktionsarten*) is a German word proposed by Karl Brugmann in his Greek grammar (1885) and distinguished from *aspect* (grammatical) by Sigurd Agrell (1908) in his study of Slavic verbs for meanings that, together with the perfective and imperfective aspects, “indicate more exactly how a certain action is realized, the way and form of its realization.”³⁰ *Aktionsart* has then come to be known under various names such as *lexical aspect*—in order to distinguish it from grammatical aspect (what we’ve studied thus far)—, *inherent meaning*, *actionality*, *aspectual character*, *procedural character*, or simply as the *kind/manner of action*.³¹ The great variety of names for this phenomenon is evidence to the fact that quite a number of diverging views have been proposed by scholars with regards to the particulars of lexical aspect.³² What we shall do then is stick to the common ground, i.e., deal with the lexical aspect inasmuch as it is related to the grammatical aspect.

The lexical aspect therefore has to do with the temporal structure of the action inherent in the meaning of the verb. In this respect, verbs are categorized with regards to their telicity, i.e., whether they have an envisioned end (telic) or not (atelic), their stativity, i.e., whether they indicate a change (dynamic) or not (stative), and their temporal extent, i.e., whether they last over time (durative) or happen only once (semelfactive).³³ The fact that we are considering the inherent meaning of a verb, however, should not lead us to conclude that lexical aspect is “objective”, especially when we contrast it to the grammatical aspect, which is apparently “subjective”, i.e., based on the choice of the

³⁰ Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 398; Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 27.

³¹ Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 397; Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, 408; Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” 30.

³² Rodríguez Adrados, *Nueva sintaxis del griego antiguo*, 399–402; Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” 28–34.

³³ See Hana Filip, “Lexical Aspect,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Tense and Aspect*, ed. Robert I. Binnick, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2012), 726–27; Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, 408; Emilio Crespo Güemes, Luz Conti Jiménez, and Helena Maquieira Rodríguez, *Sintaxis del griego clásico*, Manuales (Madrid: Gredos, 2003), 268–69.

author/writer. Indeed, as we have seen previously with regards to the grammatical aspect, the interpretation accorded to a verb depends not only on the stem the author has chosen to use (i.e., the grammatical aspect), but also on other elements such as the lexeme/word chosen (e.g. one may choose a simple word like βαίνω “I walk” [*atelic: no end in view*] or a compound word like διαβαίνω “I cross” [*telic: an end is implied, since one usually crosses over to some other place*]), as well as the other words (adverbs, etc.) surrounding the word chosen (e.g. βαίνω καθ’ ἡμέραν “I walk everyday” [*atelic*] or βαίνω εἰς τὸν οἶκον “I walk into the house” [*clearly telic*]).³⁴

The verb together with the words surrounding it in such a way as to give rise to a particular interpretation form what some authors call a *verb constellation*. According to Thomson, verb constellations can be divided into four classes, following the schema established by the scholar Zeno Vendler in his 1957 seminal paper on the temporal structure of verbs: state, activity, accomplishment and achievement verbs.³⁵

State verb constellations³⁶ are, as the name indicates, stative, i.e., they do not indicate any change over time (hence are not dynamic) and tend to last for a certain period of time and without any end in view (hence, are durative and atelic). The state may be transitory or permanent. The actions therefore of a stative verb constellation can be held to be true for any period of time. For example, in the phrase ὁ δὲ θεὸς γινώσκει τὰς καρδίας ὑμῶν (Lk 16,15), no change or endpoint is envisioned in “God knowing your hearts”. Activity verb constellations, like state verb constellations, also last for a certain period of time and without any end in view (hence are durative and atelic), the only difference being that, as the name indicates, the action changes during the time under consideration (hence, they are dynamic). Again, like in the case of stative verbs, since activities are atelic, the action of such verb constellations can be considered true for any moment during which the activity has taken place. It is important to note that the atelic nature does not necessarily mean the action continues forever, rather, that it has no contemplated end. Telic actions are said to be “finished” once their natural endpoint is attained, whereas atelic actions—since they have no natural endpoints—are said to “end arbitrarily” once

³⁴ See Emde Boas et al., *The Cambridge Grammar of Classical Greek*, 409.

