

Tense, Time, Aspect and the Ancient Greek Verb

by Jerome Moran

Nearly every – no, every – Greek grammar and course book, even the most comprehensive (in English, at any rate), gives a very skimpy, perfunctory and unhelpful account — insofar as it gives any account at all – of what ‘aspect’ is and how exactly it is related to verb tense and time (which tend to be conflated). Most of the books and articles on the subject of the aspect of the Greek verb are accessible only to the professional philologist, and can’t therefore be easily applied by non-specialists to the understanding of the actual usage of Greek writers or to the imitation of their usage when translating into their language. This article sets out to remedy this situation by giving a clear and (within limits) comprehensive explanation of aspect as it applies to the Greek verb.

1. Consider these two sentences, in particular the verbs in bold:

εἶπωμεν ἢ σιγῶμεν; (Euripides, *Ion* 758)

‘Are we to speak or are we to be silent?’

ἐθήρευεν ἀπο ἵππου, ὅποτε γυμνάσαι βούλοιοτο ἑαυτὸν τε καὶ τοὺς ἵππους (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.2.7)

‘He used to hunt on horseback, whenever he wanted to give himself and his horses some exercise.’

The questions in the first sentence (‘deliberative’ questions, therefore in the subjunctive) refer to present (or perhaps future) **time**. But one of the verbs (*εἶπωμεν*) is in a past **tense** (aorist). The second sentence refers to past time, but one of the verbs (*βούλοιοτο*) is in the present tense.

What is going on? The answer is something called ‘**aspect**’, and its connection with tense and time. Just note for now a difference in the kind of things denoted by the verbs in bold. The verb in the aorist tense denotes an *action*; the verbs in the present tense denote a *state*, or certainly something that is not an action.

2. What exactly aspect is, we shall see later. As for tense and time, the first thing to note is that the words ‘tense’ and ‘time’ are not synonymous and their meanings should not be confused, as they so often are. Tense is a grammatical (for want of a better word) concept, and is simply a feature of a verb, the most familiar function of which is to locate what it denotes in time. It is less clear what kind of concept time is, since it is not obvious what time is. However, for the purposes of this discussion the ordinary, layperson’s, understanding of time will suffice.

3. In Greek the tense of a verb may denote something different from or additional to the time at which the act, event, occurrence, process, state denoted by the verb is located. In particular, it may denote something called ‘aspect’.

4. Whether the tense of a Greek verb denotes time or/and aspect depends in the first place on the mood of the verb (‘the form which a verb assumes in order to reflect the manner (*modus*) in which the speaker conceives the action’ (Woodcock)). ‘depends’ here does not mean ‘is determined by’. So, it is not the fact that a verb is in the subjunctive mood that it uses either the present or aorist tense; it is rather that in the subjunctive mood these tenses indicate something other than time, viz. aspect. The Greek verb is used in four moods (indicative, imperative, subjunctive, optative) and two ‘non-finite’ (as some people like to think of them) moods (participle and infinitive). (I take a finite verb to be one that has a definite tense, number and person. The infinitive has a tense only; the participle lacks a person.)

5. *In general*, the tense of the indicative and the participle denotes time. (The aorist and imperfect indicatives also indicate aspect in past time, as we shall see.) *In general*, the tense of

the infinitive and the optative denotes aspect. The tense of the imperative and subjunctive indicates aspect, without reference to time. (For the main exceptions to these generalisations see the sub-sections of 10 below.)

