Towards a more perfect interpretation of imperfect verbs

Criteria for interpreting Greek verbs when translation resources don't help

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Abstract

The Greek imperfect tense presents challenges for Bible translators and consultants because its imperfective aspect can lead to range of interpretations in narrative contexts. In these verbs, imperfective aspect can simply indicate that the events are construed as ongoing, but they may also have ingressive, habitual, or iterative interpretations (Wallace 1996). Bible translations and translation resources frequently differ or present multiple interpretations, and often without sufficient guidance as to which meaning to select. This paper will provide a set of criteria whereby translators can make principled exegetical decisions by applying the concept of aspect coercion and the Duration Principle (C. Bary and Egg 2007, C. Bary and Egg 2012) and considering the lexical aspect of the verb and other time elements in the clause. These criteria provide translators and consultants the tools necessary to make sound interpretive decisions even when available resources do not offer sufficient guidance.

Introduction[1]

The Greek imperfect tense has some of the most flexible semantics of all the past focused verbs in Ancient Greek (Hollenbaugh 2021). Unfortunately, this means that it is open to many interpretations, and translation resources and commentaries sometimes differ or contradict one another. Greek grammars also list many types of imperfects. (Wallace 1996) lists 7, (Smyth 1920) lists 7, (Young 1994) has 6-7, and (Robertson 2006) has 7-9 depending on how one counts. Not only are these lists different, but it may not always be clear how the types relate across grammars. It is worth remembering that these are interpretive labels and not differences actually reflected in Ancient Greek morphology.

This paper seeks to examine the imperfect's semantics based on current linguistics work on Ancient Greek and offer practical guidelines that translators can use to interpret them in a principled way based on aspect coercion and the Duration Principle. First we will define the relevant terminology, consider the semantics of imperfect verbs, and work through an Acts 3:1-3 as an example. Then, we will consider how aspect coercion and the Duration Principle provide a mechanism for us to interpret these verbs. We will then consider questions that help us apply this mechanism and finally look at a variety of examples.

Definitions

What Greek grammarians call the imperfect is a combination of tense and aspect. Tense locates the time of an event[2] relative to the moment of speech; this time is referred to as reference or topic time (TT) (C. Bary and Egg 2007). Aspect, on the other hand, refers to how the speaker wishes to us to view the event (grammatical aspect) or comes from the semantics of the predicate itself (lexical aspect). Lexical aspect or aktionsart is the aspect contributed by the lexical (uninflected) form of the verb,

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[1]Unless otherwise noted all Greek quotations of Scripture are from the SBLGNT and all English from the ESV. Abbreviations used: TT = topic time, DP = Duration Principle, RT = runtime, TNN = Translator's Notes.

[2]Throughout this paper I use the term "event" to refer to any kind of state, event, or process rather than using the more technical term "eventualities".

which may be modified by the predicate's arguments, complements, and adjunct phrases in the clause (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997). It describes the way the event "denoted by the verb" unfolds over time (C. Bary and Egg 2007). In contrast, grammatical aspect is the contribution of the inflected form and relates the event to the topic time.

Imperfective aspect usually means that the runtime (RT) of the event described by the verb is longer than the topic time (TT) as shown below.

Listing 1: Imperfective aspect

```
     [     TT     ]
  --------RT--------
```

In contrast perfective aspect means that that RT is included in or equals the TT.

Listing 2: Perfective aspect

```
     [     TT     ]
  -----RT-----

     [     TT     ]
       --RT--
```

The Greek imperfect verb is a combination of tense and aspect. It is regarded as a past tense so the event described is located in a time prior to the moment of speech, and is usually considered to convey imperfective aspect (Robertson 2006, Campbell 2008, C. Bary and Egg 2012). However, (Hollenbaugh 2021) argues that the imperfect verb is actually a simple past throughout its development from the Homeric to the Koine period. By the Koine period, the Aorist and Perfect verbs had blocked the imperfect verb from conveying perfective and anterior aspect since they are specialized to those functions. As a result, the imperfect most often conveys imperfective aspect. This is worth bearing in mind because we do find instances of imperfect verbs in places where we might expect an aorist such as ἔλεγεν 'he was saying' instead of εἶπεν 'he said' in Matt 9:24.

