

The hidden logic of Greek tense and aspect

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1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to defend the ostensible oxymoron of a title attributing logic to Greek aspect: it will be argued that even though it is not at all obvious to either native or non-native speakers, this logic exists and can be revealed provided the factors that cloud the issue are removed. It will show that many of the difficulties faced by grammarians, linguists and non-native learners alike are due to the lack of a clear distinction of the grammatical categories involved.

The expression of time through the verb has been an object of study since the first grammars appeared. The western tradition, however, did not distinguish between what are now called tense and aspect until the middle of the nineteenth century. Even after the discovery that the category which figured so prominently in the Slavic languages played an equally important role in Greek and even after the accumulation of a massive amount of relevant studies, there is little consensus on its nature.¹ A comparison of studies with contradictory results often reveals that their authors have a different understanding of aspect. This lack of consensus may be part of the reason why it was not included in grammars until the middle of the twentieth century, while the first Greek school grammars to mention it appeared only very recently.

From the point of view of linguists, one positive result of this omission is that native speakers, being unaware of its existence,

¹ Binnick (1991) provides a clear picture of the variety of analyses and theoretical concepts.

have no preconceived ideas about aspect. Although – or perhaps because – there was never any normative interference, native speakers display practically no variation either in their use of aspect or in their grammaticality judgements.

The discussion which follows will attempt to clarify the differences between aspect and tense, as well as between aspect and Aktionsart, and reveal their points of convergence, based on the concepts of subjectivity and telicity. The insights gained through the theoretical analysis could have an indirect but positive effect on the teaching and hence the acquisition of Greek as a second language; the use of aspect is one of the most frequently quoted problems for non-native speakers. As Mackridge (1985: 102) puts it, “aspect is probably the most difficult concept for the learner of MG to master, and even those non-native speakers who can speak MG almost perfectly are often given away as foreigners by their mistakes in aspect”.

2. Time

Time is a vital concept, not only in recent years, when it has become a valuable commodity, to be measured and allotted with precision to different tasks and priced accordingly, but throughout human history. It is important, however, to stress that it is just that: a concept. There is no concrete physical entity to which it corresponds, such as there is for the concept of space, for instance.²

Two sources of human experience contribute to our understanding of time. Life and its inevitable progression from birth to death provides us with a *linear* concept of time: we usually perceive it as a line extending infinitely towards the past and the future with the present at its centre:

² These remarks relate exclusively to time as it is conceptualized and linguistically expressed by humans. This concept does not correspond to real time as understood in modern physics; suffice it to say that movement, which is so prominent in our conceptualization of time, is absent from the physical entity. For an extensive discussion see Jaszczolt 2009: 1-31.

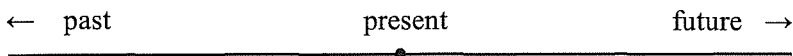


Figure 1: The axis of time

A less obvious but more primitive source for our concept of time is the regular repetition of certain phenomena (the cycles of day and night, the succession of the seasons etc.). We become aware of these long before we become aware of life and death, and they give us a sense of time moving in circles, repeated at regular intervals. This *cyclical* perception is reinforced by our sense of *rhythm*, which has its source in our earliest experiences: hearing our mother's and later feeling our own heartbeat.

All languages express time in their vocabulary, with expressions ranging from the vaguest (e.g. *in the past*), through fairly precise ones, (e.g. *last year* or *yesterday*), to the most precise (e.g. *3 nanoseconds before the explosion*). Many do so in their grammar as well, mostly through the verb. Grammatical expression usually involves the linear concept of time.³

3. Tense

Tense, the “grammaticalised expression of location in time” (Comrie 1985: 9), places events along the time axis, usually in respect to the present, i.e. the “now” of the speaker.

Tense is a *deictic* category and is therefore always defined in relation to something else; nevertheless, the term *absolute tense* is used when the point of reference is the present:

χτες πήγα στο θέατρο
 “last night I went to the theatre” (past)

The term *relative* tense is reserved for time specified in respect to another event.

³ There is some discussion in the literature on whether there are languages which code grammatically a cyclical rather than a linear conception of time; for an overview see Comrie 1985: 4-5.

περπατούσε/περπατάει/θα περπατήσει τραγουδώντας
 “she walked/walks/will walk *singing*” (simultaneity)

The term *absolute-relative* tense is used when this second event is placed in respect to the speaker's present.