6. Where the difference of tense of the verb denotes a difference of aspect only, in nearly all cases the tenses concerned are the present and the aorist. Strictly speaking, differences of aspect extend to other tenses as well (e.g. the 'resultative' form of the perfect), but these will hardly ever concern the student.
7. To help one to understand what aspect is, let us think about the different sorts of things a verb – a verb in English – can represent. It can stand for an action, event, occurrence, process or state. The same verb can denote all or most of these. Consider the verb 'to stand' (or 'to sit'). This can denote an act ('he stood up', i.e. he got up), a process ('he was standing up', i.e. he was getting up), a state ('he stood' or 'he was standing'). In Greek these would be *ἔστη* (aorist), *ἴστατο* (imperfect), *εἰστήκει* (pluperfect). These are all different ways of *viewing* or *regarding* standing. In other words, standing can be seen from several different *aspects*.
8. We should now be in a better position to understand what the aspect of a verb is. It is the way in which what is denoted by the verb is viewed by the speaker/writer. In general, where the tense of the verb indicates a difference of aspect only (and not of time), the present tense is used to indicate a process, state, ongoing or repeated act/event/occurrence. The aorist tense is used to indicate a single, completed action or occurrence (not a process or a state). So, in a clause of purpose after a primary main verb, one would expect the aorist subjunctive to be used for 'to catch sight of' or 'to hear' but the present subjunctive for 'to watch' or 'to listen to'. Catching sight of and watching both involve seeing, but the seeing

is being viewed differently. It is the difference between seeing once (aorist) and going on seeing (present). (A similar distinction can be seen in the case of hearing and listening to.) In the indicative mood, of course, the difference would be denoted by the aorist and imperfect tenses. But remember that the imperfect tense exists only in the indicative, so that other moods have to use some other tense (the present) to convey the meaning of the imperfect in the indicative. (This is what happens in clauses of indirect statement that do not employ the indicative to represent an imperfect or pluperfect indicative in the direct speech: the optative, infinitive and participle use present for imperfect and perfect for pluperfect.)¹

Some verbs by their very meaning and the inherent nature of the activity they denote will incline to one aspect rather than another, as we see in the case of 'catch sight of' and 'watch' or 'hear' and 'listen to'. Verbs that denote a process or a state belong to this category. However, in the case of most verbs the aspect and tense used must have depended on whether what the verb denotes was viewed as single, uninterrupted, completed (aorist), or whether it was viewed as repeated, continuous or otherwise interrupted and incomplete (present, and (indicative) imperfect). This is the case with conative ('tried to ...'), inchoative/inceptive ('began to ...') and iterative ('used to ...') verbs, all of which convey the idea of something begun but interrupted and not finished and over and done with. We must also remember that the Greeks may not necessarily have viewed actions, events etc. in the same way that we do, and that differences of aspect might mark distinctions of which we are completely unaware.

9. Why the Greeks thought it necessary or useful to make such distinctions of aspect is not clear, especially as they do not always seem to have observed these distinctions. Be that as it may, aspect is one of the most conspicuous

features of the Greek verb; it is an omnipresent feature, you might say. Certainly, one cannot hope to *write* anything like authentic, idiomatic, ancient Greek without knowledge of it and how it works. Also, when *reading* Greek one cannot understand the nuances of an already versatile, sophisticated and subtle language without a more or less constant awareness of it.

10. And now for a more detailed analysis of tense, time and aspect, taking each of the moods in turn, after some preliminary observations.
- 10.1 The *past* tenses of the indicative, the aorist and the imperfect, not only indicate past time but also differentiate between aspect. This does not happen with the present or future tenses. For example, as we have seen, different tenses are used for 'he saw' (aorist) and 'he watched' (imperfect). But there are not different present tenses for 'he sees' and 'he is watching', or different future tenses for 'he will see' and 'he will watch' that correspond to the uses of the aorist and imperfect for past time. Why not, if the Greeks thought it so important to mark differences of aspect? What is so special about past time and past tenses? Perhaps things only just happening in the present or not yet happening in the future seemed inherently incomplete and unfinished (or not even yet begun), so that the distinctions marked by the aorist and imperfect did not seem to apply.

Note that (except for the imperfect and aorist indicative) in general where tense is used to indicate time it cannot also indicate aspect. But, as we shall see, this (outside the indicative and participle) is the case in a small number of instances only, as the tense used in most of the moods/non-finite moods indicates aspect, not time. The inability to indicate time here is not a problem either, as there are other markers, especially context, to indicate time. So, for example, even if the present subjunctive/optative is used in a purpose clause, we are not in doubt

about the fact that the purpose was conceived in the past rather than the present or future.

