**Rethinking Greek Verb Tenses in Light of Verbal Aspect: How Much**

**Do Our Modern Labels Really Help Us?**

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Spring, 2006

**Introduction**

As an important foundation to theological education in our colleges and   
seminaries, the study and teaching of biblical Greek constitutes a challenging task as the

student of the Greek New Testament (NT) is required to master a variety of grammatical

forms and their functions. One of the more significant grammatical features of Greek that

demands the student’s (and teacher’s) attention is the Greek tense system, not least of all

because it differs so widely from the English tense system.1 In elementary Greek students

are taught forms and basic nuances of the different Greek tenses (present, imperfect,

future, aorist, perfect, pluperfect) along with general translational glosses.2 If the student

advances to a second year Greek grammar and syntax class, he/she will sooner or later

spend time acquiring a variety of labels which are supposed to reflect actual usages and

meanings of the various Greek tenses, but which also have ostensible exegetical payoff.

Thus, students acquire as part of their working “grammatical” vocabulary such labels as

“progressive present,” “conative present,” “ingressive imperfect,” “conative imperfect,”

“ingressive aorist,” “constative aorist,” “consummative aorist,” “intensive perfect,” and

so on. Grammatical analysis of verbs, then, consists partly of finding an appropriate label

for each verb encountered in a given text. These labels are time-honored ones and appear

in virtually every intermediate and advanced NT Greek grammar book (as well as a

At this point I am following fairly common parlance in speaking of Greek “tenses.” I am using “tense” in

a loose way simply to refer to the verb endings themselves without any implications regarding time (as in

English). However, as will emerge from the rest of the paper, “tense” is probably an inappropriate

description of this feature of the Greek verbal system (Greek verb endings, in addition to “tense,”

communicate voice, mood, person, and number). Due to its popularity, along with decades of standard

usage, this paper will continue to use the term “tense” in a rather loose way to refer to the formal endings of

verbs, though the rest of this paper will assume that another term (“aspect”) is a more apt description of

what is communicated by the Greek verb endings.

2 See William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (2nd edn; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003).

number of classical ones), with the recent textbook by Daniel B. Wallace providing a full

and in some cases expanded list of possible verb tense usages.3

However, despite the time-honored status of these tense labels, and the almost

sacrosanct character with which they are treated (or merely assumed) by virtually every

Greek grammar, this paper will take issue with this treatment of the Greek verb system

and suggest that these traditional labels (progressive present, iterative imperfect,

ingressive aorist, etc.) are neither helpful nor appropriate as descriptive labels for Greek

tenses.4 Although traditional theories die hard in that there is much at stake in them (and

who can fault those who cling to such verb tense labels when they are repeatedly taught

in all the major Greek grammars), as a result of the examination of the Greek tense

system in the ensuing study I will suggest that we abandon such labels in our study and

teaching of NT Greek as descriptive of Greek tenses. The following discussion will focus

mainly on the aorist, present and perfect tense forms, and more briefly the imperfect tense

form. The pluperfect tense is somewhat restricted in its usage in the Greek NT, often

being taken over by a periphrastic construction. Moreover, the future tense appears to be

an anomaly within the tense system of NT Greek and so will not be treated here.5

This study relies heavily on recent work done on the theory known as verbal

aspect, and suggests that verbal aspect not only renders the traditional method of treating

the Greek tense system more problematic, but also provides a more suitable model for

treating the Greek tense system. It is now becoming increasingly recognized that Greek

verbs do not signal time or kind of action, but verbal aspect, or how the author chooses to

represent the action. The most comprehensive and linguistically astute definition is

provided by Stanley E. Porter, one of the theory’s major advocates. Verbal aspect is “a

synthetic, semantic category (realized in the forms of verbs) used of meaningful

oppositions in a network of tense systems to grammaticalize the author’s reasoned

3 Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament*

(Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 494-586.

4 As will become evident later, I do not necessarily call into question the validity of these labels in and of

themselves; I do call into question their attachment to the Greek tenses as descriptions of the different kinds

of aorists, presents, perfects, etc.

5 For arguments for this view of the future tense see esp. Stanly 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),

pp. 403-39; K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in the New Testament* (Studies in Biblical

Greek, 5; New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 34. The future perfect also occurs in Greek, but only in

periphrastic form.

subjective choice of conception of a process.”6 More succinct is the definition by Buist

M. Fanning: “Aspects pertain…to the focus of the speaker with reference to the action or

state which the verb describes, his way of viewing the occurrence and its make-up,

without any *necessary* regard to the (actual or perceived) nature of the situation itself.”7

Or according to K. L. McKay, aspect is “that category of the Greek verb system by

means of which the author (or speaker) shows how he views each event or activity he

mentions in relation to its context.”8 Therefore, *aspect* needs to be distinguished from

another term that is often used to characterize Greek verbs, *Aktionsart*. The latter term is

used by grammarians to refer to the kind of action taking place, or “objectively” how the

action actually unfolded. The former term refers to how the author conceives of or views

the action. Greek verb endings indicate the latter. Thus, rather than telling the reader

*when* the action of the verb took place, or *how* the action actually unfolded and took place

(*Aktionsart*), verbal aspect as indicated by the verb endings tells the reader *how the*

*author chooses to represent* the action. Porter postulates three primary aspectual

meanings: the action viewed as a complete whole; action viewed as in progress, as

developing; action viewed as a state of affairs.9 These three aspectual meanings are

grammaticalized in the aorist, present (imperfect), and perfect (pluperfect) tense forms

respectively. Thus, by selecting a given tense form, the author chooses to portray the

action in a certain way.

The rest of this paper will rely on the above theory of verbal aspect in examining

the traditional method of treating Greek tenses and its accompanying labels. Given the

importance of verbal aspect, as well as other questions raised by the traditional approach

to treating Greek verb tenses, I will argue that such traditional labels are inappropriate

and unnecessary as descriptive of the Greek tense system in the NT. At the same time,

6 Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 107.

7 Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (New York: Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990), p.

50.

8 McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 27.

9 Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1992), pp. 21-22. Fanning

postulates only two primary aspects, the simple opposition between aorist and present/imperfect, but

considers the perfect as a combination of aspect, *Aktionsart*, and time (anterior action) (*Verbal Aspect*, p.

290-91). For defense of the perfect tense as communicating stative aspect see K. L. McKay, “On the

Perfect and Other Aspects in NT Greek,” *NovT* 23 (1981), pp. 289-329; Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 245-59.

verbal aspect provides us with helpful avenues for exploring the significance of Greek

tenses for teaching and studying the Greek of the New Testament.

**A Survey of Some Recent Grammatical Discussion**

As already discussed above, a feature considered germane to virtually every intermediate

or advanced NT Greek grammar is the inclusion of a discussion of the various possible

kinds of tense usages arranged under accompanying labels (for an easy example of

employing these labels consult the textbook by David A. Black).10 The following is a

representative sampling of some of the more prominent intermediate and advanced level

grammars and their treatment of the NT Greek tense system. As a starting point we can

begin with an earlier 19th century grammatical discussion by Ernest de W. Burton, *Syntax*

*of Moods and Tenses in N. T. Greek.*11 Without argumentation, Burton simply introduces

the various tense categories in his otherwise helpful treatment. For the present tense,

Burton includes progressive, conative, gnomic, aoristic, historical, future, and action still

in progress as different kinds of present tenses. The imperfect tense is divided into the

following: progressive, conative, repeated action, unattained wish, of an action not

separated from the time of speaking, obligation or possibility, a present obligation, and

with verbs of wishing. The aorist tense can achieve the following usages: historical

(momentary, extended, aggregate), indefinite, inceptive, resultative, gnomic, epistolary,

dramatic, aorist for the perfect and pluperfect. The perfect tense reveals, according to

Burton, the following usages in the NT: completed action, existing state, intensive, and

aoristic.12

In the exhaustive, historically oriented grammar by A. T. Robertson the Greek

aorist tense is divided into seven different usages (which he designates *Aktionsart*)

labeled constative, ingressive, effective, narrative, epistolary, future, in wishes.13

Likewise, Robertson classifies the present tense according to the following usages:

punctiliar, gnomic, historical, descriptive, progressive, iterative, conative, deliberative,

10 *It’s Still Greek to Me: An Easy-to-Understand Guide to Intermediate Greek* (Grand Rapids: Baker,

1998), chap. 9.

11 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898).

12 For additional discussion of the perfect tense see Burton, *Syntax*, pp. 38-44.

13 A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*

(Nashville: Broadman Press, 1934), pp. 831-47.

perfective, futuristic. And for the imperfect tense Robertson utilizes such common

descriptive labels as descriptive, iterative, customary, progressive, conative, and

potential. The perfect includes such usages and labels as present, intensive, extensive,

broken continuity, dramatic, gnomic, indirect discourse, futuristic, and aoristic.

Robertson is careful to note throughout his discussion, however, that these labels

are true only as descriptions of how the tenses *function within and interact with* features

of the surrounding context. That is, it is primarily broader contextual features, such as the

lexical meaning of the verb itself, which suggests notions of ingression, progression, etc.

For example, a verb expressing a state (ζάω, live), when used in the aorist tense, can

suggest an ingressive idea (ἐζήσεν, come to life); an adverb of time (τποσαῦτα ἔτη)

often accompanies a verb to express the notion of progression; or the constative aorist is

frequently signaled by a temporal deictic indicator, such as ἐβασίλευσαν with χίλια

ἔτη (Rev 20.4; they reigned over a period of 1000 years). Thus Robertson concludes his

discussion of the aorist tense: “It needs to be repeated that there is at bottom only one

kind of aorist.”14

Following in the spirit of Robertson’s grammar, the intermediate-level grammar

by H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, for years a standard intermediate grammar, provides

a similar classificatory scheme when it comes to its treatment of Greek tenses.15 Thus in

analyzing the present tense, Dana and Mantey suggest that at least three factors must be

taken into consideration: the force of the tense, the meaning of the verb root, the

significance of the context. The convergence of these factors account for the variety of

tense usages: progressive (subdivided into description, existing results, and duration),

customary, iterative, aoristic, futuristic, historical, tendential, and static.16 For the

imperfect Dana and Mantey include the descriptive labels progressive, customary,

iterative, tendential, voluntative, and inceptive. Their treatment of the aorist tense betrays

the same categories as found in Robertson: constative, ingressive, culminative, gnomic,

epistolary, and dramatic. Dana and Mantey round out their discussion of tense usage with

the perfect tense falling into the categories of intensive, consummative, iterative, and

14 Robertson, *Grammar*, p 835, though I would dispute Robertson’s faulty conception of the aorist as

punctiliar. See below.