όταν έφτασε είχαν φύγει
 “when he arrived they had left” (anteriority in the past)

The following table summarizes the means Greek has at its disposal for expressing temporal location:

	absolute [simple tenses]	absolute-relative: anteriority [perfect tenses]	relative: simultaneity/anteriority [converbs] ⁴
Present	Imperfective (Enestotas) <i>τρέχω</i>		Present <i>λύνοντας</i>
	[?] Perfective ⁵ <i>τρέξω</i>	[?] Present Perfect ⁶ <i>έχω τρέξει</i>	
Past	Imperfective (Paratatikos) <i>έτρεχα</i>		
	Perfective (Aorist) <i>έτρεξα</i>	Past Perfect <i>είχα τρέξει</i>	Perfect <i>έχοντας λύσει</i>
Future	Imperfective <i>θα τρέχω</i>		
	Perfective <i>θα τρέξω</i>	Future Perfect <i>θα έχω τρέξει</i>	

Table 1: Tense and the Greek verb

⁴ Usually referred to as “participles” or “gerunds”, but more accurately termed “converbs” or “verbal adverbs” (cf. Moser 2006).

⁵ It is a matter of controversy in the literature whether this perfective form, always preceded by some kind of marker, is a (present) tense or not (cf. for example, Holton, Mackridge and Philippaki-Warburton 1997, Klairis, Babiniotis et al. 2005).

⁶ This is perhaps the most controversial part of this categorization. There is no doubt that the past and future perfect are tenses denoting anteriority in the past and the future respectively, but the idea that the present perfect does the same in the present is only argued in Moser (2003) and Moser and Bella (2003), on the basis of diachronic and synchronic data and using the concept of the present sphere as developed by Declerck

Tense is a very flexible category. It can be and is used to express all kinds of modality, such as the speaker's judgement of the truth of an utterance or of the degree of likelihood of a hypothesis, or the speaker's wishes, as well as politeness. It is a fascinating process, based mainly on metaphorical uses of temporal distance, which however is beyond the scope of this paper.⁷

4. Aspect

Aspect is concerned with the *internal temporal constituency* of situations, irrespective of their position on the time axis. This is the only point on which there is no controversy in the vast literature on the subject. One of the recurring issues is the necessity and indeed the possibility of drawing a distinction between a lexical and a grammatical category concerning the internal temporal constituency of situations.

It is my belief that the distinction is not only possible and useful, but necessary for an adequate analysis, since, as will be shown in section 6, the two categories interact in a systematic way.⁸

4.1 *Aktionsart (lexical/situational aspect, actionality)*

Situations, regardless of where they are placed on the time axis, occupy a space, i.e. a chunk of time, often with internal structure; hence they can be:

- durative (whether long- or short-lasting) or instantaneous *searching* vs. *finding*

(1981). This runs counter to the widespread idea that the perfect is an aspectual category, but it is compatible with Veloudis's (2003) analysis of the Greek perfect as denoting the notion of "givenness" in conversation.

⁷ Fleischman (1989) gives a comprehensive account of the metaphorical uses of temporal distance; for a thorough discussion of non-temporal uses of tenses in Greek see Bella 2005.

⁸ Very different views are held by proponents of both Formal Semantics (e.g. Verkuyl 1994, 1999) and Cognitive Linguistics (e.g. Langacker 1990, 2006 and Nikiforidou 2004 with respect to Greek).

- continuous or intermittent
a continuously ringing bell vs. a bell that rings every five seconds
- homogeneous or consisting of clearly discernible phases
walking on a treadmill for exercise vs. walking from home to work
- including an end point or open-ended
painting a portrait vs. being a painter by profession

Of the various categorizations available in the literature, starting with the distinctions drawn by Aristotle in *Metaphysics* and *De Anima*, the most widely used is the one by Vendler (1967). Table 2 outlines the criteria on which it is based, namely telicity or terminativity (the inclusion of an end-point in the meaning of the verb) and divisibility into phases:

	[-PHASES]	[+PHASES]
[-TELIC]	STATES	ACTIVITIES
	sleep love be alive	run paint search
[+TELIC]	ACHIEVEMENTS	ACCOMPLISHMENTS
	die find recognize	run a mile paint a portrait read a book

Table 2: Vendler's categorization

Mourelatos's (1978) hierarchical categorization⁹ ends up with the same four categories (Vendler's corresponding terms are provided in brackets).