10.2 As already noted, the Greeks do not seem always to have observed the distinctions they made. So, one tense is used where we would expect another. Sometimes it is not at all clear why a particular tense has been used. At other times it does not seem to matter, when it seems that it should matter, which tense is used. This can be a very frustrating experience for someone new to aspect who accepts that it is important and is struggling to understand it. One suspects that it is impossible for us fully to understand the workings of ancient Greek when it comes to nuances of aspect. (Who can claim fully to understand the workings of Greek particles, even with Denniston as a guide?)

10.3 Although the tenses of the **indicative** in general denote time (and in some tenses aspect too), the tense used does not always indicate the expected, usual time. So, the present indicative does not always indicate present time, as is the case with the ‘historic present’ used of past narrative. The aorist indicative does not always indicate past time, as is the case with the ‘gnomic aorist’ (a real or imagined event in the past serves as a precedent for a maxim), the ‘dramatic/silent aorist’, and the use of the aorist *ᾠφελον* in wishes for the present. The imperfect indicative does not always indicate past time, as is the case with present unreal conditions or wishes for the present, and imperfect indicatives of impersonal verbs such as *(ἐ) χρῆν, ἔδει, ἔζην*, which refer to present time when used with the present infinitive.

(Note that in English too the tense used may refer to a time other than that normally denoted by the tense. So, a present tense may refer to future time, e.g. ‘if he *says* that, he will ...’ A past tense may refer to present time, e.g. ‘if he *said/were saying* this, he would be ...’ A past tense may refer to future time, e.g.

‘if he *said* that, he would ...’ In the last two examples the subjunctive mood is being used actually, so it is more a case of coincidence with the form of the indicative.)

10.4 The tenses of the **participle**, like the indicative, usually denote time rather than aspect, though relative (to the time of the main verb) rather than absolute time. However, it is not clear in some cases why the aorist tense has been used. It does not seem to indicate unambiguously anteriority, and the aorist participle is not normally used to indicate aspect rather than time. (In fact the participle generally, like the indicative in present and future time, seems strangely indifferent to differences of aspect, so that, for example, the present participle must be used (to indicate simultaneity) in instances where the aspect would seem to require the aorist, e.g. ‘while leaving the house ...’, or ‘while glancing up ...’. But this happens in clauses of indirect statement too, of course, especially ones which employ the participle, infinitive and optative.) When I say (above) that it is not clear in some cases why the aorist tense has been used, I am thinking of expressions such as *ἀποκρινάμενος ἔφη* and *ἔφη ὑπολαβών*. In these expressions common sense seems to demand that the participles denote simultaneity (unless the participles denote something different from what *ἔφη* denotes), so that they are not being used to indicate (past) time; but equally it is not easy to see that the tense denotes the kind of aspect that we associate with the aorist tense. The Greek usage may be akin to our ‘he answered and said ...’ (i.e. in answer), ‘he replied in turn and said ...’ (i.e. in reply), rather than ‘having answered, he said ...’ and ‘having replied in return, he said ...’. On the other hand, they have the appearance of formulaic usage, and therein may lie the explanation, which, of course, is no explanation at all unless one knows how they came to be formulae that constitute exceptions to the normal usage.

(The expressions *(ἐπ)ομόσας ἔφη* and *γελάσας ἔφη* are often cited as equivalent to and posing the same problem as the two mentioned above. But there is no difficulty in understanding the participles to indicate anteriority (and can one laugh and speak at the same time?), as the aorist participle nearly always does.)

It is claimed that the tense of a participle usually denotes aspect not time when the participle is used instead of the protasis of certain types of conditional sentences. But in most such instances the tense of the participle could equally well, if not better, be seen as denoting time, e.g. in the sentence ‘If he does that he will be punished’, the aorist participle *ποιήσας* could be understood as ‘having done that’.