Hollenbaugh's proposal means that the runtime of an imperfect verb must overlap with the topic time in some way. Thus the following diagrams are possible for the imperfect in addition to the one shown in Listing 1.

Listing 3: Other imperfect configurations

```
     [     TT     ]
  ----RT----

     [     TT     ]
       --RT--

     [     TT     ]
           ----RT----
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Cases where the runtime is included in the topic time would *usually* fall under perfective aspect and thus would normally be rendered by aorist verbs, but it helpful to keep alternatives in mind as we consider interpretations of the imperfect verb. In summary, based on (Hollenbaugh 2021) it is best to consider the imperfect as a flexible form that usually conveys aspects that are not covered by the aorist or perfect verbs; this will usually be imperfective.

Interaction of aspects

Lexical and grammatical aspect together can lead to interpretations beyond the normal meaning of the verb. We can see how these interact in the following examples.

(1) John was breaking the window.
(2) John was breaking windows.

In example (1) we have a past tense form (was) and the *ing* ending thus we have imperfective (grammatical) aspect. The verb *break* encodes something that happens in an instant, but is presented as ongoing because of its grammatical aspect. How should this be interpreted? Because the lexical aspect indicates something that happens in an instant that leads to a resulting state, it seems that the speaker wants us to also think of on the time leading up to the actual breaking of the window and John's actions that caused the window to break.

Now consider example (2). The grammatical and lexical aspects are the same, but because the object is now plural it is possible to intemperate this sentence differently. The punctual nature of the verb combined with the plural objects means that this sentence indicates repeated action. It could mean that John had the habit of breaking windows, or that in a single period of time he broke multiple windows. There may be other possibilities as well. Example (2) show how a change in the complements can interact with the lexical aspect to change the possible interpretations of a verb.

As with most aspects of language, the biblical authors use imperfect verbs in ways where viewing the event as unfolding in the past does not fit. In such cases, we may view the event as beginning to happen, or as occurring multiple times in a given period, or as something habitually done. In the following sections we will work though Acts 3:1-3 and explore how to understand what is meant by the imperfect in a given context.

An example

Acts 3:1-3, shown in (3), is a good illustration of how various elements in the sentence to see how the context and aspect interact. The four imperfect verbs in these verses are bolded and other relevant material is underlined.

(3) Πέτρος δὲ καὶ Ἰωάννης **ἀνέβαινον** εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν ἐπὶ τὴν ὥραν τῆς προσευχῆς τὴν ἐνάτην, καί τις ἀνὴρ χωλὸς ἐκ κοιλίας μητρὸς αὐτοῦ ὑπάρχων **ἐβαστάζετο**, ὃν **ἐτίθουν** <u>καθ᾽ ἡμέραν</u> πρὸς τὴν θύραν τοῦ ἱεροῦ τὴν λεγομένην Ὡραίαν τοῦ αἰτεῖν ἐλεημοσύνην παρὰ τῶν εἰσπορευομένων εἰς τὸ ἱερόν, ὃς ἰδὼν Πέτρον καὶ Ἰωάννην μέλλοντας εἰσιέναι εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν ***ἠρώτα*** ἐλεημοσύνην λαβεῖν.

Now Peter and John **were going up** to the temple at the hour of prayer, the ninth hour. And a man lame from birth **was being carried**, whom they **laid** <u>daily</u> at the gate of the temple that is called the Beautiful Gate to ask alms of those entering the temple. <u>Seeing</u> Peter and John about to go into the temple, he **asked** to receive alms.

Consider how ESV renders the imperfect here. The first two verbs are rendered by the English past progressive and the third and forth by a simple past. The first, second, and fourth narrate events in the story and the third provides background information on the man.

The first two verbs are not problematic as the semantics of the imperfect fit with the TT. In the case of *laid daily*, the customary/habitual interpretation of the imperfect is clear. In the last sentence, ESV rendered ἠρώτα 'he was asking' as *he asked*. It is possible given that the imperfect is a simple past and

so is compatible with perfective aspect, but this would usually be done by an aorist verb so we would expect an imperfective interpretation here.