15 H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York:

Macmillan, 1955).

16 Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, pp. 182-186.

dramatic. While their descriptions often appear to be more intuitive, at other times they

point to contextual and lexical features as the deciding factor in classifying a given tense

usage. For example, the *culminative aorist* usually occurs with “verbs which signify

effort or process, the aorist denoting the attainment of the end of such effort or

process.”17

In what has come to be considered by many the standard reference Greek

grammar, the grammar of F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk assumes and

perpetuates the well-worn but time-honored classifications of various tense meanings.18

In their grammar they posit five important kinds of action (*Aktionsarten*), punctiliar,

durative, iterative, perfective, and perfectivizing by means of prepositions, but then

provide a more extensive categorization of possible usages. For the present tense some of

the possibilities are: conative, aoristic, historical, perfective, futuristic, and used to

express relative time. For the imperfect tense: iterative, conative, used to portray the

manner of action (progress), relative time. For the aorist tense: ingressive (inceptive),

complexive (constative), gnomic, futuristic, epistolary. For the perfect: present,

continuing effect, for the aorist, and used to express relative time.

Without any linguistic justification for the inclusion of the various categories,

Nigel Turner likewise follows a fairly standard classification of the Greek tenses.19

Turner discusses the nuances of the present tense under the following categories: historic,

perfective, continuance of an action during the past up until the present, futuristic,

conative, gnomic. For the imperfect tense Turner includes discussion of conative or

desiderative, descriptions of narrative, iterative, relative time, with verbs of speaking.

For the aorist he includes ingressive or inceptive, perfective (or effective), constative,

epistolary, gnomic, proleptic (future). Though he includes no clear scheme of classifying

perfect tense usage, Turner does discuss the resultative and the so-called aoristic use of

the perfect.

In a helpful volume devoted to the significance of syntax for Greek exegesis, M.

Zerwick discusses the various tenses in terms of three “aspects:” simple realization

17 Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, pp. 196-97.

18 F. Blass, A. Debrunner, and Robert W. Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early*

*Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961).

19 Nigel Turner, *Grammar of the Greek New Testament. III. Syntax* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963).

(aorist); activity in progress or habitual activity (present, imperfect); a completed act

resulting in a state of affairs (perfect, pluperfect).20 Though Zerwick is more restrained

in his inclusion of categories, his classificatory scheme is still a standard one. Thus, for

the aorist tense Zerwick discusses inceptive, effective, global, gnomic, and proleptic

(dramatic) usages. Though he does not use precise labels, for the imperfect (present and

imperfect) Zerwick discusses its use with verbs of speaking or asking, use for an

attempted action which was not carried out, description of a continuous state, and

repeated action. In his discussion of the perfect tense Zerwick does not provide detailed

classifications, but rather demonstrates the exegetical significance of the perfect by

comparing it with the aorist (summary of the action), finding the semantics of “state of

affairs resultant upon the action” present in every case.21

C. F. D. Moule, in his engaging *Idiom Book*, discusses Greek tense usage along

the same lines as the grammar outlined above.22 Under the present tense Moule

discusses the historical present, present for the future, conative present, gnomic present,

present for action still in progress, present in reported speech. For the imperfect Moule

includes inceptive, conative, iterative, desiderative (a wish). The aorist evinces the

following meanings: ingressive, constative, of instantaneous action, epistolary (Moule

seems to deny the presence of the category “gnomic”23). Moule’s discussion of the

perfect tense largely emphasizes the “punctiliar event in the past, related in its *effects* to

the present” and distinguishes it from the English perfect tense.24

At a more basic level, the intermediate NT Greek grammar by James A. Brooks

and Carlton L. Winbery prefers the term *Aktionsart*, by which they mean the kind of

action found both in the verb root and in the tense ending.25 Without justification for their

method of treatment, Brooks and Winbery give a rather extensive list of tense categories,

along with brief discussion of their semantics and several illustrative examples. For the

20 M. Zerwick, *Biblical Greek Illustrated by Examples* (trans. J. Smith; Rome: Editrice Pontificio Istituto

Biblico, 1963), pp. 77-78.

21 Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, p. 97.

22 C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom Book of New Testament Greek* (2nd edn; Cambridge: Cambridge University

Press, 1959).

23 Moule, *Idiom Book*, p. 12.

24 Moule, *Idiom Book*, pp. 13-16. 25 James A. Brooks and Carlton L. Winbery, *Syntax of New Testament Greek*   
 (Lanham: University Press of America. 1979).

present tense they suggest the following usages determined by both *Aktionsart* (root

meaning of verb) and context: descriptive, durative, iterative, tendential, gnomic,

historical, futuristic, aorist, perfective. For the imperfect tense they include the following:

descriptive, durative, iterative, tendential, voluntative, inceptive. Likewise their

categorization of the aorist is a standard one: constative, ingressive, culminative, gnomic,

epistolary, dramatic, futuristic. Finally, the perfect tense can be classified according to the

following usages: intensive, consummative, iterative, dramatic, gnomic, aoristic.

Two recent, major works, one a monograph, the other a major reference grammar,

discuss the Greek verbal tense system at a more methodologically rigorous level and in a

more extensive manner. Fanning, in an innovative book which endeavors to implement

insights from recent research into verbal aspect (see below), attempts to provide

justification for the various traditional categories which other grammarians have

sometimes simply assumed.26 Fanning begins by distinguishing verbal aspect, that is,

“‘the viewpoint or perspective which the speaker takes in regard to the action’,”27 and

procedural characteristics, that is the actual occurrence of the action (*Aktionsart*), the

lexical meaning of the verb, and the larger expression in which the verb occurs.28

However, Fanning goes on to argue that verbal aspect does not stand on its own but

interacts with and is in fact affected by the various *procedural characteristics* (the nature

of the action itself), especially the lexical meaning of verbs. Fanning appeals to and

develops the Vendler and Kenny taxonomy of the various actional characteristics of

verbs: States and Actions; Activities and Performances; Accomplishments and

Achievements; Climaxes and Punctuals.29 Furthermore, “these features of meaning are

characteristic ultimately of entire *propositions* or sentences.”30 However, according to

Fanning these actional characteristics have a profound affect on the usage of verbal

aspect, and can even restrict the way the action is viewed by the author (see below). That

is, the interaction of aspect and procedural characteristics creates the various tense

meanings (duration, iteration, ingression, etc.). As D. A. Carson states, “He [Fanning] is

26 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*. 27 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 83.

28 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 49-50.

29 See the helpful chart in Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 129 and the detailed description of the various

categories as they relate to Greek verbs on pp. 129-63.

30 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 127.

not merely saying that the sentence or discourse carries the additional meaning, but that

the verbal form itself takes it on board.”31 In this way, Fanning attempts to provide

linguistic justification for traditional categories. Consequently, Fanning’s chap. 4 reads

like a traditional grammar where the reader is confronted with all the familiar

terminology utilized to characterize the various tenses/aspects.

Therefore, the present tense combines with various procedural characteristics to

produce the following usages: progressive, instantaneous, customary or iterative, gnomic,

past action still in progress, conative, futuristic, historical, perfective. For example, the

progressive present (action viewed as going on) occurs with verbs which are States,

Activities or Accomplishments (see the Vendler and Kenny taxonomy above). For the

imperfect Fanning discusses progressive, customary or iterative, conative, inceptive. The

aorist tense reveals the following usages: constative (of instantaneous action, extended

action, or repeated action), ingressive, consummative or effective, gnomic, proleptic or

futuristic, dramatic, epistolary. For instance, the ingressive aorist frequently occurs with

Stative verbs, while the consummative or effective aorist occurs with verbs of

Accomplishment or Climax, emphasizing the end-point of the action. In combination

with various lexis, the perfect tense can be used of resulting state, completed action,

present meaning, as an aorist, gnomically, proleptically. Again, these various meanings

come as a result of the combination of verbal aspect with the various procedural

characteristics, especially the meaning of the verb itself. As Carson noted, in Fanning’s

treatment the aspect is actually shaped by and takes on these meanings. As Fanning

concludes, “Aspect operates so closely with such features and is so significantly affected

by them that no treatment of it can be meaningful without attention to these

interactions.”32

A recent, major grammar by Wallace, a former student of Fanning, argues a

similar position as Fanning in relationship to the treatment of tense/aspect.33 Thus,

Wallace begins by maintaining a distinction between aspect (the portrayal of the action,

the unaffected meaning) and *Aktionsart* (the combination of aspect with lexical,

31 D. A. Carson, “An Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate,” in S. E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds.,

*Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series,

80; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 23.

32 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 50.

33 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*.

grammatical and contextual features).34 Based on this distinction, Wallace concludes that

“Categories of usage are legitimate because the tenses combine with other linguistic

features to form various fields of meaning.”35 Therefore, Wallace’s discussion of verb

tenses follows traditional terminology in labeling the various tense usages. So Wallace

lists as possible meanings of the present tense instantaneous, progressive, extending from

past to present, iterative, customary, gnomic, historical, perfective, conative, futuristic,

retained in indirect discourse. For the imperfect Wallace includes the following:

instantaneous, progressive, ingressive, iterative, customary, “pluperfect,” conative,

retained in indirect discourse. The aorist tense combines with various lexical,

grammatical and contextual features to produce constative, ingressive, consummative,

gnomic, epistolary, proleptic, and dramatic aorists. The perfect tense can be used

intensively, extensively, aoristically, perfectively, gnomically, proleptically, and

allegorically. These various categories are justified based on the assumption that aspect

interacts with and is affected by the lexical meaning of verbs, grammar and context.

