Ancient Greek and the category of verbal periphrasis

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Abstract: This paper discusses which constructions in Ancient Greek consisting of a finite verb and a participle belong to the category of 'verbal periphrasis'. By applying various criteria of periphrasticity to a corpus of examples, I show that only a limited number of constructions can be considered fully periphrastic. I consider these constructions to be the central members of a prototypically organized category.

Key-words: verbal periphrasis, Ancient Greek, prototypicality.

1. Introduction

The term 'periphrasis' is generally used to denote constructions in which a grammatical property or feature is expressed by a combination of words instead of a single word form (Spencer 2006:287). This paper deals with so-called 'verbal periphrasis', referring to constructions consisting of a finite and a non-finite verb form. I will discuss how to define this category in Ancient Greek (more specifically Archaic and Classical Greek). Although most would agree that such a definition is fundamental for the scientific study of the subject, there is no consensus on the matter. As a consequence, research may yield contradictory results.

The main problem with so-called 'participial (verbal) periphrasis' in Ancient Greek, on which I will focus here, is how to decide which constructions consisting of a verb

and a participial complement should be considered periphrastic. While Porter (1989:452-3) only accepts constructions with the verb εἰμί "I am", other scholars such as Dietrich (1983) discuss formally similar constructions with a wide variety of finite verbs. In fact, some twenty-seven constructions occurring in Ancient Greek have been called 'periphrastic' by one or more authors.

2. Criteria of periphrasticity

Recent studies have discussed semantic, syntactic and paradigmatic criteria for the identification of verbal periphrasis quite extensively, mainly with reference to the Romance, Germanic and Slavonic languages. By applying these 'accepted' criteria of periphrasticity to a corpus of examples, I will analyze to what extent they can clarify the situation in Ancient Greek. My corpus consists of examples taken from the major studies on participial periphrasis in Ancient Greek (a.o. Dietrich 1983).

2.1. Semantic criteria

Many definitions of verbal periphrasis accord great importance to semantic criteria. One of the most prominent criteria is that of 'tempo-aspectual relevance', meaning that the contribution of periphrastic constructions lies in the expression of additional temporal and aspectual values. While in most cases this criterion allows us to distinguish between regular and periphrastic complemenation, it is not unproblematic in all cases. Consider example (1), where the verb διαγίγνομαι "I keep doing" is used as a finite verb. We could say that in this

case too the verb emphasizes the continuation of the act, and as such has tempo-aspectual relevance. In fact, several authors hold the opinion that such constructions should be considered periphrastic.

(1)   … κολακεύων καὶ φενακίζων ὑμᾶς διαγέγονεν
          (Demosthenes, *In Arist.* 179).

          "…he has continually flattered and cozened you".

There is, however, a crucial difference between verbs such as διαγίγνομαι and 'true' auxiliary verbs when they are combined with a participle. Givón (2001, ch.12), who calls the former 'implicative modality verbs', argues that with verbs of this type there is a strong sense of semantic integration between the events of the main and the complement clause, due to the fact they are co-temporal, co-referential and that they imply the truth of their complement. This strong semantic bond is reflected syntactically, as there is no overt expression of the complement subject. In Ancient Greek they do not, however, undergo any loss of 'semantic integrity'. Auxiliary verbs, on the other hand, can be called semantically 'subordinate' or 'schematic'.

Authors such as Porter (1989) takes this schematicity to its extremes: in his opinion only εἰμί "I am" qualifies as an auxiliary verb. This has been criticized, however, by Evans (2001:222) because "it lacks diachronic scope and yields an artificially narrow definition of periphrasis". Clearly, Ancient Greek had other constructions which qualify as periphrastic, based on the above mentioned semantic criteria. Especially the construction of ἔχω "I

have" with aorist participle is commonly recognized as periphrastic.

Evans is right in stressing the importance of diachronic developments. As grammaticalization studies show, the 'schematicity' of auxiliary verbs develops in diachrony. We therefore have to ask ourselves to what degree the finite verbs of the constructions under analysis have lost their lexical meaning. A concept allowing us to analyze desemantization is 'generalization', which Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca (1994:289) define as "the loss of specific features of meaning with the consequent expansion of appropriate contexts of use of a gram". In this paper, I take into account two specific indicators of generalization: (a) compatibility with inanimate subjects and (b) compatibility with verbs belonging to different aspectual classes (so-called 'Aktionsart'). One concomitant factor I will take into account is frequency. I divide the constructions under analysis in two groups: those with finite verbs of movement and those with verbs of state.

With regard to the former group, constructions with the verbs ἔρχομαι, εἶμι "I go" and ἥκω "I come" and a future participle occur most frequently. These constructions do not, however, combine with inanimate subjects, so they are not fully generalized. They seem to be developing in Ancient Greek, as has been pointed out by the French scholar Létoublon (1982). While Herodot's use of the construction with ἔρχομαι is restricted to verbs of saying and should be considered 'metaphorical' rather than truly periphrastic, in Plato it is expanded to other lexical classes and can be considered periphrastic.

