

The Question of Time and Aspect

My esteemed Colleague and Co-chair in the “SNTS–Seminar on the Language of the New Testament”, Prof Dr James W. Voelz of Concordia Theological Seminary, had the kindness to send me his interesting and important study on “Present Aorist Verbal Aspect: A New Proposal”. This was in the context of our collegial discussions about grammatical issues in the New Testament, that hold an interest for both of us, as we encourage other fellow scholars to engage more deeply in the linguistic problems of NT interpretation.

While “wrestling” with the disorder in my email service that was brought about by the extensive upheavals resulting from the installation of a new server at Lund University, an email popped up all of a sudden from nowhere, containing the text below. I had totally forgotten that I had ever written this letter. The email was sent in September 2002.

On reading it again, I thought that it might hold some interest for readers of my web site, since the issue of Aspect and Time has been so lively discussed of late, the discussion has often been infected, owing to certain extreme views proposed as well as a rather nonchalant attitude toward the witness of the natural users of the language. Without doubt the propounding of these views indicates a genuine interest in the subject, and I personally appreciate the zeal shown (by e.g. Porter and Fanning) in pursuing this question, even though I find myself in the unenviable position of having to disagree with them. As a researcher and natural user of the language, it is my duty to correct and refute wrong teachings about it. My aim, therefore, is not really to criticize any of these scholars, but to correct wrong claims made about Greek. In other words, I am concerned not with the person of those who teach something wrong, but with the wrong thing that they teach, not with the teachers but with their teaching.

For the purpose of reading the present “Comments”, the reader should try to get hold of Dr Voelz’s article mentioned above, which is a prerequisite for understanding my comments. I hope that his study and my comments together have something to offer on the direction in which the discussion should go. More importantly, I am here taking the opportunity of setting forth my position on this important issue, since the previous discussion has been carried on without consulting any of the living representatives of the language. The gentlemen involved in the discussion have happily assumed that Greek is dead, and they have taken it on themselves to act as authorities on it.

That my position is not unique or subjective but it sets forth the perspective of the natural users of Greek, those for whom Greek is a living language, may be

gathered from the letter below by Professor D. Christidis of the Aristoteles University of Thessaloniki, a philologist of note, who read both Voelz's study and my comments. He writes:

Thank you for sending me the answer to Jim Voelz regarding Porter and Fanning, as well as his own study.

I agree with your arguments. I think that you did an excellent job in politeness by commending the good points of Voelz's article, while pointing out its weaknesses.

I hope that Jim Voelz will pay special attention to your remarks.

This, then, shows that my arguments set forth in my book, *The Development of Greek and the New Testament*, pp. and in this text from 2002, which adumbrated the position of my book (published in 2004 and 2007), may be taken as a witness to how Hellenic scholars look on this problem of their language.

The following is the text I sent to Prof Voelz in 2002.

Dear Jim,

Thank you very much for your interesting article "Present and Aorist Verbal Aspect: A New Proposal". In this article you are basically dissatisfied with the explanations given by S. Porter and B. Fanning. I congratulate you on that.

It is quite natural that speakers of English should be intrigued by this 'oddity' of the Greek language, whereby its verb expresses not only Time, but also Aspect. I fully understand and appreciate that English-speaking scholars take a great interest in the question of Aspect. It is in itself a very interesting thing. Perhaps we Greeks are a bit less appreciative of it, because for us it is a commonplace, we use it all the time without thinking consciously about it. Thus, we do not make a big fuss about it. We know, of course, that it is there and that it is a basic ingredient of the language. We learn from childhood to distinguish the Imperfect from the Aorist, and small children do it quite clearly and correctly. Aspect is not something that Greek people learn at school, but from their mother. At school they learn the terminology and the grammatical categories and the theory, etc., but the practice of Aspect has been learned already from the very beginning, at the time we begin to construct our first sentences. Aspect is extremely important for us, because it plays such an important role in our communication and in expressing the shades of meaning that we intend.

So, I should say it takes an Englishman or an American to bring this matter to the foreground and to underline its significance, e.g. for the interpretation of the NT. All this is excellent and I thank you for underlining it.