³⁵ Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” 48–49.

³⁶ In the following paragraphs in which we explain the four verb categories, the examples we give have the sole purpose of illustrating the workings of the lexical aspect in the verb category, i.e., we do not as yet consider the interplay between lexical aspect and grammatical aspect (perfective, imperfective, combinative) in the interpretation of the verb. We shall look into this interplay later on.

their duration is considered to be over. For instance, in the phrase *καὶ αὐτὸς ἐδίδασκεν ἐν ταῖς συναγωγαῖς αὐτῶν* (Lk 4,15), no endpoint is in view in the action of “teaching”, though a change is definitely expected in the subject or object of the verb. At the same time, Jesus can be said to have been teaching at any moment during which the action of teaching was taking place.

Accomplishment verb constellations are similar to activity verb constellations only in being dynamic (as the name indicates, a certain change has occurred) and durative (the change has occurred over a certain period of time), since they are telic (an end is in view). Indeed, the action of an accomplishment verb constellation can only be said to be true once the end has been attained, unlike activities and stative verbs, which are true at any moment of the period in which the activity or stative verb lasts. For instance, in the phrase *Ἐξήγαγεν δὲ αὐτοὺς [ἔξω] ἕως πρὸς Βηθανίαν* (Lk 24,50), the action of “leading out” is clearly dynamic (there is a change of state), durative and telic, two qualities indicated by the prepositional phrase *ἕως πρὸς Βηθανίαν*. If Jesus had not reached Bethany, then the statement would not be correct and would have to be phrased differently.

Finally, achievement verb constellations are those which, like accomplishments are telic (an end is attained, as the name implies) and dynamic (since there is a change in attaining an end), but they are not durative because they occur only momentarily; they are semelfactive (from Latin *semel* “once”, *factum* “event”). Here, however, a distinction is usually made between achievements that “occur as a result of a closely related process or effort which culminates in this event but is regarded as separate action” and those that are “truly momentary and imply no other action”. Fanning calls the former *climaxes* and the latter *punctuals*.³⁷ It is important to note that achievement verb constellations may at times appear to occur over time (hence have duration), but this is not the case; rather, what we have are momentary actions occurring iteratively.³⁸ An example of a climax achievement is Lk 2,46 *μετὰ ἡμέρας τρεῖς εὑρον αὐτὸν ἐν τῷ ἱερῷ*, where “finding” is presented as telic (an end is attained), as dynamic (a change in state is implied) and as a momentary act resulting from of a previous activity. An example of a punctual achievement is Lk 9,16 *λαβὼν δὲ τοὺς πέντε ἄρτους [...] εὐλόγησεν αὐτοὺς καὶ κατέκλασεν καὶ ἐδίδου τοῖς μαθηταῖς*, where the action of breaking is presented as telic

³⁷ Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford; New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), 155.

³⁸ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, 156.

(an end is attained), dynamic (bread is broken) and momentaneous (most likely iterative).³⁹

Aspect and Aktionsart

As we mentioned previously, one can never find an isolated tense form of a verb, i.e., the grammatical, lexical and contextual elements always interact together to give rise to different meanings and nuances. Indeed, depending on the *Aktionsart* various grammars will speak of various kinds or nuances of the perfective, imperfective and combinative aspects. Accordingly, the terms *conative*, *ingressive*, *iterative*, *progressive*, *habitual*, *punctiliar*, *constative*, *gnomic*, *consummative*, *resultative*, etc., are usually used to describe how the tense (grammatical aspect) of a particular verb is to be interpreted within its context. At times it can prove a bit difficult for the student to determine which *Aktionsart* correctly interprets a particular verb. In what follows, we will try to show how considering the procedural character of the verb (i.e., what kind of verb is in use) can prove to be helpful.