By way of summary, from the preceding survey of representative grammars

several observations can be made in connection with the treatment of the Greek tense

system in modern grammatical discussion. First, lists of possible usages of each of the

tenses are the accepted way to proceed in Greek grammars. A fairly standard set of

descriptive labels appears in all the grammars as descriptive of the range of meaning of

the different tenses. However, most grammars do not include any explicit justification for

these categories and tense terminology.

Second, these various categories of tense usage depend on judgments about

broader contextual features, not on the tense form alone. Such features as the lexical

meaning of the verb itself, grammar (adjuncts), and broader contextual features must be

taken into consideration in determining the usage of a given tense. Thus, an aorist in

combination with the appropriate contextual features can be labeled a “consummative

aorist.” Or within a certain contextual environment, a given imperfect tense can be

34 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 499. For Wallace, *Aktionsart* is not just the objective nature of the action,

or a reference to the occurrence of the action itself, but the combination of aspect with the various other

procedural characteristics. “***Aktionsart*** *is aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical, or contextual*

*features*” (p. 499). Thus, Wallace uses *Aktionsart* in a different way from how it is usually understood.

35 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 500.

labeled an “inceptive imperfect.” The point is that such labels are due primarily to

judgments about the meanings found in the broader contextual environment.

Third, the tense/aspect is not just a contributing factor to the broader meaning

complex, but, according to Fanning and Wallace, actually “takes on board” the meanings

provided by lexical meanings of verbs and other contextual factor. The various tenses are

actually shaped by contextual factors or procedural characteristics providing justification

for categories such as progressive present, inceptive imperfect, constative aorist,

intensive perfect, etc. Therefore, it is important to realize that for Fanning and Wallace in

particular it is not just a matter of the *differing functions* or usages of aspects in various

contexts, but the interaction of aspects with context to produce *various fields of meaning*.

Finally, these categories are deemed to have exegetical significance, so that the

task of the exegete is to move through the text and label each verb according to the

various categories. In this way verbs are usually treated in isolation.

**Evaluation of Traditional Treatments of Tense**

One might be tempted to think that virtually everything important has already

been said about Greek grammar. Despite the long-standing tradition of treating Greek

tenses in the above way, however, I wish to take issue with the traditional categories

which have become enshrined in much modern grammatical discussion. After

consideration of the shortcomings and problems of this traditional approach of

classification of Greek tenses, I will suggest some possible avenues for how the student

(and teacher) of NT Greek might approach Greek tenses. Most of the proceeding

discussion will focus on the works of Fanning and Wallace, since they represent the most

recent and thorough discussions of and attempts to provide justification for traditional

categorization of Greek tenses in the NT.

*A Failure to Distinguish Aspect from* Aktionsart, *or* *Semantics from Pragmatics*

Most of the above categories reflect a failure to adequately distinguish aspect, that

is, how the author views the action, from *Aktionsart*, that is, the kind of action, or how the

action actually takes place. Another way of putting it is that grammarians who take this

approach fail to adequately distinguish semantics (the meaning of the aspect) from

pragmatics (the function of the aspects in various contexts). As most grammarians

recognize, the majority of the commonly used labels derive primarily from information

gathered from the surrounding context, including the lexical meaning of verbs, adjuncts,

and other grammatical and contextual features, and not the tense forms themselves. Thus

Fanning flags the most important contextual features which would point to an “iterative

present:” adverbs, plural nouns, broader circumstances (the nature of the utterance is of

such that it must be repeated over a stretch of time; knowledge of the non-literary

context).36 For instance, Fanning’s sample of an iterative present from Matt 17.15

(πολλάκις γὰρ πίπτει εἰς πῦρ) depends largely on the presence of the adverb

πολλάκις to suggest the notion of iteration or repetition. More telling is his inclusion and

discussion of the category “perfective present.”37 According to Fanning, this usage is

present with certain words which denote a present state or condition (ἥκω, ἀπέχω,   
ἀκούω, πάρειμι). However, this category results solely from the meaning of the verb,

and raises the question as to semantically why the perfect tense, then, would need to be

used. Wallace also suggests that a perfective force may be due to certain contextual

factors. “This use of the present is especially frequent with λέγει as an introduction to an

OT quotation. Its usual force seems to be that although the statement was spoken in the

past, it still speaks today and is binding on the hearers.”38 Yet this is a theological, and

not a grammatical, statement. Such discussions confuse the semantics of the Greek

tense/aspect itself and the *Aktionsart*, that is, the nature of the action as can be derived

from lexical meaning of verbs and broader contextual and theological factors.

Several statements throughout Fanning’s work give the reader the impression that

it is the context, rather than the tense form, that is the deciding factor, leaving the reader

to wonder whether it is the verb tense itself or the context alone that communicates these

meanings. In his discussion of the so-called customary present, Fanning suggests that it is

“indicated by adverbs or plural nouns…, but frequently it is shown only by *contextual*

*factors* of a vaguer sort (the nature of the prediction in that circumstance, knowledge of

36 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 206.

37 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 239-240, although Fanning concludes that this usage is rather minor in

importance.

38 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 532.

the non-literary context of the utterance, etc.).”39 Thus, this category of usage can

apparently depend even on non-linguistic factors. Or on the constative aorist he

concludes that “in each case the sense is dependent on the lexical character of the verb

and other features, *not on the use or non-use of the aorist*.”40 Or regarding the present for

past action in progress, Fanning notes that it “always includes an *adverbial phrase or*

*other time-indicators* with the present tense to signal past time meaning.”41 Fanning

discusses the so-called consummative aorist, the use of the aorist to highlight the end

point of the action. See Gal 4.11 Paul states that “I have learned (ἔμαθον, a consummated

action) in which state I am to be content.” However, Fanning goes on to conclude that

“the conative or consummative sense is not automatic, and must be emphasized by the

*contextual tone* of difficulty or resistance, *since the completion or lack of it would be a*

*minor point otherwise*.”42 Likewise, in Wallace’s discussion of the ingressive (inceptive)

imperfect, he concludes that this use of the imperfect occurs in narrative literature when

there is a change in activity. But it is “*the context in each instance* [which] indicates a

topic shift or new direction for the action.”43 Fanning concludes that “the narrative

sequence produces an *inceptive* sense, since the verb in sequence denotes the process as

beginning and then proceeding on without limit….”44 Thus, in response to Jesus healing

Peter’s mother-in-law Matt 8.15 records that she ἠγέρθη καὶ διηκόωει αὐτῷ. If the

action here is inceptive (cf. NIV), it owes this idea to the “narrative sequence” as Fanning

observes, and our need to bring this out in our English translation, not to the verbal

aspect. But even here in Matt 8.15 it could be disputed whether this is inceptive at all,

aspectually portraying instead the process of serving as action in progress.

Moreover, it is commonplace in most grammars to conclude that when used with

stative verb types (e.g., γίνομαι, ἔχω,ἀσθενέω, ζάω, ὁράω), the aorist tense

communicates an ingressive notion (entrance into the state; ἐγένομην, “I became”   
ἔζησα, “I came to life”). However, given the distinction between aspect and *Aktionsart*, or

semantics and pragmatics, it may be more accurate to say that certain contexts implicate

39 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 206. Italics mine. 40 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 259. Italics mine.

41 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 217.

42 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 265. Italics mine.

43 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 544. Italics mine.

44 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 146.

an ingressive notion, usually being realized with the aorist tense. Yet it simply cannot be

taken as some kind of a grammatical rule or axiom that the aorist tense with stative verbs

are ingressive, since it is unlikely that all of Fanning’s examples in his thorough

discussion of ingressive aorists are valid and many of them are patient of different

analyses. For example, Fanning suggests that out of the eight usages of the stative verb

za<w in the aorist tense, seven of them are ingressives: Luke 15.24, 32; Rom 14.9; Rev

2.8; 13.14; 20.4, 5.45 However, virtually all of his examples can be disputed. In the Luke

passages it is not necessary to take the aorist as ingressive at all, since the author may just

be comparing the lost son’s state of being dead (νεκπὸς ἦν) with the state of being alive

(ἀνέζησεν / ἔζησεν). Similarly, in Rom 14.9 and Rev 2.8 the authors may simply be

referring to Christ being in the state of living (ἔζησεν), using the aorist to summarize this

state, rather than just his initial entry into the state of living. It is also not clear that the

use of the aorist in Rev 13.14 is ingressive, since the author once again could only be

summarizing the state of the beast as living.46 In Rev 20.4, 5 an ingressive notion does

seem to fit, especially with v. 5 since ἐζήσαν occurs with a precise temporal designation,

ἄχρι τελεσθῇ τὰ χίλια ἔτη. In this latter case it is the adjunct which suggests the

ingressive notion, not primarily the aorist with a stative verb. As Robertson concluded,

the ingressive idea “is not…a tense notion at all. It is purely a matter with the individual

verb.”47 Based on these observations, we must refrain from concluding that the aorist

with stative verbs necessarily becomes ingressive. Only broader contextual factors can

determine if an ingressive notion is present at all. The problem that can be seen from

many of these examples in this paper is that usages of tenses are often forced into a

certain category of understanding based on assumed rules or principles of usage, ignoring

other possible or more likely conclusions regarding tense usage. It appears that Fanning

has been seduced by common tense terminology.

45 According to Fanning, the eighth instance in Acts 26.5 has a past stative sense (*Verbal Aspect*, p. 262 n.

141).

46 Even though the beast is described as being wounded by the sword, this does not justify giving the aorist

ἔζησεν an ingressive idea, since it probably only refers to the fact that now he lives. Interestingly,

Fanning does admit of the usage of the aorist with stative verbs to indicate “a summary view of the entire

situation” (*Verbal Aspect*, p. 138). However, Fanning thinks that this is infrequent, though he does not tell

us why it is so. It only appears infrequent, though, when one accepts Fanning’s general discussion of

ingressive aorists and all the instances which he places within this category.