I think it was in this spirit that C. F. D. Moule made his reticent remark with regards to tense being "probably not the most fundamental question". Moule's carefully phrased opinion was given from his English standpoint, in which the verb expresses simply Time (although durative aspect can be expressed also in English). Thereby he wanted to draw the attention of English readers to this distinctiveness of the Greek verb. However, Moule's diffident opinion was seized upon by Porter (and Fanning and McKay) and the place and function of Aspect was so blown up out of all proportion that in their writings the Greek verb lost one half of its meaning (even though Fanning holds to the Time element of the verb).

No one denies the importance of Aspect, least of all a Greek, who uses it constantly, in every sentence he utters. But we cannot stand on one leg. Every sentence we utter contains also the element of Time. And the two are just as pronounced. When I say ἔγραψα ταύτην τὴν ἐπιστολήν I mean that "I wrote this letter" i.e. in the past, and I look upon my activity synoptically, as a whole, which in effect means, that the letter is written, it is ready, though I do not relate it to the present. But when I say ἐν ᾧ ἔγραφον τὴν ἐπιστολήν, σεισμὸς ἐγένετο I mean that "while I was writing the letter, an earthquake took place" i.e. I present my writing as a durative action during which another event took place contemporaneously, but both events, the writing and the earthquake, are events of the past, even though, on account of the earthquake, I probably did not finish the letter. But that is not the issue. The issue with ἔγραφον here is that I was engaged (ongoing action) in writing sometime in the past (during which time something else happened).

On p. 154 you are quite right in accepting Time and Aspect for the Indicative.

P. 154, n.4. You do well in distinguishing yourself from Porter, who works more theoretically. In particular, General Linguistics is interested in universals, in human language behavior in general, and such Linguists are after that which they think is valid for all languages. Therefore, they think that they can say things about e.g. Hungarian, or Korean, or the Urtu

languages without knowing a word in these languages. The work of Porter tends to go in that direction. As I have experienced him, his observations and remarks do not come from an intimate knowledge of the Greek language and its literature, but mainly from general linguistic insights. Herein lies the problem with Porter. He works up a theory and then tries to impose it on Greek.

P. 154 Aorist. The Greek position is not simply that the Aorist presents the action as a point (which often is the case), but especially that it presents the action synoptically (irrespective of its length) (e.g. A. Τζάρτζανος, *Συντακτικὸν τῆς ἀρχαίας ἐλληνικῆς γλῶσσης*, and *Νεοελληνικὴ Σύνταξις*, 2 Vols.).

P. 155f. The exx. you quote here show that the Aorist does not always express a point. In this you are quite right. Among the exx. there are 2 indicatives and 15 exx. of non-Indicatives. I think this is where we go wrong. Firstly, the 2 Indicatives you quote over against the 15 non-Indicative exx. do not stand in proportion to the statistical occurrences in Greek literature of the Indicative in relation to the other moods. Secondly, methodologically it is unsound to start with the other moods and base the conclusion on what is peripheral (i.e. special) uses of the moods.

The starting point must, of course, be the Indicative. Why? Because the Indicative is the mood of the main sentence, the mood that presents the action directly, the mood of fact and reality, and also the most usual mood. The other moods are secondary, indirect, dependent. As illustration, I counted the verb forms in one chapter in a variety of NT Books: Mt 5, Mk 1, Jn 1, Acts 17 and Rm 1. This is what I found:

	Indicative	Imperative	Subjunctive	Optative	Infinitive	Participle
Mat 5	81	18	36	0	12	21
Mk 1	86	10	3	0	11	47
Jn 1	140	8	8	0	5	35
Acts 17	63	0	1	4	17	44
Rm 1	43	0	2	0	12	19
Total	413	36	50	4	57	166

The proper Timeless Moods (Imp., Subj. and Opt.) have together 90 exx. in these chapters, whereas the Indicative has 413 exx. Even if we reckon among the non-Indicatives the Infinitive and the Participle, we get 313 exx in

all. It is thus quite obvious that the Indicative is the Mood that is most usual in Greek speech (in this case in the NT), and this must be the point of departure. We must begin from what is the usual, not what is unusual, special, etc. We cannot, therefore leave aside the 413 exx. of the Indicative and make the basis of our conclusion the 90 exx. of the non-Indicative moods.

