

The Role of Verbal Aspect in Exegesis

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*Note: This was my first attempt at understanding the issue of verbal aspect in NT Greek studies

Introduction

The past 15 years or so have seen a remarkable interest in grammatical studies over the role of aspect in the Greek verb. This is due to the remarkable work of Stanley Porter and Buist Fanning. Both these men, working simultaneously but independent of each other, came to very similar conclusions about the aspect of the Greek verb.

Definition

Some of the earliest significant work on verbal aspect was done by McKay who argued that verbal aspect is “the way in which the writer or speaker regards the action in context— as a whole act [aorist], as a process [imperfective], or as a state [perfect]” (*Greek Grammar*, 44).

Porter defines verbal aspect as “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 subjective choice of conception of a process” (*Verbal Aspect*, 88). In his model, if I understand him correctly, time is not a factor at all in the choice of a verbal form. The time of action is determined by context, those indicators in the text (i.e. temporal deixis? - I’m still digesting all this!).

Fanning sees it as “that category in the grammar of the verb which reflects the focus or viewpoint of the speaker in regard to the action or condition which the verb describes...a rather subjective category, since a speaker may choose to portray certain occurrences by one aspect or another without regard to the nature of the occurrence itself” (*Verbal Aspect*, 84-85). If I read Fanning correctly, he still sees temporal significance in the choice of the verbal form, particularly in the indicative. Porter seems to criticize him for not wanting to come all the way out of the closet and let go of the traditional understanding of the Greek verb (*Biblical Greek Language*, 36).

Wallace states that verbal aspect “is, in general, the portrayal of the action (or state) as to its *progress, results, or simple occurrence* (Greek Grammar, 499).

Simply stated, (as if anything about verbal aspect can be simply stated), verbal aspect is *the way in which the writer chooses to portray the situation*. This is done through the selection of a particular verb form in the verbal system (Decker, 26).

There are three basic aspects of the Greek verb: perfective, imperfective, and stative. The perfective aspect is expressed by the aorist, viewing the situation as a whole, a completed event without any regard for its progress (“Would a punctiliar idea still be valid here?). The imperfective aspect is expressed by present and imperfect. Here aspect looks at the situation as in progress and it has no regard for how the situation begins or end. The

stative aspect is expressed with the perfect and pluperfect. It portrays the situation as existing without any reference to its progress. (Can I assume that it still looks at the situation as continuing to exist?). The future tense is, for a lack of a better description, aspectually “vague.” (I can’t remember where I picked up this designation, but it has been implanted upon my brain).

In Fanning’s scheme, there are two basic aspects: internal and external, corresponding to imperfective and perfective respectively. Fanning rejects Porter’s classification of stative as an aspect of the verbal stem, seeing it, I believe, as part of *aktionsart*.

Wallace’s terminology is a bit different. He sees aspect in three parts as well, *internal*, *external*, and *perfective-stative*, with *internal* corresponding to the imperfective, the *external* to the perfective, and the *perfective-stative* to the stative. In Wallace’s scheme, he holds that the future “apparently” belongs with the aorist in the external (501).

Distinction between verbal aspect and *aktionsart*

While verbal aspect deals with how the author chooses to portray the situation through the use of a particulate verbal form, *aktionsart* deals with “kind of action” (my old school nomenclature). Decker states that *aktionsart* “is a description of the actional features ascribed to the verbal referent as to the way in which it happens or exists” (Temporal Deixis, 26). *Aktionsart* is based on lexis (meaning) and context, and is not derived from the form/tense of the verb. This kind of action encompasses various descriptions including “state, activity, accomplishment, climax, or punctual” (Ibid., 27). In other words, aspect is directly tied to the choice of a verbal form, while *aktionsart* is based on lexis and context. Decker states it this way: “Aspect expresses a view of the process grammatically, *Aktionsart* expresses it lexically and contextually” (27).

Wallace notes that aspect fits under the broader category of *aktionsart*. He notes that “Aktionsart is aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical, or contextual features” (499). Wallace’s summary of this distinction is particularly helpful. He writes,

The point is that often the choice of a tense is made for a speaker by the action he is describing. At times the tense chosen by the speaker is the *only* one he could have used to portray the idea. Three major factors determine this: lexical meaning of the verb (e.g. whether the verb stem indicates a terminal or punctual act, a state, etc.), contextual factors, and other grammatical features (e.g. mood, voice, transitivity, etc.). This is precisely the difference between aspect and *Aktionsart*: Aspect is the basic meaning of the tense, unaffected by considerations in a given utterance, while *Aktionsart* is the meaning of the tense as used by an author in a particular utterance, affected as it were by other features of the language (504).

Cautions

Moises Silva, in his book *Explorations in Exegetical Method*, introduces his discussion on verbal aspect with this heading: “The Controversy over Aspect.” He goes on to states

that aspect is a linguistic feature (73) and that “It is essential to keep in mind the distinction between linguistic research and exegetical work” (75). He then goes on to issue the sharp statement that “I do not recall ever seeing one example of good exegesis that *depends* on the interpreter’s ability to explain why one aspect rather than another was used” (ibid.). He, like others, believes that the choice of a verbal form by a writer, is often limited. In addition, certain verbs are simply more likely to occur in one aspect than in another (77). He goes on to say that it is no accident that the best translators seldom highlight “the aspectual distinctions of the original” (79) and that “pastors and professional exegetes should be very cautious in exploiting the Greek aspectual system for interpretive and homiletical purposes” (ibid.). Three years earlier in his response to the Porter and Fanning in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics*, he said pretty much the same thing, noting that “exegetes and pastors are well advised to say as little as possible about aspect” (82).