47 Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 834.

However, as seen above, rather than *Aktionsart* (or even time) the Greek verbal

system grammaticalizes aspect, or how the author chooses to view the action. Yet the

traditional classification of verbs typically and consistently confuses the two. But both

Fanning and Wallace attempt to show that aspect, though separate from *Aktionsart*,

interacts closely with *Aktionsart* and other contextual features to produce the meanings

suggested by the traditional labels. As seen in the survey above, Fanning concludes that

aspect is affected by 1) the lexical meaning of verbs; 2) compositional elements (adverbs,

adjuncts, etc.); 3) time reference; 4) discourse factors. For him the first category is the

most important. As Carson concluded, Fanning “is not merely saying that the sentence or

the discourse carries this additional meaning [e.g. inceptive, durative, constative, etc.],

but that the verbal form itself takes it on board.”48 Dependent on Fanning, Wallace

likewise suggests that aspect is the unaffected meaning of the verb tense, while

*Aktionsart* is aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical and contextual features.49

Therefore, the various “categories of usage are legitimate because tenses combine with

other linguistic features to form various fields of meaning.”50 In other words, it is not

merely a matter of the differing functions or usages of aspects, but the creation of various

fields of meaning. Yet it appears that Fanning and Wallace (as well as all the grammars

surveyed above) merely assume that aspect combines with *Aktionsart* and other

contextual features to produce the various semantic ranges of the tenses rather than

providing rigorous linguistic justification. They fail to raise the question as to whether

these meanings belong to the context, or adhere to the tense forms themselves. This

assumption points to another problem.

*The Confusion of Tense and Concept*

Fanning’s assumption that the actual semantic freight carried by any particular

verbal form depends on a complex interaction with lexis (the basic semantic range of the

verb in question), context, temporal structures and more is unjustified given the

distinction between aspect and *Aktionsart*, but is also reminiscent of a similar error

48 Carson, “Introduction,” p. 23.

49 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 499. Wallace uses *Aktionsart* in a different way than most grammars. For

Wallace, *Aktionsart* does not just refer to contextual kinds of action, but aspect in combination with

context, or aspect as it had been affected by context. See p. 504.

50 Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 500.

committed at the lexical level. In his magisterial and provocative work on lexical

semantics, James Barr inveighed against the tendency of modern biblical lexical studies

(namely *TDNT*51) to persistently confuse word and concept.52 That is, words were made

to bear the broader theological concepts derived from broader contextual features such as

sentences and paragraphs, such as when ἐκκλήσια is made to bear the entirety of the

theological concept of “church” as treated throughout the NT.53 In other words, the NT

concept of “church” is reflected in sentences, paragraphs, and ultimately the entire

discourse rather than on the lexical definition of ἐκκλήσια. Moreover, Barr also warned

against what he dubbed “illegitimate totality transfer” which refers to the error of reading

all that a word could possibly mean in its various contexts into the word in any given

context, a sort of semantic overload. It appears that the tendency to find multiple

meanings of different tenses/aspect which depend on the interaction of aspect with

various features from the broader context commits at a grammatical level the fallacies

which Barr and others have warned of at a lexical level. To suggest as Fanning and others

do that the tense grammaticalized in the verbal form (and only one element of the verb so

grammaticalized [cf. mood, voice, person, number] at that) carries all the semantic freight

derived from lexis, context, temporal structures and the discourse smacks of the

confusion of word and concept endemic in Kittle’s *TDNT* and of semantic overload akin

to Barr’s “illegitimate totality transfer.” Rather, according to Rodney J. Decker, verbal

aspect is just one factor, along with lexis, adjuncts, and other broader contextual features

which contributes to the whole complex of the verbal notion.54 Verbal aspect as

grammaticalized in the verb endings, then, contributes the notion of “the author’s

51 Gerhard Kittle and Gerhard Friedrich (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (10 vols.;

trans. G. Bromiley; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-76).

52 James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961). Cf. also Peter

Cotterell & Max Turner, *Linguistics & Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1989), chap. 4 for

discussion of Barr’s important insights.

53 “[T]he great weakness is a failure to get to grips with the semantic value of words in their contexts, and

a strong tendency to assume that this value will on its own agree with and illuminate the contours of a

theological structure...”(Barr, *Semantics*, p. 231).

54 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), p. 27-28, who concludes that “The

web of semantic factors comprised by aspect, lexis, and *Aktionsart*, along with other grammatical and

contextual factors (adjuncts, deixis, etc.) is referred to in this volume as the verbal complex. Thus a

statement that ‘the meaning of the verbal complex of x…’ is to be understood as an inclusive, pragmatic

statement (usually employed at the level of clause) summarizing the total semantic value of the verb and its

adjuncts in a particular context, including aspect, lexis, *Aktionsart*, and contextual factors” (p. 27).

conception of a process” to the entire complex, which may include notions of inception,

duration, iteration, etc. However much these notions may be reflected in our translation

of a given tense form, given the above observations it is illegitimate to transfer these

meanings onto the tense form itself, resulting in a kind of semantic overload or “tense and

concept confusion.”

Fanning and Wallace seem to only assume, but do not clearly demonstrate, that

aspect interacts with and is affected by contextual features to produce these various

meanings. Moises Silva has raised the pertinent question: “how does one distinguish

between the information conveyed by the aspect itself and the information conveyed by

the context as a whole?”55 According to Silva, if the context is sufficient to indicate

notions such as duration, iteration, ingression, etc., is this the same as saying that the

aspect indicates this meaning? It is best, therefore, to see tense/aspect as just one factor,

along with the lexical meaning of the verb, adverbs, and broader contextual features that

contribute to the whole complex of the verbal notion. Therefore, this means that it may be

legitimate at times to speak of ingressive, constative, iterative, durative, etc. meanings.

However, these meanings are pragmatic categories and are the property of the entire

proposition and broader context, including lexical meanings of the verb, adjuncts, and

other contextual features, *and not the aspect of the verb itself*. Furthermore, as Porter has

noted, if we are to create labels to reflect the semantic categories of tense usage we would

need far more than just the traditional handful of labels, since “the number of objective

classifications of events is potentially as great as the number of events themselves….”56

For example, virtually no grammar includes a category of an “iterative aorist.”57 Yet

under the traditional scheme this would certainly be a valid category based on *Aktionsart*

and other contextual factors. Even if the traditional manner of labeling tenses were valid,

we would need a lot more categories than just the traditional ones usually discussed.

Two studies have in a more limited way raised the question of tense usage and

labels. Limited to discussion of the aorist tense, Charles R. Smith laments the abuse of

55 Moises Silva, “A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect,” in S. E. Porter and D. A. Carson

(eds.), *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in the Current Debate* (Journal for the

Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, 80; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993), p. 81.

56 Stanley E. Porter, “Tense Terminology and Greek Language Study: A Linguistic Reevaluation,”

*Sheffield Working Papers in Language and Linguistics* 3 (1986), p. 83. Cf. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 33.

57 However, cf. Burton, *Syntax*, p. 20.

the aorist tense, and in doing so suggests that the interpreter exercise caution in the use of

such labels as ingressive aorist, constative aorist, culminative aorist, etc.58 While Smith is

to be lauded for pointing out the difficulty of appealing to such labels (such notions

belong to the context and not to the tense form), his reason for doing so remains

problematic. Smith argues that at bottom the aorist is noncommittal regarding the action,

that is, it does not assert anything about the action, and therefore cannot be seen in

contrast to the present or perfect tenses. In other words, it is apparently devoid of any

semantic content. However, as Porter has demonstrated it is necessary and beneficial to

see the aspect as consisting of a network of semantic choices, with the aorist not being

undefined or semantically empty, but as the least heavily marked aspect which portrays a

certain perspective or view of the action, externally as a complete whole.59 Thus, the

aorist does contribute semantically to the discourse: a particular way of viewing the

process. Smith’s reasons for abandoning the traditional labels for aorist usage are

illegitimate in that they are based on a misunderstanding of the semantics of the aorist

tense. Nevertheless, he is correct in criticizing the value of traditional labels, and at least

this feature of his insight should be extended to include other tenses.

More recently, from a different perspective than Smith, Robert Picirilli has

attempted to wrestle with some of these issues relating to categorizing the various

meanings of Greek tenses.60 Picirilli correctly distinguishes between the perspective of

the author on the action (aspect) and the pragmatic function of the context (*Aktionsart*, or

kind of action) and expresses commendable caution in the use of traditional categories.

Therefore, “such syntactical distinctions as iterative, inceptive, and the like should be

seen as pragmatic functions of *context* and not of *tense*.”61 However, he still wonders

what there is about the action that may have led the author to choose a particular tense

58 Charles R. Smith, “Errant Aorist Interpreters,” *Grace Theological Journal* 2.2 (1981), pp. 205-26. Smith

builds on an earlier and important (but often ignored) article by Frank Stagg (“The Abused Aorist,” *Journal*

*of Biblical Literature* 91 [1972], pp. 222-31).

59 For the concept of markedness as it relates to the Greek tenses/aspects see Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 89-

90, 178-81; Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 50-72. Over against Smith, both Porter and Fanning correctly see

the opposition between the tenses as equipollent rather than privative. That is, the aorist tense is marked for

meaning, but is the least heavily marked member of the systemic network. See K. L. McKay’s comment

that the aorist tense was used “when the speaker or writer had no special reason to use any other” (“Syntax

in Exegesis,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 [1972], p. 46).

60 Robert E. Picirilli, “Meaning of the Tenses in New Testament Greek: Where Are We?,” *Journal of the*

*Evangelical Theological Society* 48/3 (2005), pp. 533-55.

61 Picirilli, “Meaning of the Tenses,” p. 548. Italics his.

form and therefore finds it worth discussing possible categories of meaning. Using Mark

1.5 as an example, he notes the use of the imperfect “were going out” (ἐξεπορεύετο) and

asks “what there might have been about these actions that made it appropriate for his to

choose to express them progressively.”62 In addition, Picirilli wonders whether it might

also communicate an inceptive, iterative, or simply a descriptive idea. Picirilli concludes

that if it can be determined that in Mark 1.5 the scene was repeated over and over

(iteration), then it was appropriate for Mark to express the action imperfectively.