⁹ Mourelatos captures the strong intuition that the stative–non-stative opposition is more basic (see e.g. Dahl 1985: 28-9). He also associates verbal aspect with the noun feature of quantity, as does Verkuyl (e.g. 1993, 1999). Sasse (1991) adds a fifth category, that of inchoative

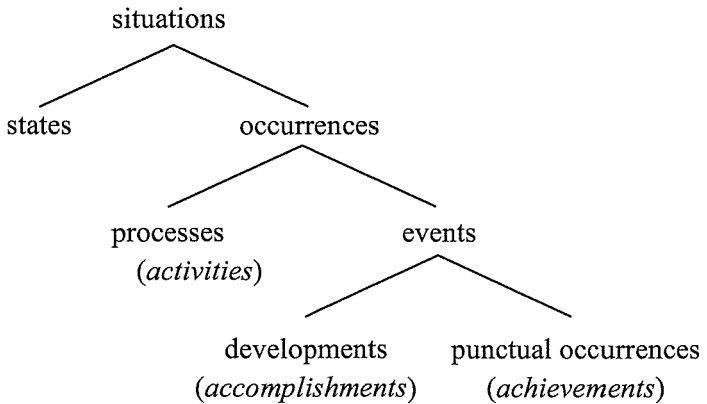


Figure 2: Mourelatos's categorization

The crucial fact about Aktionsart in respect to the matters at hand is that it is part of the inherent meaning of verbs, in other words an *objective* feature of the situations denoted by verbs.

4.2 Aspect (grammatical/viewpoint aspect)

Aspect, as understood here, is *subjective*, a matter of the speaker's choice.¹⁰ It must be emphasized that this is not an uncontroversial view; in fact, even theoreticians who believe in the necessity of the aspect-Aktionsart distinction do not necessarily see subjectivity as their distinguishing feature (see e.g. Bache 1982).

Comrie (1976: 3) has supplied what is now considered the classic definition of aspect. Even though he himself does not place

statives, i.e. stative verbs whose perfective forms mark the entry into the state (e.g. *αγαποῦσα* "I loved" – *ἀγάπησα* "I fell in love"). While this group of verbs is particularly important for Greek, the event structure of inchoatives classifies them as achievements or accomplishments.

¹⁰ Subjectivity is understood here in a way that is more similar to the usual meaning of the word rather than in the more technical sense of either Langacker (1990, 2006) or Traugott (2010). Aspect is seen here as subjective in the sense that it furnishes the speaker with a choice which does not affect the propositional content of the sentence (Moser, forthcoming).

much emphasis on the distinction of the grammatical and the lexical category, subjectivity surfaces in this definition:

Aspects are different ways of viewing the internal temporal constituency of a situation.

The description of the two subdivisions of aspect, the perfective and the imperfective (ibid.: 4), leaves no doubt as to the subjective character of the entire category:

Another way of explaining the difference between perfective and imperfective meaning is to say that the perfective looks at the situation from outside, without necessarily distinguishing any of the internal structure of the situation, whereas the imperfective looks at the situation from inside, and as such is crucially concerned with the internal structure of the situation.

The perfective and the imperfective are expressed in Greek by the two stems of the verb, aorist (simple past) and present respectively.¹¹

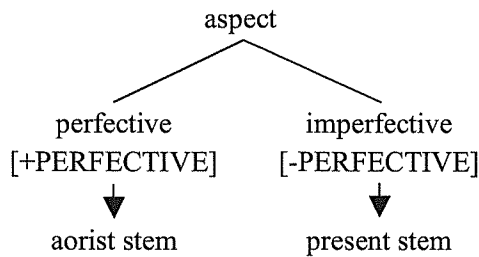


Figure 3: The basic aspectual opposition in Greek

Every form of the verb is marked for aspect. Binary pairs exist for both the past and the future, as well as for the subjunctive and

¹¹ Ancient Greek had three stems; the perfect stem was finally lost after the Koine period. Its loss is one of the main arguments in support of the claim in Moser (2008) that the Modern Greek perfect is a tense rather than an aspect and that the entire system has shifted from the expression of Aktionsart to that of aspect.

the imperative. Only the present is formed uniquely in the imperfective, although several analyses oppose it to the “dependent” perfective form, as shown in Table 1 above.