Relevance

While Silva clearly downplays the role of verbal aspect in exegesis, at least from my point of view, others are not so unimpressed. Carson notes that the level of agreement reached by Porter and Fanning is “nothing short of stunning” and that “this result on exegesis cannot easily be overestimated” (22).

There is a question however that remains: What ought to be the difference of verbal aspect in one’s interpretive process? Admittedly, I feel compelled to go back and read with a fine tooth comb all the notes I have ever prepared for teaching and preaching, correcting all my exegetical errors that were undoubtedly made. This is all a bit intimidating to say the least! I feel that an old, warm friend has been taken away from me.

Praxis (John 1:1-5)

I have chosen John 1:1-5 for several reasons. One, there is no preceding context. Secondly, the unit of thought that follows in 1:6-13 is a shift in personage until John returns in verse 14, and thirdly, it contains a great variety of verb tenses (aspects?): imperfect, aorist, perfect, and present. Therefore I think we can treat the section as a whole, without too much force being applied upon it from outside.

I, and I’m sure others, have waxed eloquently on the significance of the four imperfect forms of εἶμι in verses 1-2. I have always held that John’s this choice of verbal stem alone was teaching that there was never a time when Jesus did not exist. I had translated the four verbs in my own amplified manner as follows: “In the beginning the Word already/always was, and the Word was already/always with God, and the Word was already/always God. This One was already/always with God in the beginning.”

However, if the choice of stem by a writer/speaker deals only with how the writer/speaker portrayed the situation, it would seem that the use of this form is to show only that from the time inherent in the situation being discussed, the beginning, was this

statement true. In other words, the Word was in existence only “prior” (can I use such a temporal term?) to the beginning, and not necessarily from eternity past. If the Word was in existence in eternity past, other indicators such as lexis and context will have to prove this. (Am I on track?). In other words, it seems safe to say (I think) that the fact that the Word is equated with the eternal God is reason enough to argue for the eternal existence of the Word. Therefore, if I am correct (3rd class condition to be sure!), then I have arrived at the correct interpretation, but through a slightly different process.

Then in verse 4 we have this very same imperfect verb used twice: “In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.” I can see here how the choice of John may be simply stylistic, only in that a present tense may have accomplished the same purpose: “In Him is life and this life is the light of men.” But could it be that John uses imperfects here over present tense stems because he is viewing the situation as yet prior to the incarnation? In other words, why use a present tense when you haven’t even dealt with how the Word became such an asset to mankind. He was life, yes, but this benefit, from John’s point of view, was still looking forward to verse 14: “And the Word became flesh.” Yet I wonder if this is such a big deal given that “aspectually” speaking, both an imperfect and a present tense are both imperfective.

In verse 3 we have three uses of the verb γίνομαι, the first two being aorist and the last one being a perfect. Historically (In my old way of thinking), I saw the first two aorist uses as simply stating the fact that all things were created by the Word, without any regard for the progress. John was stating a fact; viewing creation by the Word in a snapshot. He portrayed the action as a whole; complete. In regard to verbal aspect, I believe Porter and Decker would classify these two as perfective. In other words, John has portrayed the situation as a complete event without any regard to its progress. I am not sure that I see any difference here between my indoctrination and this new discipline. John has portrayed the creation by the Word as a completed action, not commenting upon it beginning or ending. (Either I was better trained in verbal aspect than I thought, or, I am missing the boat. I fear the latter).

The perfect stem in the third use I took as a fact whose results continued on into the time of writing. The aspect of such a stem choice would be classified by Porter/Decker as stative, whereby the stem depicts a state of affairs that exists without any regard for its progress and which involves no change at the time the writer/speaker portrays that situation.

In the uses of perfects and aorists, I am not sure verbal aspect is making the impact on my thinking that the imperfects made in verses 1-2.

Finally in verse 5, John writes, “And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.” The verb “shines” is present tense while the verb “comprehend” is aorist. Aspectually speaking, the verb “shines” is imperfective. John is portraying the situation as in progress. The light is shining. The lack of a contrast to introduce the next clause may be interesting here. Might we have expected another present tense verb and a contrastive conjunction if John’s point was to balance the two thoughts? i.e. “And the

light is shining in the darkness, but the darkness is not comprehending it.” Instead we have a coordinating $\kappa\alpha\iota$ yet a change in tense to aorist. Perhaps Carson is correct when he states that the shift to aorist is “of little significance” (*John*, 138) since John is simply looking at the situation as a whole and not dealing with “a specific time, more than once, instantaneously or the like” (*ibid.*). That would have been my view as well.

Conclusion

I do in fact understand what Porter, Fanning, Decker, Wallace, and others seem to be saying about verbal aspect. In other words, I see why they argue for what they do about the choice of verb stem when a writer/speaker portrays a given situation. My trouble is that I have been doing exegetical work for so long without really ever having considered or understood verbal aspect that I need to see it in action. I would like to read someone’s exegetical paper or commentary on a passage to understand how it actually impacts exegesis.

Note: I ended up writing a paper myself on this issue. See “The Function of the Perfect Tense in 1 Peter with Reference to Verbal Aspect.”