However, while Picirilli’s comments demonstrate considerable improvement over

traditional treatments of tense categories, and while Picirilli is perhaps fully justified in

discussing such decisions and distinctions, I would still question whether his assumption

is correct that there is something inherent in the actions that may have made it more

appropriate for the author to choose one aspect over another. First, as Picirilli himself

recognizes, the context, which is the determining factor, may still be ambiguous,

including little if any indication at all of how the action objectively took place (Picirilli

himself seems unclear about how to label ἐξεπορεύετο in Mark 1.5). The danger is that

the student may still feel compelled, constrained under the traditional scheme, to select an

appropriate label. Secondly, Picirilli’s comments still make it clear that the deciding

factor for making such distinctions between ingression, iteration, description, etc. is the

context. “The key is context and interpretation rather than the imperfect tense itself as

such.”63 But then we are back to the question, is it legitimate do “dump” all of the

contextual information on the tense form itself, committing at a grammatical level Barr’s

illegitimate totality transfer, or confusion of *tense* and concept? Thirdly, Picirilli seems to

assume that the imperfect tense was the most appropriate tense to represent the action in

Mark 1.5. However, it must be questioned what in the “objective” nature of the action in

Mark 1.5 (if we can determine this) made the imperfect more appropriate, since the aorist

can be (and could have been) used of all three of his suggestions for the imperfect in

Mark 1.5: ingressive, iterative (so Burton), or descriptive (constative). Rather, the

difference seems to be whether the author wanted to view the action externally, as a

complete whole, or internally, as in progress, not whether the action occurred in a certain

62 Picirilli, “Meaning of the Tenses,” p. 548.

63 Picirilli, “Meaning of the Tenses,” p. 548.

way or not. Picirilli’s comments seem to be at odds with his own (correct) distinction

between the author’s perspective on an action (aspect) and the pragmatics of the

context.64 Picirilli may be correct that such distinctions regarding the kind of action are

important and perhaps worth listing and discussing, but I disagree that such discussion

belongs at the level of tense-form and aspect. Rather, they belong solely at the level of

context and pragmatics.

*Overdependence on English Translation*

A further difficulty with the traditional scheme is that some categories seem to be

merely the result of an inability to draw out an aspectual distinction in English

translation, or they depend more on English translation than on the semantics of Greek

aspects. A good example of this is the inclusion of the label “aoristic perfect” found in

several grammars.65 According to Fanning, in this usage the perfect functions as a

“simple narrative tense to report past occurrences without attention paid to the present

consequences.”66 The assumption appears to be that the usage of different tenses within

the same contextual and temporal framework suggests identical meaning. Though he

admits that this usage is rare, he finds several possible examples where the notion of

present consequences does not seem to fit. One of the more common examples of this so-

called “aoristic perfect” is Rev 5.7. Following a reference to the Lamb approaching the

throne, the seer observes that the Lamb then took (εἴληφεν) the scroll from the hand of

the one on the throne with a verb in the perfect where one might expect to find an aorist

tense. However, it is doubtful that this constitutes an example of an aoristic use of a

perfect where the semantic force of the perfect has disappeared in large part or altogether,

for John feels free to use the aorist form of the verb in the very next verse (ἔλαβεν) and

once more a few lines later (λαβεῖν, v. 9).67 It appears that one of the reasons for this

category of perfects is the inability or awkwardness of bringing out the force of the

perfect in English translation. Instead, most English translations translate εἴληφεν like an

64 Here Picirilli is in clear agreement with Porter.

65 Cf. Blass, Debrunner, Funk, *Grammar*, p. 177 (perfect for aorist); Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 898 (the

“aoristic” present perfect), though Robertson is more cautious; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 578-79

(aoristic perfect); Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 299-303 (perfect with aoristic sense).

66 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 299-300. Wallace says, “it focuses so much on the act that there is no room

left for the results” (*Greek Grammar*, p. 578).   
67 Cf. the use of the aorist in 3.11; 4.11; 6.4; 10.8, 9, 10; 17.12; 18.4; 20.4; 22.17.

aorist in narrative. Yet just because the interpreter cannot bring out the force of the

perfect (or any other Greek tense) in English translation (or any other receptor language),

or just because the traditional manner of translating the perfect does not sit well in the

context, does not justify the conclusion that the semantic force of the perfect has been

diminished in some instances. Furthermore, Fanning’s suggestion that the “present

consequences” are no longer in view is due to a misunderstanding of the perfect tense and

an over reliance on an outmoded time-based conception of verbal aspect as

grammaticalized in the verbal forms (a past action with present results).68 The perfect

tense refers to a state of affairs, irrespective of whether it refers to past, present, or future

time.69 In addition, the fact that the aspects can be used side-by-side in the same context

could be taken to suggest not similarity in meaning but conscious choice and distinction

in aspectual meaning.

Fanning, following the intermediate grammar of Dana and Mantey, also includes

a category in his discussion of the perfect tense of “perfect for completed action,” or

consummative perfect, which “highlights the completion of [the action], while leaving

the resulting condition in the background.”70 However, most of Fanning’s examples he

offers appear to reflect English translation sense of the verb rather than the semantics of

the Greek perfect. Thus, for example, the ἑώρακεν in John 1:18 (“no one *has ever seen*

God”), the νενίκηκα of 16:33 (“I *have overcome* the world”), the εἴρηκεν of Heb 1:13

(“to which of the angels *did* he *ever say*”), or the ἡμαρτήκαμεν of 1 John 1:10 (“if we

say we *have not sinned*”) all appear to depend more on the sense of English translation of

the verb and the awkwardness of bringing out the force of the Greek perfect in English

translation, rather than on the semantics of the Greek perfect (stative aspect) itself. In

each of the above cases, the full stative force of the perfect fits well. In addition, several

instances of the category “ingressive aorist” or “ingressive imperfect” discussed above

may also be the result of the sense of our English translations (see the discussion of the

imperfect in Matt 8.15 above).

68 See the slightly more restrained comments on this ostensible use of the perfect by McKay, *New Syntax*,

p. 50.

69 For examples of the different temporal contexts of the perfect tense see Porter, *Idioms*, pp. 40-42.

70 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 298. Cf. Dana and Mantey, *Manual Grammar*, pp. 202-3; Wallace, *Greek*

*Grammar,* p. 577. Wallace does not think that the present state has disappeared, but only that it does not

receive the emphasis. But one can still ask whether this is more the result of translation into English.

Part of the difficulty is that Fanning’s classifications of verbs according to the

Vendler-Kenny taxonomy (States, Actions, Activities, Performances, Accomplishments,

Achievements, etc.) appear at times to be more English-based than Greek-based.71

McKay is one of the few who is acutely aware of the problem when he states that

“Idiomatic English translations must use English categories, but this does not imply that

those categories can be directly transferred to the explanation of Greek idiom.”72 For

example, Fanning classifies νικάω as a Climax or Accomplishment type verb, and

therefore labels the aorist ἐνίκησεν in Rev 5.5 as a clear example of a “consummative

aorist.”73 However, according to McKay, νικάω may have originally signified a state, so

that it should be understood to mean “to be in a state of overcoming.”74 McKay

concludes that “it cannot be clear to the modern reader how much the ancient speakers of

Greek were aware of the distinctions we find it convenient, and often necessary, to make

in translating, and some of them at least owe more to peculiarities of modern English (or

any other target language) than to those of ancient Greek.”75 This coheres nicely with

Porter’s distinction between semantics and pragmatics, the latter being taken into

consideration in translational realizations. Our *translation* of a given verb will often

reflect the aspect, the meaning of the verb itself, broader contextual features, and even

temporal distinctions. But this does not mean that these features belong to the *aspect* of

the verb itself as grammaticalized in the verb ending.

*Failure to See the Tenses as Part of a System*

Classification of Greek tenses according to traditional labels that reflect their

variety of meanings reflects a larger methodological problem, that is, attempts to

manufacture the various categories of tense usage are grammatically unprincipled and

linguistically unjustified. Greek maintains a close correspondence between tense forms

(morphology) and aspectual meaning. That is, Greek is relatively morphologically stable,

so that morphology is all important when discussing verbal aspect. In simple terms, we

71 Cf. McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 29. 72 McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 28.

73 Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 264.

74 McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 28. “It is likely that our traditional lexical definitions of some Greek verbs

obscure some of the qualities the speakers of ancient Greek felt in them” (p. 28).

75 McKay, *New Syntax*, p. 29.

learn from 1st year Greek that Koine Greek is highly fusional or inflectional. All the

grammatical information regarding the verb, including its aspect, is found in its ending.

By choice of a given morphological ending, the author selects a perspective on the action

being described (aspect). In light of this phenomenon Porter has applied systemic

linguistics (esp. from the work of M. A. K. Halliday) to understanding the Greek verbal

system as consisting of a network of semantic choices.76 The different Greek aspects can

be arranged according to a network of choices. The use of an aspect by an author entails a

semantic choice from within the system which requires an increasingly specific semantic

choice as one moves through the system. Each aspect is meaningful in relationship to the

others. Porter graphically displays the network of choices accordingly:

Aorist

Aspect →→→│ Present

Non-aorist →→→│

Perfect

The basic opposition is between the aorist and non-aoristic aspects. Then a further

decision is required between the two non-aoristic aspects, the present and perfect, with

the perfect offering a more specific semantic choice. What this means is that within the

Greek verbal system there are no principled (formal and morphological) means of

distinguishing between so-called ingressive, constative, consummative aorists, or

durative, iterative, durative presents, etc. These are all contextual, semantic categories

that are realized (if present at all) at the level of propositions and larger contextual factors

rather than grammaticalized within the verb form itself, and depend on judgments that are

interpretive in nature.

