Parallel data for semantic analyses of ancient languages: Greek conjunct participles

It is very common for Ancient Greek (AG) to stack up aorist participles in pre-matrix-clause position to express serialized main-like events, only the last one of which is typically rendered as a finite verb (1). The function of a sentence-initial aorist participle is however often ambiguous between a framing and a main event [B&H11; H12] (2).

(1) *kai **agorasas** sindona, **kathelōn** auton eneilēsen tēi sindoni*
'Then he bought fine linen, took Him down, and wrapped Him in the linen' (Mk 15.46)

(2) *kai **apolysas** tous ochlous anebē eis to oros kat' idian proseuxastha*
'When he had sent the crowds away, he went to the mountain to pray by himself'
'Then he sent the crowds away and went to the mountain to pray by himself' (Mt 15.39)

Parallel Bible data (PROIEL Treebank [H&J08]) indicates that some other early IE languages, such as Old Church Slavonic and Gothic, show a very similar distribution. In others yet, morphological and semantic constraints are also at play. Latin, lacking a direct equivalent to aorist participles, recurs to a variety of other strategies to fulfil the same discourse functions, including present active and perfect passive participles, absolute constructions, main clauses, and finite adverbial clauses (chiefly *cum*-clauses). Classical Armenian (Arm), on the other hand, even with aorist (*-eal*) participles that could provide a one-to-one correspondence to AG pre-matrix aorist participles, also shows a clear three-way competition between conjunct participles, main clauses (3), and finite (*ibrew*-) adverbial clauses (4) in that position:

(3) *ew **arar** xarazan č'owaneay ew ehán zamenesin ï tačarē* (*kai **poiēsas** phragellion …*)
'So He made a whip out of cords and drove all from the temple courts (AG: and having made a whip …)' (Jh 2.15)

(4) *Zays **ibrew ararin** p'akec'in i nerk's bazmowt'iwn jkanc' yoyž minč'ew parpatein owṙkank' noc'a* (*kai touto **poiēsantes** …*)
'When they had done so, they caught such a large number of fish that their nets began to tear (AG: and having done this …)' (Lk 5.6)

Understanding what drives the choice in each language not only helps gain better insights into how temporal and discourse relations are syntactically encoded within the individual languages, but it also sheds light on the participle system of AG itself, particularly when it comes to disambiguating examples like (2) above. Subsets of these participles that are consistently translated as main clauses in both Latin and Arm (e.g. sequences of imperatives) are a telltale sign that we are dealing with independent rhemes. Absolute constructions and a considerable overlap of finite temporal subordinates (e.g. *when*-clause equivalents) rendering AG aorist participles indicate that we are likely dealing with framing participles in the AG original (e.g. the Arm and Latin parallels for (2), an *ibrew*- and an absolute clause respectively). By means of parallel Bible data we are also able to validate our observations cross-linguistically using probabilistic semantic maps [W10; HH&C14]: preliminary results indicate that the array of possible Arm and Latin realisations of AG aorist participles find a clear echo in the world's languages.

References

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