Constructions consisting of a verb of movement and a present participle occur somewhat less frequently. Dietrich

(1983) discusses some, mostly Homeric, examples with the verbs βαίνω "I go" and πέλω "I (be)come, am", where the finite verb maintains a strong lexical sense. The constructions of ἥκω and especially ἔρχομαι with present participle, on the other hand, prove to be periphrastic in examples such as (2).

(2)   Ἥκομεν ἄρα εἰς τὰ πρότερα περιφερόμενοι
(Plato, *Resp.* 456b).

"We come round, then, to our previous statement".

Most constructions with verbs of state occur infrequently. Often they combine with only one type of *Aktionsart* and do not take inanimate subjects. Some constructions, however, are more frequently used, among others εἰμί "I am" with present, perfect and aorist participle, which combine with inanimate subjects and all types of *Aktionsart*.

The constructions of τυγχάνω "I happen to be" with present, perfect and aorist participle also occur frequently. There has been, however, and there still is, discussion with regard to their grammatical status. While some argue that these constructions are in fact periphrastic, others point at the fact that the verb retains a notion of 'coincidence', and as such is not completely desemantized. I would like to note that this notion of 'coincidence' is often not necessary, and sometimes even contextually impossible. Moreover, the examples show that constructions with τυγχάνω are used in contexts very similar to those with εἰμί. Further research is needed, however, to determine how the semantics of this verb evolved diachronically.

Let's resume, for now, our determination of degree of generalization. The three constructions with τυγχάνω occur frequently, are possible with inanimate subjects and can combine with all four types of *Aktionsart*. These elements thus seem to confirm the grammatical character of the constructions. With regard to the most frequently occurring construction, the one with present participle, we may note an evolution in the degree of generalization. While Thucydides, Lysias and especially Plato have a marked preference for the combination with verbs of state, the percentages in Isocrates are spread more equally. My research on Isocrates also shows that τυγχάνω, when combined with present or perfect participle, has almost fully lost its notion of coincidence. With aorist participle, however, it retains this notion in eighty-seven per cent of the cases.

2.2. Syntactic criteria

Certainly the most prominent syntactic criterion is that of 'contiguity', designated by some with the term 'cohesion'. Scholars discussing this criterion generally stress the 'iconic' nature of constituent structure: in general, two linguistic elements which are semantically close, are coded contiguously. What about periphrastic constructions in Ancient Greek? According to Porter (1999:45-46) "no elements may intervene between the auxiliary verb and the participle except for those which complete or directly modify the participle". This 'rule' has been criticized, however. According to Evans (2001:232) it is "entirely artificial and ignores the natural flexibility of word order". When we look at example (3), we see that Evans is quite

right. The subject can come in between the finite and the infinite verb form with various types of periphrastic constructions. Interestingly, there are also quite a few examples where a genitive comes in between the component parts of a given construction. Other elements which may 'intervene' are adjuncts of place and time.

(3)   ἦσαν δὲ Κορίνθιοι ξυμπροθυμούμενοι μάλιστα
       τοῖς Ἀμπρακιώταις (Thucydides, *Hist.* 2.80.3).

       "The Corinthians were zealously supporting
       the interests of the Ambraciots".

Despite the fact that the constructions in Ancient Greek can be separated by various types of elements, there is a clear tendency for those constructions which are more grammatical to be also syntactically more contiguous, as shown in table 1. Although there are several factors to be taken into account, we can say that these results roughly correspond to the semantic observations made earlier on. With regard to the constructions occurring less frequently, the criterion of syntactic contiguity is obviously less reliable.

Construction	Zero distance
ἔχω + part.aor.	88 %
εἰμί + part.perf.	73 %
ἔρχομαι + part.pres.	69 %
εἶμι + part.fut.	64 %
ἔρχομαι + part.fut.	61 %
τυγχάνω + part.perf.	60 %
τυγχάνω + part.pres.	58 %
ἥκω + part.pres.	58 %

εἰμί + part.aor.	48 %
εἰμί + part.pres.	47 %
ἥκω + part.fut.	46 %
τυγχάνω + part.aor.	46 %

Table 1

Another syntactic criterion often mentioned is so-called 'clitic climbing', whereby a pronoun moves from its participial complement to the finite verb, as for example in Modern Greek τον ἔχω δει "I have seen him". What about Ancient Greek? My database contains about fifty examples of clitic pronouns accompanying a variety of constructions. One might expect the majority of these to follow their logical 'head', the participle, but in fact this position only represents eighteen per cent of the examples. This does not mean that the remainder can be considered examples of clitic climbing: most of these clitics are in so-called 'Wackernagel-position', meaning that they come in clause-second position, whether or not in combination with one or more discourse particles. In the examples which would be the best candidates for clitic climbing, the clitic follows the finite verb, as in (4).