Comrie’s (1976: 17) examples from both French and Classical Greek, which happens to be virtually identical to its Modern Greek equivalent, show clearly that the aspectual difference does not express any objective difference in the situation, but rather presents a different aspect, due to the different point of view (or vantage point) adopted by the speaker:

- (1) εβασίλευε δέκα έτη – (1a) εβασίλευσε δέκα έτη
 “He reigned_[±PERFECTIVE] for ten years”
 (2) il régnait trente ans – (2a) il régna trente ans
 “He reigned_[±PERFECTIVE] for 30 years”
 (3) – Τι έκανες χτες;
 “What did you do yesterday?”
 (3a) – Έγραφα μια αναφορά
 “I wrote_[-,PERFECTIVE] a report”
 (3b) – Έγραψα μια αναφορά
 “I wrote_[+,PERFECTIVE] a report”

There is undoubtedly a subtle difference in meaning in each version in both languages.¹² This difference, however, concerns the implicatures that arise and not the essential, truth-conditionally determined meaning of the statement. Thus, the imperfective versions would be more likely to be used by a speaker who would want to stress the long duration and/or the tediousness of the situation. But long or short duration, instantaneity, completion and non-completion are mere implicatures, i.e. inferences arising from the context and cancellable by it (Comrie 1976: 16-24). Thus, while (3b) strongly suggests that the report is finished at the time of utterance, the implicature can easily be cancelled, e.g. through the addition of something like “I wrote_[+,PERFECTIVE] a report for a

¹² There is also a difference between the two languages. French has virtually abolished the Passé Simple (perfective past) and replaced it, at least in spoken language, by the Passé Composé, which now functions both as a perfective past and a perfect.

while, but I found I could not concentrate properly, so I gave up. I'll finish it tonight.”

The description of aspect so far shows that it is indeed subjective in the sense that it is a matter of *choice* on the part of the speaker, rather than being determined by the situation referred to. The literature on aspect, however, includes several different views. These are based on the universally acknowledged further subdivisions of aspect, which are shown in Figure 4, taken from Comrie (1976: 26).

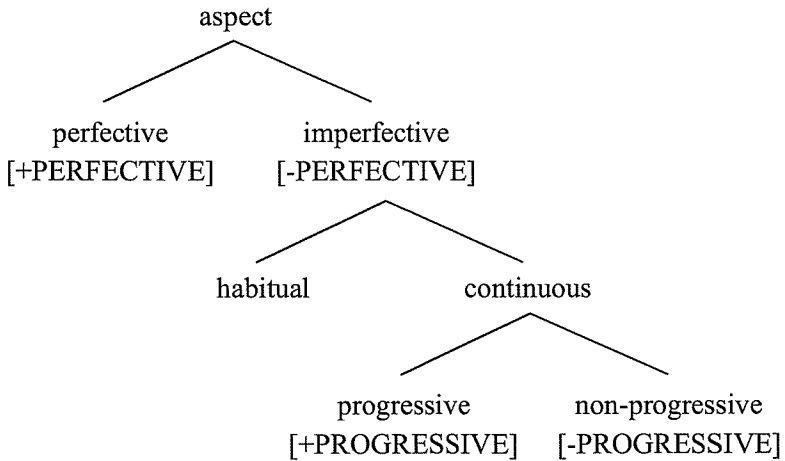


Figure 4: Classification of aspectual oppositions

Greek marks morphologically only the basic [\pm PERFECTIVE] opposition, but all other distinctions are semantically viable.

Bache (1982 and several other works) rightly points out that the only truly subjective subdivision is the first one, i.e. the [\pm PERFECTIVE] opposition. This is a very astute insight; while Bache's solution is a different definition of aspect, however, the solution proposed here is a re-categorization of the habitual and the progressive.

The discussion will start with the [\pm PROGRESSIVE] distinction, which is frequently equated to the [\pm PERFECTIVE] one, causing serious difficulties in second/foreign language acquisition.

