

Forum

‘Aspect’ as a feature of meaning in the Classical Greek verb

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This Journal published in 2016 an article by Jerome Moran on ‘Tense, Time and Aspect in the Greek Verb’ (Moran, 2016). It rightly pointed to the unsatisfactory nature of the treatment of the concept of ‘verbal aspect’ in available grammars and language courses, but did not sufficiently, I think, throw light on the issue for practising teachers and their students, nor did it satisfactorily clarify the intellectual issue posed. And yet this concept, which is not difficult to understand, is all-embracing and lies at the heart of the meaning of verbs in the classical language so that it is important to understand the distinctions it provides within the scope of the Greek verb.

Interest in the concept of aspectual distinctions, which are seldom made explicit in traditional Greek grammars, arose from acquaintance with the verb in Russian where aspect is very prominent. In Russian verbs, two contrasting aspects are found which permeate the system. There are two parallel verbs for a particular verbal idea which may be differentiated by prefixes or suffixes or internal vowel variation or even the use of two completely different verbs, one of which denotes the imperfective aspect, the other the perfective. As these names imply, the criterion of difference is whether what the verb conveys is seen as complete in itself or, at the time of reference, incomplete, whether as a single unfinished action/situation or a series of repeated actions. It is very often the case that a verb whose meaning is naturally imperfective will produce a perfective by-form by adding a prefix or by some other variation. The distinction is also all-pervasive in the verbal system of Modern Greek.

The distinction is present in the Latin verb system where the difference between the imperfect and perfect tenses is aspectual, though in general the Latin verb system is markedly different from the Greek.

In Classical Greek the aspectual system is ubiquitous and even more extensive. There are four aspects, though one, concerning the future, could perhaps be regarded as a pseudo-aspect. Unfortunately, the writers of Greek grammars have confused the student by treating the aspects as part of a tense system, thus rendering the distinctions unclear. Thus the term ‘present’ is constantly used for the imperfective aspect, and the confusing term ‘aorist’ is used for

the perfective, although the word actually means ‘indefinite’, a poor description of the perfective function; while ‘perfect’ is attached to a derived extension of the verb which denotes a state of being resulting from a past event. Hence it would be better termed ‘stative’. The future can be seen as a predictive aspect: the Indo-European parent language lacked a future tense, and the Greek future was created out of the ‘aorist’ (perfective) subjunctive. In Russian and Modern Greek the future has been brought into imperfective/perfective aspectual contrast, and in Russian what has the form of a present perfective refers in fact to the future, the concept of a present perfective being illogical since it is impossible for a verb to denote something at the same time as present and complete in time. In Greek, the development of a participle, an infinitive, and even an optative to act as a future-in-the-past makes the ‘future’ look more like a separate aspect.

So, in Classical Greek we have four aspects which can be seen in most verbs (but notice that the verb ‘to be’ only exists in the imperfective and predictive aspects). There are just two tenses in Greek referring simply to time, *present* and *past*, terms which apply to the indicative mood of verbs, and which also differentiate in a large degree the two parts of the Conjunctive Mood, traditionally divided into subjunctive, described as ‘primary’ and the optative, accordingly said to be ‘historic’, where these terms refer obliquely to present and past in subordination. The syllabic augment and its equivalent lengthened vowel in the indicative mood indicate a past tense. ‘Present’ is by some authors referred to as ‘non-past’.

The sense of the aspects in Classical Greek is as follows: the imperfective denotes that which is incomplete, as the term implies, and as previously noted, can also refer to an unfinished series of actions; perfective (misnamed ‘aorist’ by ancient grammarians) indicating a completed action; stative, misnamed ‘perfect’, denoting a state of affairs arising from a previous event (a notion too subtle to last: it developed even in later classical times into something like the English periphrastic perfect with ‘have’); and the predictive aspect, referring to expected future events and situations and capable of expressing intention. The verb σώζω illustrates the contrast between its basic imperfective meaning ‘keep safe’ and its derived perfective meaning σώσω meaning ‘rescue’; in its predictive aspect this contrast cannot be rendered, and it is unclear whether σώσω without a context means ‘will rescue’ or ‘will keep safe’. The perfect is well illustrated in the passive, where σέσωμαι means ‘having

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been rescued, I am safe'. Similarly, with ἀποθνήσκει, where the imperfective present means 'is dying', the perfective past ἀπέθανε means 'died', and the stative present τέθνηκε means 'is dead'.

