

Tense & Verbal Aspect

Chapter 7

Verbal Aspect

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν
ὁ λόγος

Definition

Verbal Aspect: The **subjective perspective** or **viewpoint** from which an author communicates the action of a given verb.

Notice, this is NOT the objective way in which the action is performed, but the way the action is **portrayed**.

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Author's Perspective on the Action

It is generally agreed that there are three aspects in the Greek verbal system.

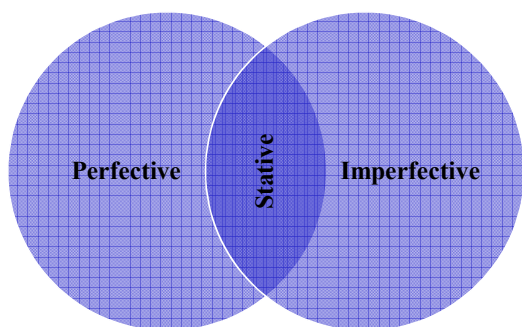
Imperfective

Perfective

Stative

VERBAL ASPECT

| Aspect | Definition | Tense-Form |
|---------------------|---|----------------------|
| Imperfective | Action viewed as in process, ongoing | Present or Imperfect |
| Perfective | Action viewed as complete (not necessarily completed), as a whole | Aorist |
| Stative | A state of affairs that exists from a previous action | Perfect |



| Aspectual Category | Past-time Indicator | Imperf Aspect Prefix | Lexical Core | Perf Aspect Suffix | Personal ending |
|-------------------------|---------------------|----------------------|--------------|--------------------|-----------------|
| Perfective (past) | ε | — | λυ | σ | αμεν |
| Perfective (non-past) | — | — | λυ | σ | ομεν |
| Imperfective (past) | ε | — | λυ | — | ομεν |
| Imperfective (non-past) | — | — | λυ | — | ομεν |
| Stative (past) | ε | λε | λυ | κ | ειμεν |
| Stative (non-past) | — | λε | λυ | κ | αμεν |

| Imperfective | Perfective | Stative |
|--|--|--|
| λύω Non-Past Imperfective (Present Tense-Form) | λύσω Non-Past Perfective (Future Tense-Form) | λέλυκα Non-Past Stative (Perfect Tense-Form) |
| έλυον Past Imperfective (Imperfect Tense-Form) | έλυσα Past Perfective (Aorist Tense-Form) | έλελύκειν Past Stative (Pluperfect Tense-Form) |

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Time of Action

The presence of an **augment** with the imperfect, aorist, and pluperfect indicative forms generally communicates that the action of the verb is in the past.

The augment is only found on the **indicative forms**, indicating that only in the indicative mood is the element of time a factor.

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Type of Action

Traditionally, the **present** tense form was thought to signify a “continuous” or “linear” action, whereas the **aorist** tense-form signified a “punctiliar” or “once-for-all” action.

This distinction is overly-simplistic because the tense-form itself does not communicate the type of action (*Aktionsart*) but only the author’s perspective of the action (aspect).

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Type of Action

Aspect: the perspective of the author based on the unaffected meaning (i.e., the tense-form alone).

Aktionsart: takes into consideration the (1) lexical, (2) grammatical, and (3) contextual factors. The tense-form itself does not communicate the type of action.

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Type of Action: Lexical Factors

Lexical Determination: When a verb is limited to a particular tense form. For example, with non-indicative verbs, **εἰμί**, **κεῖμαι**, **κάθημαι**, and **φημί** are always **present**.

With imperatives, **ἴδε** and **ἰδοῦ** are always **aorist**, whereas **εἰμί** and **οἶδα** occur only in the **present**.

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Type of Action: Lexical Factors

Lexical Influence: The influence of the verb’s inherent meaning on its usage in the various tense-forms. Verbs that have a **natural terminus** (= telic) prefer the **aorist** whereas verbs that have **no natural terminus** (= atelic) prefer the **present**.

Thus, a verb’s tense-form is sometimes influenced by the verb’s inherent semantic nature.

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Type of Action: Lexical Factors

Telic verbs are often expressed in **aorist** forms.

Atelic verbs are often expressed in **present** forms.

καλόν μοι **ἀποθανεῖν** (A A Inf) εἰς Χριστόν,
ἢ **βασιλεύειν** (P A Inf) τῶν περάτων τῆς γῆς

“It is better for me **to die** in Christ than **to be king** over the ends of the earth” (Ignatius, *Romans*, 6.1).

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Type of Action: Lexical Factors

Telic

Performance (bounded actions with perceived duration)

Punctual (bounded actions with little perceivable duration)

Atelic

Stative (states and relationships)

Activity (actions with no inherent termination)

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Telic Verbs

Performance: An action that is limited in that it conveys a climax, conclusion, or termination, and yet still conveys some perceived duration.

Examples: **ἀνοίγω** (“I open”), **δίδωμι** (“I give”), **ἐνδύομαι** (“I get dressed”), **ἐτοιμάζω** (“I prepare”), and **καλέω** (“I call”).

