

Introduction to Greek Verbs

Tense

“No element of the Greek language is of more importance to the student of the New Testament than the matter of tense. A variation in meaning exhibited by the use of a particular tense will often dissolve what appears to be an embarrassing difficulty or reveal a gleam of truth which will thrill the heart with delight and inspiration.”¹ “Verbs are the most exciting part of the Greek language.”²

Tense indicates two aspects of a verb:

1. **Time** of action
 - Past
 - Present
 - Future
2. **Kind** (Dana and Mantey) or **Aspect** (Mounce) of action
 - Linear (a movie) – watching the progress of an event
 - “Punctiliar” (a snapshot); Indefinite, undefined – knowing the event happened
 - Completed

The following chart summarizes the most common Greek tenses:

Tense	Example	Time	Kind/Aspect
Present	1 John 3:6 No one who abides in Him sins ; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him.	Present	Continuous, durative, linear
Imperfect	John 4:6 So Jesus, being wearied from His journey, was sitting thus by the well	Past	Continuous, durative, linear
Aorist ³	John 2:20 This temple was built in forty-six years	Past	A snapshot instead of a movie as with the imperfect. “As occurring [or an occurrence – mw] without reference to its progress....Signifies nothing as to completeness, but simply presents the action as attained....Punctilinear” ⁴
Future	John 14:26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.	Future	Since the action is yet future, the kind of action is generally indefinite (similar to the aorist).
Perfect	1 John 3:6 No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him .	Past / Present	Completed, with results in the present
Pluperfect	(Rare) Acts 1:10 Two men stood by them	Past	Completed, with results in the past

It should be noted that the *time* of the action indicated by a tense is generally only meaningful when the mood (see below) of the verb is indicative. Outside of the indicative mood (e.g., “if” conditional statements in the subjunctive mood, participles, etc.) only the *kind* of action retains its absolute significance.

¹ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1955), 176.

² William D. Mounce, *Basics of Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993), 122.

³ “The most prevalent and most important of the Greek tenses. “ – Dana & Mantey, 193.

⁴ Dana and Mantey, 193-194. Note that “punctilinear” does *not* mean (as is sometimes stated) “one time” or “once for all” [mw]. “The aorist denotes an action simply as an event, without in any sense defining the manner of its occurrence.”

Voice

Voice is the quality of a verb that indicates the relationship between the subject of the sentence and the action of the verb.

1. **Active** – As in English, active voice indicates that the subject of the sentence is acting. The subject is performing the action: “The boy throws the ball.”
2. **Passive** – Also as in English, the passive voice indicates that the subject is being acted upon. The subject is receiving the action: “The ball is thrown by the boy.”
3. **Middle** – Greek has a voice not found in English. “The middle voice indicates that the subject is somehow participating in the results of the action. The subject rather than the action is the point of emphasis. Special attention is drawn to the subject.”⁵

Numerous Greek verbs use the same form for the middle and the passive voice. In other words, the spelling, accent, etc., of the two are identical and the context will determine whether the middle or passive voice is intended. For example, the sentence “He was going to the store” might use the form a passive voice verb. The verb “is going” makes no sense if expressed as a passive (“he was being went..”??). Therefore, the verb would be interpreted as a middle voice, drawing attention to the subject: “He (and not someone else) was going to the store.” You would probably not translate the sentence in that awkward fashion, but that is the underlying meaning of the middle voice.

Some verbs, called deponent verbs, have no active form, so even when the form is listed as passive, the context will require that the verb is an active verb. Most deponent verbs are of a nature that the passive voice would not make sense (e.g., “I begin”, “I become”, “I come”, etc.)

Mood

Mood is the quality of a verb that indicates the relationship of the action of the verb to reality.

1. **Indicative** mood is the mood of certainty. It confirms the reality of the action from the viewpoint of the speaker. “He goes to the store.”
2. **Subjunctive** mood is the mood of probability. The action is not actually taking place but is objectively possible. This is the most common mood after the indicative, such as conditional “if” statements. “If he goes to the store...”
3. **Optative** mood is the mood of possibility. “It presents no anticipation of realization, but merely presents the action as conceivable. Hence it is one step farther removed from reality than the subjunctive.”⁶ “He might go to the store.” (Optative mood is the rarest of moods in the New Testament.)
4. **Imperative** mood is farthest removed from reality since it is only volitionally possible and is dependent on the will of the person addressed in the command. “Go to the store.” (He might obey, he might not.)

