The perfect in Homer: a synchronic functional account

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The Homeric perfect has received much attention over the years.[1] However, the goal has remained elusive of providing a coherent account of a single morphological category which, in the active alone, has the range of meaning seen in *ὄπωπε* 'has seen', *μέμυκε* 'bellows', *ὄλωλε* 'is destroyed'. We offer a synchronic account in which the semantic function of the perfect is, in almost all instances, derivable from that of the present or aorist stem of the same verb, if there is one. The perfect morphology can therefore be viewed as an operator which takes verb stem as its argument and yields a predictable semantic function, with the few exceptions being stored in the lexicon.

We test a synchronic model built around three concepts: reference time, Aktionsart, and thematic role. Reference time (after Reichenbach 1947) is the time from which a situation is viewed, and may be different from event time; in the English present perfect, reference time is the same as speech time even though event time falls in the past. In the Homeric perfect, we likewise see reference time as coinciding with speech time, but event time may be either in the past (as in the English present perfect) or at speech time. This allows for the fact that some Homeric perfects denote situations in the past and other situations in the present. We test this hypothesis in the Homeric perfect by analysing the temporal adverbials which qualify it, and find that these include adverbials that refer to or encompass the present (e.g. *νῦν* 'now') but preclude those which refer to a past time distinct from the present (e.g. *πάλαι* 'long ago').

To represent the basic Aktionsart (or 'lexical aspect') of a verb, we use the categories T (transitional) and NT (non-transitional) as seen outside the perfect, e.g. *θνήσκουσι* 'they die' (T) or *μέλει* 'it matters' (NT). We hypothesize that the perfect of transitional verbs is then resultative, symbolized as '$^{(T)}$NT', in which 'NT' denotes the non-transitional situation in the present and the superscript '$^{(T)}$' the transitional event which gave rise to it; and that the perfect of non-transitional verbs remains non-transitional (NT). In functional notation, *θνήσκουσι* → *τεθνᾶσι* 'are dead/have died' is an example of PF(T) → $^{(T)}$NT, with 'PF' signifying the perfect morphology as an operator, 'T' signifying the transitional Aktionsart of the present/aorist, and $^{(T)}$NT the resultative Aktionsart of the perfect. And *μέλει* → *μέμηλε* 'it matters' is an example of PF(NT) → NT, with the non-transitional Aktionsart of the present/aorist carrying over into the perfect. Thus, the perfect denotes whatever non-transitional situation is predicated in the event structure of the present/aorist. With transitional verbs, this is a resultant situation, and with non-transitional verbs, this is a non-resultant situation.

In resultative (i.e. $^{(T)}$NT) perfects, the event structure denoted includes both a past transition and the resultant situation in the present. With certain perfects, such as *τεθνᾶσι*, the transitional event and the resultant state imply each other ('dying' ↔ 'being dead'), so the fact that *τεθνᾶσι* is translated by either 'have died' or 'are dead' is unsurprising. With others, such as *ὄπωπα* 'I have seen', the resultant situation is context-dependent, and since (in English) there is no form which means 'I am in the resultant situation of seeing', the present perfect tends to be used in translation.

As for argument structure, we hypothesise that, when the perfect has the same argument structure as non-perfect forms of the same verb, the arguments keep the same thematic roles. For example, in the intransitive verb *ποτάομαι* 'I flit', perfect *πεπότημαι* 'I flit', the subject in the perfect keeps the same thematic role (Agent) as in the present; similarly, in the transitive verb present *πάσχω τό* 'I suffer it', perfect *πέπονθα τό* 'I have suffered it', the subject and object have the same thematic roles (Experiencer and Theme, respectively) in both tenses. However, when non-perfect forms are transitive and the perfect intransitive, we hypothesise that the subject of the perfect is the less agentive argument of the two arguments of the non-perfect. For example, the arguments of present *ὄλλυμι* 'I destroy something' have the thematic roles of Agent and Patient, respectively, and the single thematic role of the perfect *ὄλωλα* 'I am destroyed/perish' has the thematic role of Patient. In practice the less agentive thematic role of non-perfect forms is the object, so the thematic role of the object of the non-perfect sinply becomes that of the subject of the perfect. We therefore formulate our hypotheses on argument structure as follows, where X and Y are the thematic roles of the subject and (if there is one) object, respectively, of non-perfect forms:

[1] Many relevant issues were already identified by Delbrück (1897); on the extensive literature, see e.g. Willi (2018).

PF(X) → X (both non-perfect and perfect intransitive: thematic role stays the same)
PF(X_Y) → X_Y (both non-perfect and perfect transitive: thematic roles stay the same)
PF(X_Y) → Y (non-perfect transitive, perfect intransitive: object's thematic role becomes subject's)

To test these hypotheses, we searched for all occurrences in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* of perfect forms of any verb. For each verb, the Aktionsart and argument structure of perfect and non-perfect forms were recorded; we also searched for all occurrences of the perfect within 5 words of specified temporal adverbs. We found that, as predicted, the only temporal adverbs in ordinary use with the perfect refer to present or indefinite past time. We also found that the Aktionsart of the perfect is easily predictable from that of non-perfect forms in a substantial majority of cases (168/170, 98.8%); likewise, the argument structure of the perfect is almost always compatible with the above functions (164/170, 96.5%). Moreover, the remaining exceptions are not only few enough to be tolerable but are susceptible to principled explanations in terms of phenomena such as polysemy and ellipsis. Overall, we find that the semantic function of the Homeric perfect is overwhelmingly predictable from that of other tenses of the same verb if there are any.

References

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