Aspect and State verbs

State verb constellations are those where the action of the verb expresses no change in itself or in the condition, relation or location of subject or object. The imperfective aspect, therefore, is the most compatible one for such verb constellations, since the two used together will denote *continuous* existence, not a progress.

The perfective aspect used with state verb constellations will most frequently denote entrance into the state indicated by the verb (hence, the *ingressive* aorist), and less often a *summary* view either of the entire (past) existence or of *repeated* (past) states of the subject.

The combinative aspect used with state verbs denotes a meaning that combines the senses of state verbs in the imperfective and perfective aspects: the emphasis is laid on *describing* an existing state, though the *ingressive* act leading to that state is sometimes also implied. Where the act of entrance into a state is not implied, there is no difference between the use of the combinative and the imperfective aspects.

Examples:

³⁹ For a more detailed presentation of these verbal classes, see Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, 126–63.

1. Θεὸς δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν νεκρῶν ἀλλὰ ζώντων, πάντες γὰρ αὐτῷ ζῶσιν – God is not of the dead but rather of the living, for to him all live (are alive) (Lk 20,38). ζάω is a stative verb, “to be alive”. With the imperfective, it denotes the continuous existence in the state of being alive. This is highlighted further by the contrast with its opposite (being dead) in the previous clause.
2. ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὗτος νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἔζησεν – this brother of yours was dead and now he has come to life (Lk 15,32). The perfective aspect with the same verb indicates entrance into the state of living, here as well contrasted with its opposite, that of being dead.
3. καὶ ἐζήτουν οἱ ἀρχιερεῖς καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς τὸ πῶς ἀνέλωσιν αὐτόν, ἐφοβοῦντο γὰρ τὸν λαόν – and the high priests and the scribes were looking for a way to do away with him, for they were fearful of the people (Lk 22,2). Φοβέομαι is a stative verb indicating the state of apprehension or fear. The imperfective aspect denotes a continuing existence in this state.
4. καὶ ἐφοβήθησαν τὸν λαόν, ἔγνωσαν γὰρ ὅτι πρὸς αὐτοὺς εἶπεν τὴν παραβολὴν ταύτην – and they became fearful of the people for they knew that he had said this parable to them (Lk 20,19). Here the perfective aspect used with the same verb indicates entrance into the state of fear... the reason is even given in the following clause.
5. τί ἐστήκατε [ἐμ]βλέποντες εἰς τὸν οὐρανόν; – why are you standing while looking up to heaven? (Acts 1,11) Here, the verb ἵστημι in the perfect is stative (in the present tense it is an achievement: to make stand) and denotes the continuing state of standing without implying the act leading to the state, hence the verb could have been used with the imperfective aspect without any change of meaning.
6. Ὅταν δὲ ἴδητε κυκλουμένην ὑπὸ στρατοπέδων Ἱερουσαλήμ, τότε γινώτε ὅτι ἤγγικεν ἡ ἐρήμωσις αὐτῆς – when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies, know then that her devastation has drawn near (Lk 21,20). ἐγγίζω is used only intransitively in the NT hence can be considered a state verb indicating “to be near”. Here, with the combinative aspect, it indicates not only the state of being near but also the entrance into that state.

Aspect and Activities

Activities, as we discussed previously, are verb constellations that are dynamic, durative and atelic. With these verb types, the imperfective aspect will denote an action

progressing through time without any regard for a beginning or endpoint. If the context refers to a specific action, the imperfective aspect will be quite *descriptive*. At times the imperfective aspect is used in narratives immediately after another occurrence or to indicate a shift in topic. In such cases, the verb will indicate the process as beginning and then proceeding without, of course, any natural endpoint in view. This use of the imperfective is usually termed *inceptive* or *ingressive*.