General Linguists claim sometimes that the Indo-European verb in primitive societies expressed Aspect rather than Time. Personally, I find it difficult to conceive of any time in human history, when people did not think in terms of time. Had they not watched the sun rise or go down? Could they not communicate about events yesterday and tomorrow? Unbelievable as this claim may seem, let us grant it for the sake of argument. Now when these Linguists speak of the Timelessness of the verb, they think of the time before the IE was split into the various languages, i.e. 15.000, or 10.000 or 5.000 years B.C.?, that is, before there was any Greek language. We know, however, that when Greek took form and produced its first literature (let us take Homeros), the verb did express Time and the verb still expresses Time today, twenty-eight centuries later.

If we start with the Indicative we will be able to fit the other moods in the scheme, and also solve the problems of the few more special cases.

P. 156. "Linear, durative, or 'protracted' action explanations really do not work with any of these". Why not? For example, Mk 2:5 ἀφίενται need not be understood as Linear just because it is Present. The Present does not always express Linear action. Act 8:19 λαμβάνη expresses the repeated occurrence that Simon hopes for so he can earn a good living. Mk 1:5 μετανοεῖτε καὶ πιστεύετε signals John's repeated call for repentance. But here it must be inquired into whether we do not sometimes also have a faulty use of the moods owing to the non-Greek background of the NT authors. This option needs to be considered. Again, we should not start with that which is unusual, a special case, or even erroneous, and use this (limited) evidence to build up a general theory.

P. 156 on Tense. Tense is a necessary category, since it denotes the Time element that the Greek verb expresses. If we take it away, we are imposing viewpoints that the language will not admit.

P. 156 Aktionart versus Aspect. There were and there are still

Grammarians who use these terms interchangeably. If we prefer to use Aspect to distinguish the Aoristic from the Presentic elements, and Aktionsart to indicate the fact that some verbs are by nature linear and others punctiliar, I do not mind very much. Porter's distinction of these terms on p. 157 is an artificial distinction that is not perceived or intended by speakers of Greek, while his BBC helicopter example only confuses the issue. In other words, it is an over-interpretation. The only distinction that is admissible here, is that we have Aspect with all verbs by means of the tense we choose to use, but that some verbs, on account of their inherent meaning, have that Aspect naturally to them.

P. 157. Is only the Present that is "concerned from a speaker's standpoint with the movement etc" (Porter)? Both the Aoristic and the Presentic Aspects are the speaker's choices (except in case where that option is not offered).

P. 157f. Your criticism of Porter is correct. His picture cannot explain the Present Imperative and Subjunctive.

P. 158. It is typical of Porter not to go into concrete matters which demand a deep acquaintance with the language. He prefers to dwell upon generalities.

P. 158. Fanning's internal /external viewing is unhelpful. It may be Fanning's speculative thought, but hardly the Greek's perspective.

P. 159 Focus. I have asked and searched myself to find out whether this explanation corresponds to what I am doing when I choose to use a particular Aspect. The answer is negative again. I cannot see that I have ever made the distinction assumed here, namely, focus on activity when I use the Aorist, and relationship or connection between activity and me as doer "to depict it as part of me or depict me as intimately involved and concerned with it". I am afraid I do not relate to this analysis. And I do not make any such difference between my use of the Aorist and my use of the Imperfect (and linear Present).

This raises again the question of principle. If the ancient Greek Grammarians did not understand the action in this way—which means that they did not experience what is described here—how can Greek Aktionsart or Aspect function in the proposed way? But if the Greeks did not feel the action that way, then on what valid grounds can we claim that this is the way Aspect

functions in Greek?

Perhaps this brings home the truth that we need to understand Greek from a thorough acquaintance with the many expressions it has taken (books and speech), not as Porter does, by construing a theory and then trying to impose it upon the language in a cavalier manner.

P. 159, n.15. I am afraid it is not possible to do away with the concept of Time. It is integral to the Greek verb.

P. 159, n.16. Porter's explanation that the Present Subjunctive is used in Mark when the issue personally affects those present leaves unexplained the fact that the children, too, which are equally present, are referred to by the Aorist Subjunctive, and not by the Present Subjunctive!

P. 160, Mk 9:24. If the father, *ex hypothesi*, did not intend to assert this "close connection between himself and the act of believing", I wonder, did he have any other alternatives in Greek? Would he have been able to use the Aorist, perhaps? Is not the Present Indicative the only option available to him? Whereas the interesting thing with the aspect distinctions is that the speaker usually has more than one option. That is what makes his choices interesting.