Greek learners of English and English learners of Greek, for instance, tend to treat the imperfect and the past progressive on the one hand and the aorist and the simple past on the other as equivalent, with the result that they often produce unacceptable utterances, such as (4) and (5):

- (4) *For as long as we were going to school, we were waking up at 6:30 every day
 “Όσο πηγαίναμε_[-PERFECTIVE] στο σχολείο, ξυπνούσαμε_[-PERFECTIVE] στις 6.30 κάθε μέρα”
- (5) *Το καλοκαίρι πήγα_[+PERFECTIVE] κάθε μέρα για μπάνιο
 “In the summer I went swimming every day”

The progressive, just as the imperfective, is defined as paying attention to the internal temporal constituency of the situation. Their crucial differences are that the progressive (a) cannot be used as a habitual and (b) is linked to the type of situation, i.e. to Aktionsart. As Comrie (1976: 35) puts it, “we can give the general definition of progressiveness as the combination of progressive meaning and non-stative meaning.” It might be added that punctual situations (achievements) are equally incompatible with the progressive (**I am finding my pen*), thus confining its use to verbs with discernible phases. What this means is that, while for most situations there is a choice between progressive and non-progressive, there are limitations imposed by the objective temporal constituency of the situation; therefore, the progressive is not entirely subjective.

These rules can be and often are disregarded. The achievement verb “die”, for instance, can be used in the progressive (*be dying*); however, in these cases the verb takes on a different meaning, comprising the process that leads up to the death and therefore effectively changing category and becoming an accomplishment.

States can also be flexible, without even involving a change in Aktionsart, but again there are subtle differences of meaning between utterances such as

- (6) Oh, I love this!
 (7) Oh, I am loving this!

Such uses, however, are in defiance of the rules, which they deliberately break in order to create an effect; this is a widespread practice of the speakers of any language and one that often leads to change. For the moment the English progressive, while undoubtedly aspectual, since it offers the speakers a choice in most cases, is not fully subjective. If the choice spreads to all types of Aktionsart it will become a continuous imperfective; at the current point in the history of the language the opposition holds between the progressive and all other types of aspect (non-progressive continuous, habitual and perfective), all of which are expressed by the non-progressive forms of the verb.

The habitual is used for situations which are repeated *regularly*, since, as Comrie (1976: 26-30) points out, simple repetition is not merely insufficient, but in fact rules out the habitual.¹³ This is certainly true of Greek, where the imperfective is completely unacceptable in such contexts; compare (8) and (9) below:

- (8) Πέρυσι το καλοκαίρι πήγα_[+PERFECTIVE] / *πήγαινα_[-PERFECTIVE]
 30 φορές για μπάνιο
 “Last summer I went swimming 30 times”
- (9) Πέρυσι το καλοκαίρι *πήγα/πήγαινα κάθε μέρα για μπάνιο
 “Last summer I went (used to go) swimming every day”

What emerges from this discussion is that habituality is tied up with the objective nature of situations. In Greek, where the habitual is expressed by the imperfective, there is no choice whatsoever on the part of the speaker, since the imperfective is compulsory when there is objective habituality and impossible in cases of simple iterativity. English does offer a choice, but on a different level; the aspectual opposition between the progressive and the non-progressive means that the latter covers part of the continuous, the habitual and the perfective. It is only in the past that the language has at its disposal a specifically habitual form,

¹³ Comrie (ibid.) also points out that repetition is not even a necessary condition; this is undoubtedly true of the English “used to” construction (cf. sentences such as *This road used to be so quiet*), but it seems to be the result of an extension of its use rather than an inherent dimension of the habitual meaning.

and even there this form has been extended to cover continuous uses as well. In effect, therefore, the choice is between two imperfective alternatives, the "used to" habitual providing the explicit information that the non-progressive form is not a perfective. The fact remains that habituality is an objective feature of situations and therefore, under the definition adopted here, not an aspectual category at all. It could be said that habituality embodies the cyclical conception of time mentioned in Section 2.

It should be pointed out, nevertheless, that, while several languages have a separate habitual form, it is very common for habituality to be expressed via the imperfective. The explanation is simple: the event structure of situations which consist of clearly discernible phases (activities and accomplishments) can find an easy parallel in a series of identical situations repeated at regular intervals. It is easy for the phases of a situation to be visualized as separate events. Given that the imperfective is normally used when the speaker wishes to stress this type of internal temporal consistency, it is a small cognitive step that leads to its use as an expression of habituality.