(4) ὥσπερ ἂν εἰ ἐτύγχανόν σε ἐρωτῶν …
     (Plato, *Gorg.* 453c).

"suppose I happened to ask you …".

2.3. Paradigmatic criteria

The first paradigmatic criterion I discuss is that of 'paradigmaticity'. This criterion, which points at the fact that a construction is integrated in the inflectional paradigm and as such is obligatory, plays an important role in most definitions of periphrasis.

In our case, very few constructions comply with this criterion. There is, of course, the well-known case of εἰμί "I am" with perfect participle. The reference grammars state that the construction is suppletive in the third person of the medio-passive indicative perfect and pluperfect of verbs with occlusive stem, and the medio-passive subjunctive and optative perfect. The future form of the finite verb is also commonly used to circumscribe the active future perfect. We may note, moreover, that the construction has spread through the paradigm: it is also used with vocalic verbs, in the active voice, outside the indicative, subjunctive or optative mood, and not exclusively with the third person.

Maybe less well known is the fact that the construction of ἔχω "I have" with aorist participle was often used for forms which did not have an active synthetic perfect, and in these cases should be considered suppletive. The forms of this construction did not spread through the paradigm as those of εἰμί with perfect participle. Its use is mainly limited to the singular forms of the present indicative, which represent seventy-four per cent of the examples. It is occasionally used in the infinitive and imperative moods. For the subjunctive, optative and participle moods there are only a few examples, and it is not quite clear whether they should be interpreted periphrastically.

Various scholars point at the fact that the construction is also used with verbs which did have a synthetic perfect.

Some scholars have also recognized 'non-paradigmatic' periphrases, for which they use the term 'categorial periphrasis'. Such forms are often related to the paradigm, in that they are felt to be 'roughly equivalent' to synthetic forms. Stahl (1907:145), for example, equates the periphrastic form λέγων ἐστίν in (5) with the synthetic form λέγει, both meaning "he is speaking". Here we are on the borderline between semantic and paradigmatic criteria: only constructions which have tempo-aspectual relevance and are semantically non-compositional will resemble synthetic forms.

> (5) μετὰ ταῦτα δὴ λέγων ἐστὶν ὁ Νέστωρ (Plato, *Hipp.Maior* 286b).
>
> "so after that we have Nestor speaking".

A second paradigmatic criterion is that of restricted paradigmatic variability, which means that the number of constructions expressing a similar aspecto-temporal meaning should be restricted. As Dietrich (1983) shows throughout his work, this is not so much the case in Ancient Greek. Interestingly, however, the number of variants seriously diminishes in Post-Classical Greek.

3. Conclusion: the category of verbal periphrasis

Let us draw some conclusions. Firstly, I hope to have shown that, based on the proposed semantic, syntactic and paradigmatic criteria, the different constructions which are regarded as 'periphrastic' in the secondary literature in

fact are not equally grammaticalized. Secondly, it will be clear that the criteria themselves do not have an equal status. Especially the semantic criteria proved to be fruitful, both to distinguish periphrastic from non-periphrastic constructions, and to analyze the grammatical character of the constructions.

In an attempt to clarify the situation in Ancient Greek, I would like to propose a fourfold distinction between (a) grammaticalized constructions, (b) grammaticalizing constructions, (c) non-grammaticalized constructions and (d) constructions with implicative modality verbs. Only constructions belonging to the first group, namely εἰμί "I am" with perfect participle and ἔχω "I have" with aorist participle, are fully grammaticalized. Constructions in the second and the third group comply to a much lesser degree with the proposed criteria. Here we may situate constructions with verbs such as τυγχάνω "I happen to be" and πέλω "I (be)come, am". Those of the third group might be considered expressive alternatives, occurring infrequently. For the fourth group, consisting of constructions with finite verbs such as διαγίγνομαι "I keep doing", I use the term 'implicative modality verbs', coined by Givón. He puts verbs like these at the right end of a complementation scale,

Where to draw the line? Which constructions should we consider periphrastic? Some might argue that only constructions of the first group deserve further attention. I prefer, however, to consider verbal periphrasis in Ancient Greek a prototypically organized category (Givón 1989, ch. 2), with the 'central' members complying with all of the criteria and the more 'marginal' members with some criteria. Such an approach has considerable advantages, as

for example that it anticipates the fact that the category may be 're-shaped' in Post-Classical Greek, with some members becoming more central, and others more marginal. Moreover, it explains the considerable amount of confusion in earlier publications on periphrasis in Ancient Greek.

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