Activities used with the perfective aspect will denote a period in which the action of the verb is/was carried out. However, since the perfective aspect considers the action of the verb in its entirety and activities are usually atelic, an activity in the perfective aspect, once its duration is over, is not usually considered “done to completion” but rather “arbitrarily ended”. Thus, the perfective aspect will only assert that the activity took place during a certain period of time, the *constative* aorist. As a matter of fact, there is usually no much of a difference in using the imperfective or the perfective aspect with such verbs.

The combinative aspect interacts with activities in a manner similar to the perfective aspect, adding only a reference to a kind of *continuing consequence* of the action. Usually, the continuing result of the action is seen as the effect of the activity on the subject or object. When the effect of the activity is on the subject, it is usually his/her responsibility or authority over the resultant state that is being highlighted.

Examples:

1. παραχρῆμα δὲ ἀναστᾶσα διηκόνει αὐτοῖς – and having gotten up immediately, she began to minister to them (Lk 4,39). διακονέω is an activity verb (dynamic, durative, atelic). Its use here immediately after other actions denotes an action that has just begun but without any end in view.
2. αἵτινες διηκόνουν αὐτοῖς ἐκ τῶν ὑπαρχόντων αὐταῖς – who would minister to them from their resources (Lk 8,3). Here, the same verb διακονέω is used in the imperfect and since it is atelic, it portrays a descriptive notion, i.e., it describes a continuous action.
3. καὶ ὅσα ἐν Ἐφέσῳ διηκόνησεν, βέλτιον σὺ γινώσκεις – and how much he ministered [to me] in Ephesus, you know better (2 Tim 1,18). Here we have διακονέω again, this time used with the perfective aspect. Accordingly, no completion is implied (since the verb is atelic) but rather a summary of the activity, which may or may not have been ended. The perfective here only asserts that the activity took place during a certain duration (when Paul was ἐν Ἐφέσῳ). As we mentioned before, the perfective here

can be substituted with the imperfective with no change in meaning: *ὅσα ἐν Ἐφέσῳ διηκόνουν “how much he was ministering [to me]...” entails “how much he ministered [to me]...”

4. εἰ μὲν οὖν ἀδικῶ καὶ ἄξιον θανάτου πέπραχά τι – if then I am in the wrong or I have done something worthy of death (Acts 25,11). Here *πράσσω* is used as an activity verb since no specific endpoint of the action is indicated (Paul is doing something which may be considered by some worthy of death). With the combinative aspect, the continuing result of the action is emphasized, here with consequences falling on the one responsible for the action.

Aspect and Accomplishments

Accomplishments are those verbs which are dynamic, durative and telic. Accordingly, with the imperfective aspect, such verbs will denote an ongoing action already begun at the time being referenced by the speaker, yet whose termination has not yet been attained. As we mentioned before, even if the end is actually not attained, the statement still remains true. This quality allows the speaker to speak of actions of which he has no certainty (or interest) as to their termination, or of simultaneous actions, etc. At times, the lexical meaning of the verb or the context may imply some difficulty in attaining the inherent end of the verb, thus giving a sense of incompleteness to the whole. This corresponds to the *conative imperfect* found in many grammars.

With regards to the perfective aspect, since accomplishments are telic, the aspect will indicate that the action of the verb has been carried through to its inherent endpoint: if the end is not attained, an accomplishment in the perfective aspect would constitute an untrue statement. This shows why the perfective aspect has more to do with the *completeness, wholeness or entirety* of an action than with completion: the latter comes from the interaction between the perfective aspect and the telicity of the verb.⁴⁰ Where the lexical meaning of the verb or the context imply a certain difficulty in attaining the end, the perfective aspect gives the idea of a successful action. This is usually called the *consummative aorist*.

In the case of the combinative aspect, the telicity of accomplishments will indicate that the action has been carried out to completion, just as in the case with the perfective aspect.