* * *

The discussion so far indicates that, if aspect is understood as the grammatical expression of the [\pm PERFECTIVE] opposition, it can be distinguished from the category of Aktionsart on the basis of a binary feature [\pm SUBJECTIVITY]. A continuum could be postulated, in which Aktionsart would occupy the [-SUBJECTIVE] and aspect the [+SUBJECTIVE] end (Figure 5). The habitual and the progressive would then be intermediate categories, dependent on the objective nature of situations.

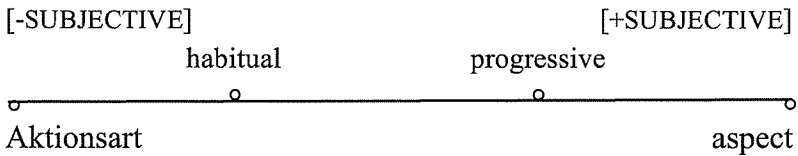


Figure 5: The Aktionsart–aspect continuum

All this leads to the conclusion that, with the exception of habitual situations, which demand the imperfective, the choice between the two aspects is free in Greek.

Nevertheless, according to grammars, teaching manuals and theoretical analyses, several restrictions seem to apply. The next section will look at precisely these restrictions, which, if real, pose serious problems for the subjectivity-based analysis proposed here.

5. Restrictions on the choice of aspect

5.1 Some gaps and other strange things in the verbal system

The first restriction arises from the fact that a small number of verbs do not have perfective forms. It is no coincidence that all these verbs denote states (*έχω* “have”, *ξέρω* “know”, *οφείλω*, *χρωστώ* “owe” etc.); the lack of lexical telicity (see Section 6) is what allows the absence of perfective forms. Since this asymmetry runs counter to the general tendency of the verbal system, suppletion or periphrasis step in to provide the lacking perfective (*αποκτώ* “acquire”, *μαθαίνω* “learn”, *δημιουργώ οφειλές/χρέη* “incur debts” etc.).

It follows, then, that the lack of perfective forms does not entail a lack of aspectual choice; it simply means that the perfective, since it is not morphologically available, has to be expressed in a different manner.

Interestingly, among the large number of state verbs that do have perfective forms many allow two different interpretations: they can either function as true perfectives (looking at the situ-

ation as a whole, ignoring its internal structure) or they can function as inchoatives, signalling the entry into the state:

- (10) Κοιμήθηκαν τρεις ώρες
 “they slept for three hours” (perfective)
- (11) Κοιμήθηκαν στις τρεις
 “they slept (= fell asleep) at three” (inchoative)

Again, this does not prove a lack of choice; the possibility of using either aspect is maintained (10 can also be expressed with the imperfective *κοιμόντουσαν*) but the perfective can also take on another meaning, effectively changing the Aktionsart of the verb by turning the state into an achievement.¹⁴

5.2 Adverbials

A more convincing set of restrictions concerns the incompatibility of many adverbials with one of the two aspects. It is very true that adverbials such as the ones in the left column of Table 3 combine only with the imperfective aspect, while those in the right column combine only with the perfective.

<i>adverbials + imperfective</i>	<i>adverbials + perfective</i>
συχνά “often”, συνήθως “usually”, πάντα/πάντοτε “always”, πότε-πότε “now and then”, ασταμάτητα “incessantly”, κάθε βράδυ “every evening”, όποτε “whenever” etc.	δύο, τρεις, τέσσερις φορές “twice, three, four times”, επανειλημμένως “repeatedly”, ξαφνικά “suddenly”, μόλις “as soon as”, ξανά “again” etc.

Table 3: Adverbials allowing only one of the aspects

It is also true, however, that adverbials themselves are a matter of choice. In normal usage, speakers do not build their sentences around an adverb; they choose their vantage point and then choose all the lexical items and grammatical constructions accordingly.

¹⁴ In Moser 2008 it is argued that both these phenomena are remnants of earlier phases of the language, when the morphology expressed Aktions-art rather than aspect.

It should be added that all those which are incompatible with the perfective have a habitual meaning, which, as argued in 3.2, is imposed by the objective temporal structure of the situation. The adverbials on the right-hand side, on the other hand, can combine with the imperfective if the context allows a habitual meaning; in fact, their combination with the habitual *imposes* a habitual reading.