P. 160f. "Activity" is not enough to explain the quoted verses. For example, 1 Pt 1:22: ἀγαπήσατε could also have been ἀγαπᾶτε.

P. 162. As a matter of fact μὴ κωλύετε (1 Cor 14:39) does imply that there had been attempts to hinder speaking in tongues.

P. 162. For the various strange exx. we must make some allowance for incorrect usage. At any rate, such cases cannot dictate a theory of Aspect.

A Necessary Clarification

In various ways and with different nuances and degrees of intensity the question of whether being at home in a language makes any difference has been raised by Porter, Fanning, and Silva.

All of them have looked negatively on the issue. Here the arguments are various indeed, often exuding a West-Atlantic self-confidence: (a) that Greeks have been fooled about their language; (b) that the mother language relation can be a

hindrance to understanding how one's language functions; (c) that Linguistics can give us insights not understood by the natural speakers, etc. etc. To underline the pure logic of these pronouncements, it has been asserted that also an ordinary Englishman or American is not always conscious of what he is doing when speaking or writing English. If this is so in the case of English, then the same must apply to Greek. From this the conclusion is drawn that the Neohellenic viewpoint cannot have any relevance for the interpretation of the New Testament.

On the surface this syllogism sounds logical. However, behind this superficial syllogism, there hides a hideous error. Those who say so confuse matters of different nature.

1. To compare an ordinary user of English and his understanding of his language with a Hellenic scholar and his understanding of his language is totally fallacious: the two are NOT comparable. An English or American ignoramus should be compared with a Greek ignoramus, not with a Greek *scholar*!

2. This self-defending attitude has been assumed for fear that one's research might be considered superfluous or inadequate. This is a wrong conclusion. The non-Hellenic scholar can, indeed, do very much in the study and analysis of the Hellenic language. In *The Development of Greek and the New Testament* I have never tired in exhorting the (non-Hellenic) reader to follow some of the leads I give—as Keith Elliott pointed out in his review—to carry the research further. Thus, a non-Hellenic scholar, who has researched, for example, the use of prepositions in Herodotus, must know more about this issue than a Hellenic scholar, who has not studied the problem. The areas in which the non-Hellenic scholar can make serious and important contributions are legio. Thus, the non-Hellenic scholar's fears are unfounded.

3. However, a non-Hellenic scholar must never forget that, no matter how much he studies and researches, he will always lack the *Gefühl* of the language. This *Gefühl* of the language is based on the mother-tongue experience! And it relates to all languages without distinction. For example, I myself have been using English since 1959. I have written thousands of pages in English, I have preached in English and I have lectured in English. I have far more experience in English than any New Testament or classical scholar that I know have in Greek, yet in a matter of a fine nuance of English grammar or diction, I would never argue against a professional native of English. The point I am making has, unfortunately, rather arrogantly been disregarded by the above scholars in their youthful enthusiasm, when a German scholar of the stature of Karl Krumbacher—the man who established Byzantine studies and who knew Neohellenic—expressed himself thus with respect to Neohellenic: “What I lack is the feeling of the [Greek] language, which every one usually has only for his own mother tongue”. It is sad that this basic linguistic premise has been brushed aside by the above scholars.

3. Another serious problem is that theoretical linguistic analysis is being

confused with how the real language works. Thus, non-Hellenic linguists are sometimes so sure of themselves that their General Linguistics automatically has placed in their hand the key to unfolding the mysteries of the Greek language, that they often make statements that clash with the way the natural speakers of the language experience and use it. It is important to realize that to study linguistic theorizing about human language in general is not the same thing as knowing how Greek functions. It is useless to argue that the modern linguist is better equipped to understand the Greek language than an ordinary Greek. The linguist surely knows the linguistic terminology and the analytical linguistic tools, but the ordinary Greek (and here I am not talking about the Hellenic *scholar*!) knows what he means by what he says and writes! And his 'meaning' can never be falsified by a General linguist's theorizing. The linguist's is a theoretical, abstract hypothesizing, which may be correct or mistaken; what is needed in reading and exegeting a text is what meaning the sentence communicates in a living situation and how it is understood by those who communicate in it.

I hope that the above points clarify my position on Modern linguistic theory and its limitations for actual exegesis.

“We speak of what we feel and we testify of what we mean when we speak Greek, but you do not accept our testimony!” (Jn 3:11 ‘paraphrased’).