At a grammatical level this means that the most meaningful choices are *between*

the aspects, not *within* them. As Porter says, “the meaningful choice of the Aorist occurs

in relationship to the Present/Imperfect and Perfect/Pluperfect tenses.”77 Further, not only

are the various so-called tense usages not formally marked, but the same usage can often

76 Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 1-16. Cf. M. A. K. Halliday, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (3rd

edn; rev. by C. M. Matthiessen; London: Arnold, 2004).

77 Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 30.

be found under different forms: ingressive aorist and imperfect; inchoative present and

imperfect; iterative present and imperfect; gnomic aorist and present. This significant

overlap suggests that these meanings if present are *contextually* and not *aspectually*

dependent. If one is to follow formal indications, there are no choices beyond aorist,

present, imperfect, perfect and pluperfect tenses. As Robertson concluded regarding the

aorist tense, “there is at bottom only one kind of aorist.”76 Fanning and Wallace in

particular are unclear as to how the functions of aspect are tied to morphology.

*A Practical Consideration*

A final criticism of the traditional way of classifying and labeling tense usage is a

practical one. How much have we really achieved exegetically by labeling a given verb

an ingressive or constative aorist, or a progressive or customary present? If we decide

that the h3marton in Romans 5.12 is a constative aorist, or that the e1zhsan in Revelation

20.4 is an ingressive aorist, what have we really gained? Is exegesis merely a matter of

moving through a text and attaching a label to each verbal form? And if it is the context

that makes the various tense meanings clear, then why complicate things by creating

numerous categories of tense meanings? I must confess that I have yet to find one

example where labeling a certain verb tense according to its ostensible usage has yielded

any significant exegetical insight. Rather, such a practice seems to perpetuate the fallacies

of 1) forcing an arbitrary construct on a given tense; 2) leaving the impression that

exegesis consists of little more than labeling given tenses; 3) isolating individual verbs

and their tenses and giving too much exegetical weight to a mere tense usage, deflecting

attention away from the broader discourse as the proper locus of meaning. The

accompanying error is that students nurtured on the traditional scheme of labeling tenses

will be tempted to force a classification on a given tense when the context may not

support it (see the discussion of the ingressive aorist above).

**Rethinking Greek Tenses**

Based on the preceding difficulties with the traditional means of classifying Greek tenses,

I would suggest that we avoid the use of such labels as descriptive of the Greek tense

78 Robertson, *Grammar*, p. 835.

system altogether. Yet if the traditional method of classifying and interpreting Greek

tenses/aspects is unhelpful and inappropriate, is there another scheme that should replace

it? How should teachers and students of NT Greek approach the Greek tense system? In a

sense, this way of putting the question assumes the need for a system of classification,

though classificatory schemes may be necessary to explicitly reveal meanings that native

speakers take for granted, especially in an epigraphic language such as NT Greek. I

would suggest that we classify Greek tenses simply in terms of how the author chooses to

view the action, that is, according to the three primary aspects. As seen above, verbal

aspect can be understood as “the author/speaker’s reasoned subjective choice of

conception of a process.”79 Thus, the author can conceive of the action as in progress

(Present, Imperfect), as a complete whole (Aorist), or as a state of affairs (Perfect,

Pluperfect). Beyond these three categories, any other meanings (durative, iterative,

ingressive, constative, etc.) are not to be attached to the Greek tenses/aspects, since there

are no principled linguistic means for discerning them. Rather, if they can be determined

at all they reside in the broader contexts.

Romans 5.1-5 shift aspects as indicative of how the author chooses to conceive of

the various processes. The author begins with an aorist participle (δικαιωθέντες)   
which summarizes what has already been discussed previously, the readers’ justification.

The implication of their justification is presented as a process in progress with the present

aspect (e1xomen). Then two more verbs in perfect aspect (ἐσχήκαμεν, ἑστήκαμεν) present

the benefits that we have through Christ as a state of affairs. Two occurrences of

κατυχώμεθα in the present tense view boasting as a process in progress. The perfect tense

εἰδότες then presents the knowledge of what tribulation accomplishes as a state of

affairs, while the working of tribulation to produce endurance (κατεργάζεται) and the

fact that hope does not disappoint (καταισχύνει) are viewed as processes in progress.

The author shifts back to the perfect aspect to portray God’s love poured out in our hearts

(ἐκκέχυται) as a state of affairs. The aorist tense then summarizes the experience of

believers in receiving the Holy Spirit (δοθέτες). In this section, then, the author

grammaticalizes his conception of the various processes, as either a process in progress, a

summary or complete whole, or a state of affairs. Any other meanings (duration,

79 Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 1.

ingression, iteration, etc.), if present at all, would have to be determined by broader

contextual features and not by the usage of the different tense forms.

This still leaves the question as to what we do with such categories as ingressive,

iterative, durative, constative, etc. if they are not to be attached to tenses as labels

reflecting their meaning. Throughout this paper I have attempted to argue that these

labels are inappropriate and unhelpful as descriptions of the tenses. Is there a place for

these labels, then, in our Greek grammars at all, and if so, where should they appear?

This is an area where we need to rethink the way we treat verbs in our Greek grammars.

As suggested above, I think that they labels should be dropped in our discussion of verb

tenses. Furthermore, I would suggest that such categories if included at all should be

discussed under verbs as part of the verbal complex, but not as part of the verb tenses.

Perhaps these labels should be introduced only *after* each of the aspects have been

introduced and discussed. Following a treatment of each of the aspects and their

semantics, these categories then could be introduced with a discussion of the contextual

features (including the lexical meaning of the verb) that signal these meanings and the

aspects that often find realization in these constructs. Yet there must always be the

accompanying realization that at times the contextual indications may be ambiguous or

not present at all. Most of all, it should be made clear that these meanings are contextual

categories that do not belong to the tense forms themselves. The use of such categories is

only justified when warranted by contextual evidence. In the end it may be better to avoid

such terminology.

In addition to communicating the author’s perspective on the action, a further

function of the Greek aspects is at times to signal discourse prominence. One of the

significant insights of discourse analysis is the recognition that discourse is not flat, but is

structured to highlight certain elements as semantically and pragmatically more

significant than others. As Robert E. Longacre notes, “The very idea of discourse as a

structured entity demands that some parts of discourse be more prominent than others.”80

Therefore, language users use language in a way that sets apart certain information from

other information within a given discourse. According to Jeffrey T. Reed, “Prominence is

80 Robert E. Longacre, “Discourse Peak as a Zone of Turbulence,” in J. R. Wirth (ed.), *Beyond the*

*Sentence: Discourse and Sentential Form* (Ann Arbor, MI: Karoma, 1985), pp. 81-98.

defined…as those *semantic and grammatical elements of discourse that serve to set aside*

*certain subjects, ideas or motifs of the author as more or less semantically and*

*pragmatically significant than others*.”81Based ultimately upon the insights of Gestalt

psychology, discourse analysts have recognized at least two levels of prominence: often

labeled *figure* and *ground* or *background* and *foreground*.82 Porter helpfully proposes a

third level, *frontground*, for the following three levels of prominence in discourse:83

1. *background*: this does not refer to material that is non-essential or

unimportant, but to material that serves a supporting role.

1. *foreground*: this refers to material that is selected for more attention

and often consists of the main characters and thematic elements in a discourse.

1. *frontground*: elements that are frontgrounded are singled out for special

attention, are presented in a more well-defined way, and stand out in an

unexpected manner in the discourse.

Though more research needs to be done, one of the linguistic features of Greek that can

function to signal discourse prominence is the aspectual system.84 The notion of aspect as

portraying the author’s perspective on an action fits nicely with the notion of discourse

prominence which communicates different levels of perspective (background,

foreground, frontground) on various features of the discourse. As seen above, the Greek

aspectual system should be seen systemically as a series of choices. That is, rather than

studying the various verb tenses/aspects in isolation, they should be viewed in

relationship to one another. As one moves through the aspectual system (from aorist, to

present, to perfect) a more specific semantic choice is made. Thus, the three primary

aspects can be seen to correspond to the three levels of discourse prominence:

81 Jeffrey T. Reed, “Identifying Theme in the New Testament: Insights from Discourse Analysis,” in D.A.

Carson and S. E. Porter (eds.), *Discourse Analysis and Other Topics* (Journal for the Study of the New

Testament Supplement Series, 113; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1995), p. 76

82 H. A. Dry, “Foregrounding: An Assessment,” in *Language in Context: Essays for Robert Longacre*

(ed. S. J. J. Hwang and W. R. Merrifield; Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1992), pp. 435-50; P.

Hopper, “Aspect and Foregrounding in Discourse,” in *Discourse and Syntax* (ed. T. Givon; New York:

Academic, 1979), pp. 213-41; S. Wallace, “Figure and Ground: The Interrelationship of Linguistic

Categories,” in *Tense-Aspect: Between Semantics and Pragmatics* (ed. P. J. Hopper; Amsterdam:

Benjamins, 1982), pp. 201-23.

83 Porter, *Idioms*, p. 23. Jeffrey T. Reed and Ruth A. Reese use the terminology of “background,” “theme”

and “focus” in a very similar way (“Verbal Aspect, Discourse Prominence, and the Letter of Jude,”

*Fililogia Neotestamentaria* 9 (1996), pp. 185-88.

84 Cf. Hopper, “Aspect and Foregrounding;” Wallace, “Figure and Ground.

”

1. *background* – aorist aspect
2. *foreground* – present aspect
3. *frontground* – perfect aspect

While I am not claiming that this is always the case in aspectual usage in the Greek of the

New Testament, it appears that one of the ways an author can create discourse

prominence is by selection of aspectual forms. As Reed reminds us, “the use of verbal

aspect to signal prominence…is a secondary role…and thus a discourse function, not a

morphological function of Greek grammar.”85 As the least heavily marked aspect, the

aorist aspect is used in narrative to form the main story line and backbone of the

narrative, and in epistolary literature the aorist is used to related material that forms the

background for the main thematic material. The more heavily marked present aspect

selects certain events in narrative to dwell on, and in epistolary literature it serves to draw

attention to the thematic material in the discourse. The most heavily marked perfect

aspect, then, can function to draw specific attention to selected events in the discourse.