⁴⁰ Thomson, “What Is Aspect?: Contrasting Definitions in General Linguistics and New Testament Studies,” 60.

However, the combinative aspect will highlight the continuing consequences of the action. These consequences may focus on the *effect* of the action on the subject or on the object or stress the *responsibility* or *authority* of the subject in carrying out the action that has brought about such consequences.

A few examples:

1. ἐξερχόμενοι δὲ διήρχοντο κατὰ τὰς κώμας εὐαγγελιζόμενοι καὶ θεραπεύοντες πανταχοῦ – so having set out, they would go through (were going through), the villages preaching and healing everywhere (Lk 9,6). *Here the verb διέρχομαι is an accomplishment. Even if the disciples did not manage to go through all the villages, the statement still remains true: they were in the processes of doing so. In addition, the fact that it is in the imperfect indicates an activity whose endpoint is currently not of interest to the writer. Indeed, it appears to give the background for other actions that are of more interest to the writer at this point: the “preaching” and “healing” was in obedience to the mission just given to the disciples by Jesus (Lk 9,1-5), and, in the following verse, Herod “heard” of all these activities (Ἦκουσεν δὲ Ἡρώδης ὁ τετραάρχης τὰ γινόμενα πάντα (Lk 9,7)).*
2. Οἱ μὲν οὖν διασπαρέντες ἀπὸ τῆς θλίψεως τῆς γενομένης ἐπὶ Στεφάνῳ διήλθον ἕως Φοινίκης καὶ Κύπρου καὶ Ἀντιοχείας μηδενὶ λαλοῦντες τὸν λόγον εἰ μὴ μόνον Ἰουδαίοις – Now those who had been scattered by the tribulation that happened because of Stephen went [through] up to Phoenicia and Cyprus and Antioch, speaking the word only to the Jews (Acts 11,19). *Here again we have the verb διέρχομαι. The fact that it is in the perfective aspect indicates that the entire action of “going through” up to its inherent end—here even indicated in the place names—is under consideration. If these people had not reached those destinations, the statement would be false.*
3. καὶ συνήλασεν αὐτοὺς εἰς εἰρήνην εἰπὼν· ἄνδρες, ἀδελφοί ἐστε· ἵνατί ἀδικεῖτε ἀλλήλους; – and he tried (was trying) to reconcile them saying, ‘men, you are brothers! Why do you wrong each other?’ (Acts 7,26) *the verb συναλλάσσω is an accomplishment verb (durative, dynamic, telic). The context shows that Moses was not successful in reconciling the two fellow countrymen who were fighting, hence the use of the imperfect shows that though the action was initiated, its inherent end was not reached.*
4. οὗτος ἐξήγαγεν αὐτοὺς ποιήσας τέρατα καὶ σημεῖα ἐν γῆ Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ ἐν ἔρυθρῃ θαλάσῃ καὶ ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ ἔτη τεσσεράκοντα – this man led them out by

performing wonders and signs in Egypt and in the red sea and in the desert for forty years (Acts 7,36). Here ἐξάγω is an accomplishment and the context indicates that its inherent end has been attained with much difficulty, hence the aorist tense can be considered a consummative aorist.

5. καὶ ἰδοὺ πεπληρώκατε τὴν Ἱερουσαλήμ τῆς διδασχῆς ὑμῶν – and behold, you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching (Acts 5,28). Here, πληρώω is an accomplishment (dynamic, durative, telic). It's being in the combinative aspect highlights the continuing effect of the action of filling: the city continues to be full of their teaching. In this context, the Sanhedrin seems to wish to highlight the apostles' responsibility for the effects of their action of filling the city.