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Telic Verbs

Punctual: An action that is done in a moment without taking any perceived or significant time duration for the action.

Examples: **ἀγοράζω** (“I buy”), **βάλλω** (“I throw”), **εὕρισκω** (“I find”), and **πίπτω** (“I fall”).

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Atelic Verbs

Stative: Conveys a condition or relationship (personal, temporal or local). That is, a stative verb refers not to what someone *does* but what someone *is*.

Examples: **ἀγαπάω** (“I love”), **ἀσθενέω** (“I am sick”), **εἰμί** (“I am”), **ἔχω** (“I have”), **ζάω** (“I am alive”), **μισέω** (“I hate”), **οἰκέω** (“I am dwelling”), **πιστεύω** (“I believe”), **πλουτέω** (“I am rich”), and **φοβέομαι** (“I am afraid”).

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Atelic Verbs

Activity: Viewed as having no set limit for their completion (“unbounded”).

Examples: **ἀναγινώσκω** (“I am reading”), **ἐσθίω** (“I am eating”), **κηρύσσω** (“I am preaching”), **λέγω/λαλέω** (“I am talking”), **περιπατέω** (“I am walking”), and **ποιέω** (“I am doing”).

| Telic Events | Present Impv | Aorist Impv |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| ἀγοράζω | 0 | 3 |
| βάλλω | 0 | 14 |
| δείκνυμι | 0 | 8 |
| ἐνδύω | 0 | 5 |
| ἐτοιμάζω | 1 | 8 |
| λαμβάνω | 1 | 11 |
| πωλέω | 0 | 5 |
| σφύζω | 1 | 9 |
| Total | 3 | 63 |

| Atelic Events | Present Impv | Aorist Impv |
|---------------|--------------|-------------|
| ἀγαπάζω | 8 | 1 |
| γρηγορέω | 10 | 1 |
| ἐργάζομαι | 3 | 0 |
| ἔχω | 11 | 0 |
| μνημονεύω | 8 | 0 |
| πιστεύω | 13 | 2 |
| προσεύχομαι | 15 | 2 |
| φοβέομαι | 25 | 3 |
| Total | 93 | 9 |

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Type of Action: Lexical Factors

Lexical Influence: Verbs of motion are almost always found in the **present** tense-form when used as imperatives (e.g., ἀκολουθέω, ἐγείρω, ἔρχομαι, περιπατέω, πορεύομαι, ὑπάγω, φεύγω, and φέρω).

However, **-μι** verbs overwhelmingly prefer the **aorist** (e.g., ἀφίημι, δίδωμι, ἵστημι, and τίθημι).

| Verbs of Motion | Present Impv | Aorist Impv |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------|
| ἀκολουθέω | 16 | 2 |
| ἐγείρω | 18 | 2 |
| ἔρχομαι | 15 | 5 |
| περιπατέω | 14 | 0 |
| πορεύομαι | 23 | 4 |
| ὑπάγω | 38 | 0 |
| φεύγω | 9 | 0 |
| φέρω | 10 | 1 |
| Total | 143 | 14 |

| -μι Verbs | Present Impv | Aorist Impv |
|--------------|--------------|-------------|
| ἀφίημι | 3 | 26 |
| δίδωμι | 4 | 31 |
| ἵστημι | 0 | 7 |
| τίθημι | 1 | 2 |
| Total | 8 | 66 |

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Type of Action: Grammatical and Contextual Factors

Present Imperatives: Preferred in epistles. Paul uses the present imperatives 3x more than the aorist. One exception is 1 Peter which has 25 aorists but only 10 present imperatives.

Aorist Imperatives: Preferred in historical narratives and prayers.

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λύσατε αὐτὸν καὶ **φέρετε**

Untie it [a young donkey] and **bring** it here
(Mark 11:2).

... **ἀπαρνησάσθω** ἑαυτὸν καὶ **ἀράτω** τὸν
σταυρὸν αὐτοῦ καὶ **ἀκολουθεῖτω** μοι

“... he must **deny** himself, **take up** his cross,
and **follow** Me” (Matt 16:24).

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σοὶ λέγω, **ἔγειρε** **ἄρον** τὸν κράβαττόν σου καὶ
ὑπάγε εἰς τὸν οἶκόν σου

“I tell you: **get up**, **pick up** your stretcher, and
go home” (Mark 2:11).

χαίρωμεν καὶ **ἀγαλλιῶμεν** καὶ **δώσωμεν** τὴν
δόξαν αὐτῷ

“**Let us be glad**, **rejoice**, and **give** Him glory”
(Rev 19:7).

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Summary

Once the lexical, grammatical, and contextual factors
have been considered, then the interpreter is in a place
to determine if the form is the expected (default) form.

If it is not the default form, then it is possible that the
unexpected form is conveying a special nuance.
Otherwise, no special nuance should be read into the
tense-form used.