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:

εἴπωμεν ἢ σιγμέν; (Euripides, Ion 758)

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

ἐθήρευεν ἀπο ἰππὸ, ὁπότε γυμναί βούλοιτο ἑαυτὸ 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 (εἴπωμεν) is in a past tense (aorist). The second sentence refers to past time, but one of the verbs (βούλοιτο) 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.

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 ἐστή (aorist),
ἔστη (imperfect), εἰσήκου (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/
ocurrence. 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 speech: the optative,
infinite and participle use present
for imperfect and perfect for
pluperfect.)

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 ancient Greek when it comes to nuances of 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 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 future action, 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 ἀποκρίνουνται ἐφ' ἀκοῇ and ἐφ' ὑπολογίῳ. In these expressions common sense seems to demand that the participles denote simultaneity (unless the participles denote something different from what ἐφ' 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.

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 perfect or present subjunctive?
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 statements and indirect questions indicates time, not aspect.

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.

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.

10.9 The tenses of the indicative nearly always indicate aspect only. But the tense of the indicative used in indirect statements and indirect questions indicates time, not 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.

Jerome Moran is a JACT Tutor and a retired teacher of Classics and Philosophy in the secondary sector. jeromemoran@hotmail.com

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 (HMV) the future indicative may be replaced by the future optative, denoting time and not aspect;
(b) the optative after a HMV 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 HMV 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.