5.3 Verb complements

Verbal complements of the verb – mostly sentential in Greek, given the lack of infinitives – constitute one of the most problematic issues related to aspect, both for theoretical analyses and for learners. This is the domain where even the most accomplished non-native speaker is bound to be revealed sooner or later. Native speakers, who, unexpectedly, never disagree on their judgements on the grammaticality of this type of structure, are at a loss to give an explanation of why, for example, (12) is grammatical and (13) is not.

- (12) Προτιμάω να διαβάζω_[PERFECTIVE] Βιολογία από το να δουλεύω στο εστιατόριο
 “I prefer reading biology to working at the restaurant”
- (13) *Θέλω να σπουδάζω_[PERFECTIVE] Βιολογία
 “I want to study biology”

The explanation lies in telicity as defined in section 6 below. Lexical telicity or perfectivity (i.e. lexical or grammatical telicity; see Table 4) in the matrix clause entails perfectivity in the complement.

- (14) Προσπάθησα να διαβάσω/*διαβάζω την «Άννα Καρένινω» στα Ρωσικά, αλλά δεν τα κατάφερα
 “I tried to read *Anna Karenina* in Russian, but I couldn’t”
- (15) Αποφάσισε να ταξιδέψει για ένα χρόνο πριν πιάσει δουλειά
 “She decided to travel for a year before starting to work”

However, most atelic verbs (certainly activities, but also states) tend to become telic when they acquire a complement, hence the unacceptability of (13).

The only exception is, predictably, habituality, which is regularly expressed through the imperfective; in fact, an imperfective complement usually imposes a habitual reading and all the imperfective sentences above would be acceptable if the context allowed them to be interpreted as habituais:¹⁵

- (16) Προσπάθησα να διαβάζω κάθε μέρα δυο σελίδες από την
«Άννα Καρένινα»
“I tried to read two pages from *Anna Karenina* each day”

There are only a few verbs which only accept imperfective complements: verbs of perception (“see”, “hear”, “feel”), because the senses only perceive what is in the process of happening, verbs of (permanent) knowledge or preferences (“know”, “like”) and “aspectual” verbs (“begin”, “continue”, “finish”), because they mark points along the development of a situation.

6. Aktionsart and aspect: affinity and interaction

The fact that Aktionsart and aspect were placed on a continuum in 4.3 above suggests that there is an affinity between them. This is indeed the case, as they both pertain to the internal temporal constituency of situations. Their common feature is [\pm TELICITY]. Telicity is understood here in a very abstract sense. In the case of Aktionsart it corresponds to reality, since the telic categories (accomplishments and achievements) contain an inherent end-point. In the case of aspect, telicity, embodied in the perfective, becomes entirely notional: independently of whether an end-point exists in reality, a perfective view of a situation, i.e. the selection of a vantage point affording a view of the situation as a whole, entails positing some notional boundary. In other words, telicity is objective in the case of Aktionsart and subjective in the case of aspect.

¹⁵ Example (12) is one of the rare occasions when a non-habitual imperfective complement is appropriate; it suggests that the sentence is uttered as a general statement, with the flavour of an “eternal truth”, which is associated with both the present and the imperfective.

	[-SUBJECTIVE] (Aktionsart)	[+SUBJECTIVE] (aspect)
[+TELICITY]	achievements accomplishments	perfective
[-TELICITY]	states activities	imperfective

Table 4: Subjectivity and telicity in aspect and Aktionsart

It is cognitive affinity that allows the two categories to interact. Greek has one of the most highly grammaticalized aspectual systems: practically every verb in the language has both stems and a full set of forms in two symmetrical voices. Nevertheless, subtle differences in the meaning of the two aspects arise in combination with the different types of Aktionsart.

The shared telicity makes the perfective combine without difficulty with achievements and accomplishments, while atelicity makes the combination of the imperfective with the remaining two categories equally unproblematic.

It is the combination of atelic aspect and telic Aktionsart and vice versa which might be expected to present difficulties. As was seen in 5.1, however, the perfective is entirely compatible with states (example 10); it merely assumes an additional function, namely that of providing a corresponding inchoative predicate (example 11).