This whole system is illustrated admirably in tabular form in Abbott and Mansfield's Greek grammar, which, for all its venerability, presents the verb tables in an absolutely aspectual way, clearly marking past off from present in the indicative columns, showing the temporal relationship between the subjunctive and the optative in the 'conjunctive' columns, and by its horizontal arrangement illustrating the different aspects clearly. Of course, the labelling of the aspects is unhelpful, but the relationship between the aspects is transparent.

In most uses the two moods of the conjunctive, which are essentially prospective regarding time, are concerned not with facts but with ideas such as deliberation, purpose, fear for the future, wishes, and generalisations (the indefinite uses in relative and other clauses): the aspectual contrasts persist, of course, as in all other parts of the verb.

A further point is that there are verbs whose meaning is either basically imperfective and which form other aspects by modifying the imperfective stem, such as πιάω, by adding an element such as σα/σε to produce a perfective (aorist) ἔπασα, and σο/σε for the predictive (future) aspect πιάσω; and verbs whose perfective (aorist) meaning is basic to them, so that derived lengthened forms are created to form their imperfective, which may be referred to as perfective verbs: an example would be ἔ-λαβ-ον, where the imperfective is a lengthened form of λαβ- with an infix nasal consonant as well as a suffixed nasal consonant (λαμβάνω). The athematic -μι verbs with front reduplication in -ι- are perfective verbs which have developed the modification of a reduplicated front to produce an imperfective equivalent. It is usually clear when you consider the action or situation conveyed by the verb whether it is basically perfective or imperfective (e.g. 'take' is clearly a completed action, so the verb is perfective). Of course, as the perfective aspect lacks a present tense, it is the imperfective that is shown as the prime form in dictionaries. But some verbs have an entirely different perfective: such are φέρω/ἔνεγκαι; αἰρέω/ἔλεῖν; ὁράω/ἰδεῖν; τρέχω/δραμεῖν; curiously, οἴχομαι, ἤκω, ἀλίσκομαι and φεύγω (the last only partially) are stative, though they are imperfective in form.

There are of course secondary meanings which grow out of the aspects: these include the use of the past imperfective in an inceptive sense, and the same used conatively ('I was trying to...'), the strange 'gnomic' past perfective ('gnomic aorist'), the predictive participle expressing purpose, the present imperfective used for vivid narration in the sense of the past perfective ('historic present'), called in Latin *repraesentatio* as it makes past events come back to life, and in the imperative mood the perfective giving a

sharp immediate order whereas the imperfective is often more gentle, conveying a suggestion of 'please', arising out of the underlying perfective/imperfective contrast.

Participles relate to the main verb in time and while the imperfective participle is synchronous with it, the perfective participle naturally refers to that which is anterior with respect to the main verb because it refers to something completed. Hence the common translation into English 'having done...'

With the infinitive, however used, the aspectual force applies whether it be in the prolativ use, in an indirect command or an indirect statement.

In hypothetical conditional sentences aspect is used to convey an imaginary situation: verbs are put in the past tense: in past conditions the situation is seen as completed so the perfective aspect reflects this accurately; in the case of present hypothetical situations the past tense serves to express the counter-factuality of the situation, and the imperfective aspect its incompleteness, which accords with its reference to present time. This use of a past tense occurs, of course, in many European languages to bring out the counter-factual nature of hypothetical conditions. Regarding future counter-factual conditions, the historic conjunctive (optative) is used, but the completion of the imagined situation is shown in the use of either the perfective or imperfective aspect. The participle κε(v) or αv is used to flag the hypothetical nature of the sentence.

Of course, the chance that writers of Greek courses and teachers brought up on the traditional but confusing terminology would adopt the terminology used here is almost certainly nil, and so learners will continue to be confused about this all-pervasive feature of the Greek language. And the terminology I have used, while familiar in the grammar of other languages, seems doubtless somewhat clumsy in comparison with the traditional terminology. It is, however, understood and used by philologists.

In his article, Moran expresses surprise and doubt regarding some uses of verbs with regard to their aspect in that they do not seem to conform to what an English speaker would expect. My advice would be to trust the Greek writer who certainly knew what he wanted to say and had an understanding of aspect, however subconscious, and make an effort to interpret the aspectual sense even if sometimes it seems strange.

Reference

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