Note (as indicated above) that the tense of the participle in clauses of indirect statement introduced by verbs of seeing, perceiving, etc. indicates time, not aspect.

10.5 The tenses of the **imperative** are time-neutral (though logically the imperative has reference to the future, or at least the present) and denote aspect only. It is probably in the use of the imperative that one is most aware of an apparent lack of consistency in the marking of aspect, or at least puzzlement as to why one tense has been used rather than another. One is not always clear whether it is the inherent nature of the activity or whether, whatever the nature of the activity, it is the difference between single or repeated instances / occasions (perhaps similar to the difference between the Latin use of *ne* with the perfect and present subjunctive) that is being marked. How does Greek make clear what is meant by ‘Do not sleep in class’? If the aorist (subjunctive) is used, is the teacher really intending to make crystal clear that his command should apply only to this one class? Or is he giving a command not to *fall* asleep, in this and any other class? What difference would be indicated by the use of the

present (imperative)? Sometimes it really does not seem to matter to a Greek writer what tense is used, which is disconcerting for a student trying to get clear differences of tense and aspect. (It is ironic that students usually encounter aspect for the first time in the form of the imperative and aorist subjunctive when learning about direct commands and prohibitions. It might be better to introduce it with deliberative direct questions rather than the imperative, where the same problems do not arise.)

If the tense of the infinitive used in clauses of indirect command is the same as the tense that would have been used in the direct command/prohibition (a reasonable assumption, surely), we might, by studying the former carefully in Greek texts, have more evidence from which to gain a better understanding of the distinction of aspect in the latter.

10.6 The tenses of the **infinitive** nearly always indicate aspect only. But the tense of the infinitive used in indirect statement, in wishes for the present and past expressed by *ὄφελον* with the infinitive, in the use of impersonal verbs such as *(ἐ) χρῆν* etc. (see earlier) with present or aorist infinitive, indicates time, not aspect.

10.7 The tenses of the **optative** nearly always indicate aspect only. But the

tense of the optative used in indirect statements and indirect questions indicates time, not aspect.²

10.8 The tenses of the **subjunctive** indicate aspect only.

Note that in the indefinite construction the difference of time is indicated by the difference in *mood*, not tense. The subjunctive is used of present and future time, the optative of past time. The difference of tense indicates a difference of aspect.

11. Where the tense of the verb indicates aspect only and not time it is vital to grasp the implications of this. It means, for example, that the present tense can be used of past and future time (think of the constructions of which this is true), and the past tense (aorist) used of present and future time (again, think of the constructions). We are so used to the tense of a verb indicating time location only that the Greek usage is hard to get our head around. It seems to us at first to be a systematically perverse and wilful misuse or abuse of the tenses, for no obviously justifiable reason, and not even consistently but randomly applied. One can easily end up thinking that it does not really matter what tense of the verb is used. But we should reflect that the Greeks seem to have thought

that it did matter, accept that it did, and try to figure out why.

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¹This is the conventional explanation of the difference in aspect of the aorist and the present/imperfect. A different, or additional, explanation is given by E. J. Bakker, *A Companion to the Ancient Greek Language*, pp. 161-166 (and in various articles). (The conventional explanation is given in pp. 140-141.) Actually, Bakker does not give any examples in the book of an aorist/present contrast, and the examples he does give are confined to the indicative and concerned mainly with main clauses.

²It is not true, as some books state or imply, that indirect statement (and the use of the optative in indirect questions) is the only instance of an optative that denotes time rather than aspect. Note that -

- (a) in clauses of effort or precaution after a historic main verb (H MV) the future indicative may be replaced by the future optative, denoting time and not aspect;
- (b) the optative after a H MV in a causal clause denotes time, not aspect;
- (c) the optative replacing the indicative in the protasis of a present and future open condition in indirect speech after a H MV denotes time, not aspect.

There may be others.

As can be seen above, it is also not true, as is claimed, that the future optative is used only in clauses of indirect speech.