The imperfective, on the other hand, when used with accomplishments, which are telic but durative, simply foregrounds the process and its duration rather than the end-point:

- (17) Σαν σήμερα πέρυσι σκαρφάλωνα στο βουνό
 “A year ago today I was climbing the mountain”

The most problematic combination is that of the imperfective with achievements. It seems very difficult for speakers of Greek to perceive these instantaneous events as developing, since there is no process involved:

- (18) Χτες βρήκα_[+PERFECTIVE]/*έβρισκα_[-PERFECTIVE] το πορτοφόλι μου
 “Yesterday I found my wallet”

It is, however, not impossible; in fact it is precisely in this combination that the independence of aspect from objective reality is most obvious. A punctual event can be seen as unfolding, i.e. as having duration, in order to be used as a backdrop to some other event:

- (19) Τη στιγμή που έβρισκα το πορτοφόλι μου χτύπησε το κουδούνι
“The moment I found my wallet, the bell rang”

7. The perfect, subjectivity, tense and aspect

The perfect, as already mentioned in section 3, is the object of a long-standing debate concerning its classification as a tense or as an aspect. The concept of aspect as developed above has the advantage of excluding the perfect from the category aspect on the basis of clear criteria.

The Greek perfect can be replaced by the aorist in every one of its uses, with the exception (in the current Standard) of the experiential use:

- (20) Έχω σπάσει/έσπασα το χέρι μου και πονάει
“I have broken my hand and it hurts”
(21) Έχω πάει/*πήγα στην Ιρλανδία, αλλά όχι στο Δουβλίνο¹⁶
“I have been to Ireland, but not to Dublin”

Even though the reverse does not hold (i.e. the perfect cannot always replace the aorist), the interchangeability of the two suggests that subjectivity is involved; the choice, however, does not concern the internal temporal constituency of a situation. The Greek perfect always refers to an event firmly placed at a moment anterior to the present, i.e. in the past.¹⁷ Choosing the perfect instead of the aorist has the effect of including this past event in the sphere of the present, i.e. stressing or foregrounding its rele-

¹⁶ The perfective (simple) past is perfectly acceptable if the sentence refers to a specific trip rather than the unspecified experience of having visited Ireland.

¹⁷ It should be stressed that the Greek perfect does not have the cross-linguistic uses more closely connected to the present, i.e. *recent past* and *ongoing situation*.

vance for the current situation. Any event presented in the perfect remains a past event. This is the reason for its inclusion in the category of anterior tenses in Table 1, along with the unequivocal anteriority of its past and future counterparts, which historically precede the present perfect.¹⁸

8. Some practical guidelines

Subjectivity and telicity may work as theoretical tools, but they are hardly useful in the classroom or as a learning tool. The theoretical results reached, however, can serve as a basis on which to simplify the formidable task that non-native speakers seem to face when trying to learn Modern Greek. This section formulates some practical rules that learners may find helpful:

- Any regularly (habitually) repeated situation must be conveyed through the imperfective
- It is safe to use the perfective in all verb complements; it is almost always acceptable, even in the relatively rare occasions when the imperfective can be used. The only exceptions (verbs that only allow the imperfective) are:
 - verbs of perception (physical or mental): βλέπω “see”, ακούω “hear”, ξέρω “know” etc.
 - “aspectual verbs”: αρχίζω “start”, συνεχίζω “continue”, σταματάω “stop” etc.
 - the verb μου αρέσει “like”
- The aorist can replace the perfect on almost every occasion, but the reverse is not true; when in doubt, always opt for the aorist.

9. Conclusion

The preceding discussion has attempted to show that a clear distinction between aspect and Aktionsart is crucial for understanding aspect in general, Greek aspect in particular and even

¹⁸ More arguments in favour of this analysis can be found in Moser 2003 and Moser and Bella 2003.

tense and its relationship to aspect. The distinction drawn here was based on subjectivity in the sense of free choice with no effects on the propositional content of the sentence.

More precisely it was claimed that Aktionsart is objective in the sense that it reflects the inherent temporal constituency of the situation, while aspect is subjective in the sense that it expresses the point of view that the speaker chooses to adopt when describing a situation. Opting for [\pm SUBJECTIVITY] as the distinguishing feature of the two categories logically limits aspect to the basic [\pm PERFECTIVITY] opposition, assigning non-prototypical aspectual functions to the progressive and the habitual. It also excludes the perfect (a category notoriously difficult to classify) from the domain of aspect, placing it in the area of absolute-relative tense.

Finally, it was claimed that, while the theoretical discussion is of no use *per se* to learners of Greek, they can benefit indirectly from the clearer picture of the field that emerges through the analysis.

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