Aspect and Achievements

As we stated before, achievements are verb constellations that are dynamic, telic and not durative, and can be divided into climaxes (have a prefaced activity leading to the attainment of the end) and truly punctuals (semelfactives). Accordingly, used with climaxes, the imperfective aspect will place the focus on the prefaced action as continuing or in progress without, however, reaching the climax, so that it appears as an incomplete action (the *conative* imperfective). Used with punctuals, on the other hand, the imperfective aspect will denote repeated occurrences of the momentary action (the *iterative* imperfective—or *distributive*, if the agents of the action are different).

Since achievements are telic, the attainment of the end is usually more important than the phase leading to that end. For this reason, given that the perfective aspect considers the whole act, when used with climaxes, the perfective aspect will focus on the instantaneous climax, leaving out the phase leading to the climax. In this way, there is no difference with the use of the perfective aspect with punctuals, except perhaps the fact that with the latter, the perfective can also indicate a summary or composite of repeated occurrences. In any case, the perfective with climaxes and punctuals always indicates a completed action (perfective aspect + telic nature of accomplishments).

The combinative aspect used with climaxes will focus on the climax of the action being reached thus denoting the completion of the action (like in the case of the perfective aspect). At times the combinative aspect will also allude to the state resulting from the completion of the action (usually so in passive and intransitive verbs). With punctuals, however, the emphasis is usually on the continuing state of the completed action.

Examples:

1. καὶ ἐπλησαν ἀμφοτέρω τὰ πλοῖα ὥστε βυθίζεσθαι αὐτά – and they filled both boats so that they were (almost) sinking (Lk 5,7) βυθίζω is an achievement verb that lasts for a while before the act of sinking actually occurs. Hence used here with the imperfective, it indicates an incomplete action, also because the context (what follows) confirms that the boats did not sink, for which reason one can add the “almost” in the translation.
2. Ἄνῆρ δέ τις Ἀνανίας ὀνόματι σὺν Σαπφίρῃ τῇ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ ἐπώλησεν κτήμα (Acts 5,1). Here πωλέω is an achievement verb in which the act of buying is a process leading to the actual buying (climax). With the perfective aspect, only the actual buying is highlighted.
3. καὶ πολλοὶ πλούσιοι ἔβαλλον πολλα – and many rich people were throwing in large sums [of money] (Mk 12,41). Βάλλω is an achievement verb that is semelfactive: the actual act of throwing is punctual. Thus, the imperfective aspect here can only indicate distribution, i.e., indicates the single act of each rich man throwing in large sums of money.
4. πάντες γὰρ οὗτοι ἐκ τοῦ περισσεύοντος αὐτοῖς ἔβαλον εἰς τὰ δῶρα, αὕτη δὲ ἐκ τοῦ ὑστερήματος αὐτῆς πάντα τὸν βίον ὃν εἶχεν ἔβαλεν – for all these threw into the offerings from their surplus whereas she, from her need, she threw in her whole livelihood (Lk 21,4). Here again we have the word βάλλω used, this time with the perfective aspect. Since it is a semelfactive verb, in the first case it will denote the composite of all single actions of each rich man, whereas in the second case, it will denote the single action of the widow.
5. πτωχὸς δέ τις ὀνόματι Λάζαρος ἐβέβλητο πρὸς τὸν πυλῶνα αὐτοῦ – a certain poor man named Lazarus lay at his gate (Lk 16,20). Here again we have βάλλω used, this time with the combinative aspect. It being a punctual, the aspect places the focus on the continuing state of the completed action, hence the translation as simply “lay”.
6. θυγάτηρ, ἡ πίστις σου σέσωκέν σε – daughter, your faith has saved you (Lk 8,48) σώζω can be considered as achievement verb with a process leading to a climax. Here the combinative aspect seems to focus on the attainment of the climax.
7. ἄνθρωπε, ἀφένονται σοι αἱ ἁμαρτίαι σου – man, your sins have been remitted for you (Lk 5,20). ἀφίημι is here an achievement verb that also seems to have a process leading to a climax. In the passive form, however, the combinative aspect seems to focus on the resultant state.

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