These are not the only way to signal discourse prominence, and often aspect will

converge with other features to signal prominence.

In light of the above discussion, several examples from the NT will illustrate how

verbal aspect is important signaling the author’s perspective on the action or discourse

prominence. In the well-known commissioning of Jesus’ disciples in Matt 28.19-20, the

author alternates aorist and present tense forms. V. 19 begins with an aorist participle

πορευθέντες, followed by an aorist imperative, μαξητεύσατε. The author then switches

to two present participles, βαπτιζοντες and διδάσκοντες, followed by a verb in the

aorist tense (ἐντειλάμην). In light of the function of aspects in relation to each other, the

aorist participle πορευξέντες functions to background the action of going as a

prerequisite to the action that takes place in the main verb, the imperative that precedes it

(μαξητεύσατε).86 The aorist imperative, then, serves to summarize Jesus instructions to

the disciples, while the present participles (βαπτίζοντες, διδάσκοντεσ) serve to

85 Jeffrey T. Reed, *Discourse Analysis of Philippians: Method and Rhetoric in the Debate over Literary*

*Integrity* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series, 136; Sheffield: Academic Press,

1997), p. 114.

86 For this function of the participle see Stephen H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament*

*Greek* (2nd edn; Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 2000) pp. 181-87.

emphasize and specify in more detail what making disciples involves. The aorist

ἐντειλάμην summarizes what the readers already know from earlier sections of Matthew.

To consider a discourse as a whole, the book of Ephesians manifests a fairly clear

discourse function of verbal aspect. As is well known, the epistle to the Ephesians divides

somewhat naturally into two broad sections: chaps. 1-3; chaps. 4-6.87 That is, the epistle

can be divided fairly evenly into a section that expounds theological truth, followed by a

section that explicates the practical implications of the theological exposition. What is

less well-known is that this way of dividing this letter corresponds nicely to a discernable

shift in verbal aspect.

Chaps. 1-3 Chaps. 4-6

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Aorist Aspect | 64 | 59 |
| Present Aspect | 54 | 120 |

What can be discerned in this chart is that the aorist tense has a slight

distributional advantage over the present in chaps. 1-3, while the present tense clearly

proliferates in chaps. 4-6. Thus as the section which forms the basis and theological

foundation for the later exhortations, chaps. 1-3 are largely carried along by the aorist

aspect. Conversely, as the section which contains a higher proportion of thematically

significant imperatival forms (there are 38 imperatival forms in chaps. 4-6, and only one

imperative in chaps. 1-3) and is hortatory in tone, the present tense predominates in

chaps. 4-6. As Kathleen Callow states regarding attitudinal types, “material at the factual

end of the purposive chain is considered less prominent than material at the activity end;

there is a graded increase in prominence as we move away from fact towards volition and

activity.”88 Thus as the section which is volitional and in which imperatival forms are

prevalent, it should not surprise the reader to find the more thematic present tense

predominating in this material. Indeed, the imperatival mood is “the mood of *volition*,”

87 See for example F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon and to the Ephesians* (New

International Commentary on the New Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), pp. 247-48; Markus

Barth, *Ephesians 1-3* (Anchor Bible, 34; Garden City: Doubleday), p. 53. In fact, Barth’s work on

Ephesians is a two volume commentary divided into a volume each on chaps. 1-3 and chaps. 4-6.

88 Kathleen Callow, “Patterns of Thematic Development in 1 Corinthians 5.1-13,” in D. A. Black (ed.),

*Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation* (Nashville: Broadman, 1992), p. 197.

the mood utilized “to express the appeal of will to will.”89 The above chart does show

that the distribution of present tenses is close to that of the aorist in chaps. 1-3, and that

the aorist tense is still found with only slightly less frequency in chaps. 4-6. However, in

chaps. 1-3 it appears that the present tense is utilized when the author is relating material

directly to the experience of his readers, or highlighting significant events.90 The aorist

tense in chaps. 4-6 continues to provide supportive and background material to the

thematic material and recalls what the readers already know.91

Another example of how verbal aspect works within a stretch of discourse is

found in 1 Corinthians 15.3-5. In citing what appears to be a traditional creedal

formulation, Paul relates the most important events from that tradition. Including the

reference to the passing on of the tradition itself (παρέδωκα, παρέλαβον), the events

relating to the Christ event are all found in the aorist aspect (ἀπέθανεν, ἐτάφη, ὄφθη [see

also vv. 6-8]). The only exception is the reference to Christ’s resurrection in the perfect

tense ἐγήερται in v. 4. Several grammars and commentaries classify ἐγήγερται,

according to the well-worn grammatical categories, as an *intensive perfect* which focuses

on a present state produced by a past action.92 Thus according to Gordon Fee, the perfect

ἐγήγερται implies “that he was both raised and still lives.”93 However, the perfect

tense/aspect says virtually nothing as to whether the state of affairs continues into the

present or is permanent. The fact that Christ is still risen is a theological point, and not a

grammatical one. Rather, it appears that here the author’s use of the perfect aspect in 1

Cor 15.4 is motivated from a discourse perspective. The reason that the perfect

ἐγήγερται appears in the midst of several aorists is not to emphasize the continuous

existence of Christ as raised, but as the foreground tense it serves to introduce and

89 Dana and Mantey, *Grammar,* p. 174.

90 See Gustavo Martin-Asensio, *Transitivity-Based Foregrounding in the Acts of the Apostles: A*

*Functional-Grammatical Approach to the Lukan Perspective* (Journal for the Study of the New Testament

Supplement Series, 202; Sheffield: Academic Press, 2000), p. 45.

91 In Ephesians 6.10-20 the reader encounters a number of aorist imperatives (ἐνδύσασθε – v. 11;

ἀναλάβετε – v. 13; στῆτε – v. 14; δέξασθε – v. 17). The section begins (v. 10) with a present

imperative, ἐνδυναμοῦσθε, which serves to draw attention to the overarching command, to be strong in

the Lord. The aorist imperatives that follow, then, summarize and itemize what is involved in the

overarching command to be strong in v. 10.

92 For discussion of the category “intensive perfect” see Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 574-77. See

virtually all the major grammars for inclusion and discussion of this category.

93 Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (New International Commentary on the New

Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), p. 726. For this perspective see also Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*,

pp. 301-302; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 576.

highlight the main topic of discussion in the next section of chap. 15: the resurrection of

Christ. The perfect aspect, then, serves to anticipate the further discussion of Christ’s

resurrection, as well as the topic of resurrection in general, in the subsequent discourse.

In fact, when one examines the rest of Chap. 15 the perfect ἐγήγερται occurs six more

times (vv. 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 20), all with reference to the resurrection of Christ. Thus the

use of the perfect ἐγήγερται is highly motivated and serves to highlight the main focus

of attention, Christ’s resurrection, as well as to establish cohesion within the discourse.

Rev 5.1-13 provides an intriguing example of not only interesting uses of

individual tenses/aspects, but also provides a sustained visionary account where tenses

shift constantly. In the second scene of John’s programmatic throne room vision (cf. Rev

4), a second figure is introduced (the slain lamb), along with other features (a scroll, a

mighty angel, the harps and gold bowls). According to the traditional manner of treating

verb tenses, one could simply move through the text, and armed with the traditional

categories, attempt to provide a label for each verb (durative present, constative aorist,

intensive perfect, and so on). However, it is more important to view the aspects

systemically in relationship to each other and to notice how the author’s aspectual choice

might function to shape the discourse as a whole. The aorist tense, as the basic narrative

tense, seems to be used to summarize the vision and mark out discreet units (ειδον, vv. 1,

2, 6)94 and to simply summarize key events and carry the vision along (ἀνοῖξαι, λῦσαι,

Εὑρέθη, ἐνίκησεν, ἔλαβεν, ἔπεσαν, λαβεῖν ἐσφάγη, ἠγόραςας, ἐποίησας, ἔπεσαν,

προσεκύνησαν) . In semantic opposition to the aorist, the present tense is used to

describe and highlight certain elements of the vision, for example, the one seated on the

throne (καθημένου), the speech of the angel (κηρύσσοντα) and the elders/four living

creatures (λέγει, ᾳδουσιν, λέγοντες), which interpret the significance of the vision, and

to describe the possession of harps (ἔχοντες) and the content of the bowls of incense

(γεμούσας). The present tense also serves to emphasize the fact that no one could look at

(βλέπειν) the scroll.95 Thus the present tense adds further descriptive touches to the

vision by selecting certain elements to describe with the foreground present tense.

94 Cf. David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5* (WBC, 52a; Dallas: Word, 1997), p. 338; Heinz Giesen, *Die*

*Offenbarung des Johannes* (RNT; Regensberg: Friedrich Pustet, 1997), p. 158.

95 The presence of another present tense, βασιλεύουσιν (over against the future βασιλεύσουσιν), in   
v. 10 depends on a difficult text-critical problem. For discussion see Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual*

*Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2 edn; Stuttgart: United Bible Society, 1994), pp. 666-7.

Notable are the present tenses used to introduce the hymns which liturgically interpret the

significance of the Lamb’s action of taking the scroll (λέγει, ᾳδουσιν, λέγοοντες).

The perfect tense, then, is reserved for the introduction of the most salient

elements and events in this vision. Thus, the scroll which is first introduced in v. 1 is

described with two perfect participles (γεγραμμένον, κατεσφραγισμένον), and the

introduction of the lamb and the seven spirits are frontgrounded by means of perfect

participles (ἑστηκος, ἐσφαγμένον [cf. v. 12], ἀπεσταλμένοι). Hence, these two new

and significant elements in the vision (the scroll and the Lamb) are introduced with the

most heavily marked perfect aspects.