Person, Number

Person is characteristic of the verb that represents the subject as first, second, or third person (I, you, he, etc.)

Number indicates whether the verb relates to a singular or plural subject (I/we, he/she/they, etc.).

20020116
Updated 20170912

⁵ Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1950), 38.

⁶ Dana and Mantey, 172.

Additional Notes on Greek Tenses

The uses of tense we have discussed so far are the *basic* tense usages. There are also other, special cases of the tenses that sometimes occur. These are determined only by the context and the verbal idea used, not by the form of the word or the parsing in the Analytical Lexicon. These special uses are not as clear-cut as the basic distinctions between the tenses, and are only given to help you understand some of the flexibility of the tenses. Translation and interpretation are not sciences of rigidly applying precise rules, but rather an art of transferring ideas from one language to another. The more you work with Greek (including your own study, using commentaries, comparing English translations, etc.) the more you will get a “feel” for the way the authors of the New Testament (under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit) used tenses. Then you will be better prepared to engage in the “art” of interpretation. The following descriptions should be helpful in understanding some of the flexibility of the tenses. The goal is not to memorize every detail of these uses, but to use this information to familiarize yourself with the tenses and to have the information for reference.

1. Present Tense: Continuous action in present time (remember, the time element of tense only has definite significance in the indicative mood).

Special uses:

- Historical Present: A past event viewed with the vividness of a present occurrence; also called the dramatic present “And He is going up into the mountain” Mk 3:13
- Aoristic Present: A present event without reference to progress; punctiliar action in present time. “Jesus Christ heals you” Acts 9:34
- Futuristic Present: An event which has not yet occurred, but which is regarded as so certain that in thought it may be contemplated as already coming to pass. “The Son of Man is delivered to be crucified” Mt 26:2
- Tential Present: Action intended or attempted but not actually taking place. “For which of these works do you stone me?” Jn 10:32

2. Imperfect Tense: Continuous action in past time.

Special uses:

- Customary Imperfect: Action that regularly occurred in past time. “The multitudes used to ask Him questions” Lk 3:10
- Iterative Imperfect: Action occurring at successive intervals in past time. “They kept on choosing out the first seats.” Lk 14:7
- Tential Imperfect: Action not attained but only attempted. “He tried to reconcile them” Acts 7:26
- Inceptive Imperfect: Emphasizing the beginning of an action or the initiation of a process “Having sat down He began teaching the multitudes” Lk 5:3

3. Future Tense: Future time, but the kind of action is indefinite (in the future); either punctiliar or linear, depending on context.

Special uses:

- Imperative Future: Expression of a command (the indicative mood is used, but the future tense gives the sense of a command like an imperative mood)

4. Aorist Tense: Punctiliar action in past time; an occurrence without reference to progress or completion

Special uses:

- Constative Aorist: Action viewed in its entirety, gathered into a single whole. “This temple was built in forty-six years” Jn 2:20

September 14, 2017

- Ingressive Aorist: Action viewed at its beginning “He became poor” II Cor 8:9
 - Culminative Aorist: Action viewed in its entirety, from the perspective of its completion “I have learned to be content” Phil 4:11
 - Epistolary Aorist: Used by the writer to place himself at the viewpoint of the reader to state an act which is present or future to him, but will be past when the letter is read “I am sending him” Phil 2:28
 - Dramatic Aorist: Stating a present reality with the certainty of a past event; Used for emphasis “Now the Son of Man is glorified” John 13:31
5. Perfect Tense: Progress of an action or state to a point of culmination and the continuing existence of its finished results.

Special uses:

- Intensive Perfect: Emphasis on continuing result; the strong way of saying that a thing *is* “He who doubts is condemned if he eats” Rom 14:23
- Consummative Perfect: Emphasis on the completed (or “consummated”) process; still includes the idea of existing result, otherwise culminative aorist would have been used (see above) “You have filled Jerusalem with your teachings” Acts 5:28
- Dramatic Perfect: Describing an action in an especially vivid and realistic way (similar to, but more forceful than the historical present or the dramatic aorist); emphasizes the result of the action “He sold all that he had” Mt 13:46

(Adapted from Dana and Mantey, pp. 181-208)

20020116