One other significant usage of the perfect aspect requires attention. In v. 7 the

lamb now approaches the throne (aorist ἦλθεν) and takes the scroll from the hand of God

(see v. 1). This description of the lamb taking the scroll occurs in the perfect aspect

(εἴληφεν). As discussed above, under the traditional classificatory scheme the majority

of grammars label this as a clear use of an “aoristic perfect,” that is, the use of a perfect

where one expects an aorist and where any notion of existing results drops out.96 I have

expressed my misgivings with this category above, especially since the author is clearly

aware of the aorist form which he uses twice in the next two verses (ἔλαβεν, λαβεῖν).97

A more satisfactory solution in light of verbal aspect is that the perfect tense, as the

frontground tense, is used to highlight the most significant action in the discourse, the

transfer of the scroll from the right hand of God to the Lamb (εἰληφεν) as the only one

who is invested with authority to open the book and set its contents into motion.98 Once

the transition takes place, the author then switches back to the background aorist tense

(ἐλαβεν, λαβεῖν) to recall what has already taken place. Given the systemic relationship

of verbal aspects, an approach which sees the aspects in relationship to each other and

which considers the pattern of aspectual use over a stretch of discourse seems much more

profitable than simply moving through a text, isolating and labeling individual verb

tenses. Revelation 5 provides an important example of how verbal aspect serves to

96 See G. Mussies, *The Morphology of Koine Greek as Used in the Apocalypse of St.* John (Novum

Testamentum Supplements, 27; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1971), p. 265; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, p. 579;

Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, p. 303; E. Lohmeyer, *Die Offenbarung des Johannes* (HNT, 16; Tübingen: Mohr,

1970), p. 55 (“aoristisch gebrauchtes Perfekt”).

97 For a complete discussion of this issue, cf. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 270-73.

98 Aune labels Chap. 5 “The Investiture of the Lamb” (*Revelation*, p. 319).

structure the discourse and how the author desire attaches greater importance to certain

discourse features by means of verbal aspect.

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*Excursus: Verbal Aspect in Imperatives in NT Greek*

Analysis of Greek imperatival constructions has also been subject to treatment

based on supposed categories of meaning based on the apparent usage of tenses.99 The

following interpretive scheme is usually accepted as axiomatic by grammars and

commentaries:

1. *Present imperative* – carries a durative idea of “keep on….”
2. *Aorist imperative* – carries an ingressive idea of a beginning action (“start...”).
3. *Present prohibition (present imperative with μή*) – carries a durative idea and

commands the cessation of an action already in process (“stop….”)

1. *Aorist prohibition* *(aorist subjunctive with μή*) – carries an ingressive idea,

forbidding the beginning of an action (“Do not start...”).100

However, given the significance of verbal aspect for understanding the Greek verbal

system, the above scheme, though deeply entrenched in much modern grammatical

discussion, will simply not hold up. First, it confuses aspect and *Aktionsart*, failing to

recognize that there is no necessary correlation between the form of the verb as

grammaticalized in the verb morphology and the kind of action it describes. This means

that any notions of “stop,” “start,” “do not start,” “keep on” can only come from the

context (if they are present at all) and do not belong to the form of the imperative itself.

Second, the above scheme is beset with so many exceptions that it calls into question the

validity of the scheme itself.101 For example, James Boyer has calculated that out of the

99 For a fuller discussion cf. Dave Mathewson, “Verbal Aspect in Imperatival Constructions in Pauline

Ethical Injunctions,” *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 17 (Mayo, 1996): pp. 21-35.

100 For this scheme see most clearly Dana and Mantey, *Manuel Grammar*, pp. 299-301. Cf. James H.

Moulton, *A Grammar of New Testament Greek. Vol. 1. Prolegomena* (ed. J. H. Moulton; Edinburgh: T. &

T. Clark, 1906), pp. 122-26; Moule, *Idiom Book*, pp. 20-21; Blass, DeBrunner, Funk, *Greek Grammar*, pp.

172-74; Turner, *Syntax*, pp. 74-75; Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, 78-81; Brooks and Winbery, *Syntax*, pp. 118,

127.

101 For important discussion on Greek imperatives see J. Donovan, “Greek Jussives,” *Classical Review* 9

(1895): pp. 145-49; J. P. Louw, “On Greek Prohibitions,” *Acta Classica* 2 (1959): pp. 43-57; James L.

Boyer, “A Classification of Imperatives: A Statistical Study,” *Grace Theological Journal* 8.1 (1987): pp.

35-54; Mathewson, “Verbal Aspect.” These studies show that the supposed rules for Greek imperatives

based on tenses simply will not stand.

174 instances of the present imperative with μή (present prohibition), 100 examples occur

in contexts with *no* indication of whether the action is taking place or not, 36 occur in

contexts where the action clearly is not taking place, and only 38 occur in context where

previous action is either explicit or probable, warranting the translation “stop….”102 This

is a far cry from what is needed to establish a ‘rule’ or even a general principle for

present prohibitions. Instead, I would propose that the following scheme based on verbal

aspect be adopted.

1. *Present imperative* – commands an action as a process in progress.
2. *Aorist imperative* – commands an action as a complete whole.
3. *Present prohibition* – forbids an action as a process in progress.
4. *Aorist prohibition* – forbids an action as a complete whole.

Thus, any notion of ingression or duration, action as already taking place or urged

to begin, can only be deduced from the context and not the imperatival form itself.

Consistent with the above discussion, it is more appropriate methodologically to consider

the aspects in imperatival constructions in systemic relationship to each other, rather than

to treat them in isolated fashion according to the assumed rules of usage. In Colossians

3.5-17, Paul continues a lengthy parenetic section with several imperatival constructions

that effectively illustrate the importance of aspect for understanding imperatives. These

verses can be divided into two sections, vv. 5-11 and 12-17, which delimit the Christian

life by means of a vice and virtue list respectively. The structure of this section of

discourse revolves around three aorist imperatives: νεκρώσατε (v. 5), ἀπόθεσθε (v. 8),

ἐμδίσασθε (v. 12), with the former two imperatives introducing the negative parenesis,

and the later imperative introducing the positive parenesis. In the midst of these aorist

imperatives, several present imperatives are scattered throughout this section (vv. 9, 15-

17): μὴ ψεύδεσθε (v. 9), βραβεθέτω, γίνεσθε, ἐνοικείτω (vv. 15-17).

According to the assumed rules of usage, one could construe the aorist

imperatives as ingressive, that is, it is a call to commence an activity, or see them as

calling for decisive action.103 But this would make the present imperatives problematic,

35-54; Mathewson, “Verbal Aspect.” These studies show that the supposed rules for Greek imperatives

based on tenses simply will not stand.

102 Boyer, “Classification,” p. 43.

103 Peter T. O’Brien, Colossians, Philemon (Word Biblical Commentary; Waco: Word, 1982), p. 176.

as portraying actions that are to be continued, since they seem to correspond to and

further explain the aorist imperatives. Moreover, on what basis does one decide that the

present imperatives in this context are any less decisive, especially since the aorist aspect

is usually regarded as the “default” tense? Conversely, the μή ψεύδεσθε in v. 9 could be

understood as a call to stop an action already in progress.104 However, apart from the

assumed rule, there is no contextual evidence that the readers are already lying, thus

necessitating the rendering “stop lying.” Rather, I would propose that verbal aspect offers

a more compelling and fruitful treatment of the imperatives and the shift in tenses in this

section. The aorist imperatives serve as the summary commands in both the negative

(νεκρώσατε, ἀπόθεσθε) and the positive exhortations (ἐνδυσασθε). The aorist aspect, as

that which summarizes the action as a complete whole, serves as the summary term in

each case. The present imperatives (μὴ ψεύδεσθε, βραβεύετω, γίνεσθε, ἐνοικείτω),

then, serve to spell out in more detail what is involved in the summary aorist imperatives.

Therefore, it appears that the author’s choice of verbal aspect in imperatival constructions

in Col. 3.5-17 evidence a conscious patterning. Paul employs the aorist imperatives to

introduce the general admonitions. The author then switches to the foreground present

tense to spell out in more detail specific areas of exhortation for his readers.

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**Conclusion**

Drawing on insights from recent research into verbal aspect, the preceding work has

attempted to argue that despite the long tradition and sheer influence of the traditional

way of handling Greek tenses according to labels which ostensibly reflect valid

meanings, these labels should be abandoned as inappropriate and unhelpful in discussion

and interpretation of Greek verb tenses. Though these labels have a long pedigree of

usage in modern grammatical discussion, and will probably continue to do so, to classify

Greek verb tenses according to these semantic categories confuses the meaning of the

aspect with *Aktionsart*, or how the action actually took place. Rather such categories of

meaning (ingressive, durative, iterative, etc.) depend on interpretive judgments from the

broader context, including the meaning of the verb itself. But to transfer all of this

104 Cf. Bruce, *Colossians*, p. 140 n. 49.

meaning onto the tense form itself is to commit at a grammatical level a similar fallacy

often committed at a lexical level (confusion of word and concept). Moreover, these

categories frequently are based on English translation of Greek tenses in context, and also

fail to take into account the Greek aspects as a system. The categories that are usually

appealed to may be valid at times at a rhetorical and contextual level. But it is misleading

and unhelpful to transfer all this contextual information to the verbal forms themselves.

And often contextual evidence is lacking for finding these kinds of meanings.

Instead, I would suggest that students of NT Greek should view the Greek tenses

in terms of the three primary aspectual values, seeing them as only contributing the

author’s perception of the action. The author can conceive of the action as a complete

whole (aorist), as in progress (present, imperfect), or as a state of affairs (perfect,

pluperfect). In addition, though not the only or primary function, the aspects of Greek

verbs, as contributing the author’s perspective on the action, often function to signal

levels of prominence in discourse (background, foreground, frontground). Otherwise,

students are advised to say as little as possible about the tenses of Greek verbs, and

attention should be deflected to the broader discourse units made up of sentences,

paragraphs, and genres.105

105 For sane advice regarding treatment of verbal aspect in the interpretive enterprise see Moises

Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in Light of General Linguistics* (Grand Rapids:

Zondervan, 1990), pp. 111-118.