ESV renders the imperfect verbs in these verses in three different ways. This does not clash with the semantics for the imperfect, but is it justified and should translators follow suit?

We could refer to commentaries and translation resources to answer this question. The Translator's Notes (TNN) for Acts offers interpretations for each of these verbs (Blood and Christensen 2021).

Verb	TNN's Analysis
were going up	They were likely "on their way"
was being carried	Same as above
laid	"The Greek grammar indicates that they customarily did this."
asked	"Greek ending on the verb probably indicates that this man asked more than once."

Table 1: Acts Translator's Notes on Acts 3:1-3

Unfortunately it is not clear from the discussion here that we are dealing with the same type of verb or not or how/why the "Greek grammar" indicates a habitual reading. TNN agrees with how ESV rendered the first three verbs, but indicates that the last verb is probably iterative, which is not recoverable from ESV's translation.

Another question that emerges is what justifies the habitual rendering of the 3rd verb, ἐτίθουν 'they were placing' given the semantics discussed in section 2? καθ᾽ ἡμέραν 'every day' forces us to reconsider how to interpret the imperfective aspect. It is clear that this requires an iterative or habitual interpretation, but how, and is there a theoretical basis for this?

Aspect coercion

Aspect coercion is the reinterpretation of the default meaning of an aspect based on contextual factors. Coercion happens when the normal or literal interpretation does not fit and we need to "avoid a semantic mismatch" between elements in an utterance (C. L. Bary 2009). This is precisely what happens with ἔτιθουν in Acts 3:1-3. There is a mismatch between the default incomplete action interpretation and the phrase 'every day,' which triggers the reinterpretation of the phrase. Specifically there is a mismatch between the RT of the verb and the TT establish by the adverbial phrase. This is a violation of Egg's Duration Principle (hereafter DP) (C. Bary and Egg 2012) which can be stated as in (4). The DP is both a mechanism that triggers coercion and also means of deciding how to resolve the mismatch.

(4) **Duration Principle**: The interpretation of a sentence must match what we know about its duration either from context or from the typical duration of the event denoted by the predicate.

As we saw in section 3, the interaction between lexical and grammatical aspect can violate the DP and trigger coercion, but it can also be triggered by the arguments or complements of a predicate (Pulman 1997). Examples (1) and (2) had different interpretations because the object of *breaking* in (2) was plural which lead to an iterative interpretation. This could also be triggered by a plural subject as shown in (5).

(5) Fifty people were baptized at the church today.

Like (2) the most natural interpretation of this sentence is iterative because the typical church would not have a baptismal large enough to baptize fifty people at the same time.[3] This would not be a problem for a sentence like (6) because fifty people can typically run a 5k at the same time.

(6) Fifty people ran a 5k today.

Using the concept of aspect coercion and the DP, we will layout a series of questions in the following sections to consider as we interpret imperfect verbs.

What do we know about the topic time?

Before we can know what kind of coercion needs to take place to resolve a mismatch we need to establish what the topic time (TT) looks like. (C. L. Bary 2009){140} says that in narrative material aorist verbs push the main event line forward whereas imperfect verbs tend to provide background information.[4] (Hoyle 2008){90} notes that imperfect verbs "present subordinate verbal concepts." To put this in the terms we are using, aorist verbs push the TT forward[5], whereas verbs with imperfective aspect do not and occur at a previously established TT (C. L. Bary 2009). So our first question for interpreting an imperfect verb is what does the context tell us about the TT?

Adverbials and other elements of a sentence can impact its TT. The following are some examples of how adverbs can affect the TT of a sentence. These definitions come from (Pulman 1997) (especially in his footnotes).

- Expressions such as *frequently* or *every/each + time period* can lengthen the TT.[6]
- *On + time period* can shorten the TT.[7]
- *Until + time period* expressions add an end point to the TT which may shorten it.[8]
- *In + time period*[9] and *For + time period*[10] expressions specify the start and end points of the TT which may shorted or lengthen the TT.

Acts 3:1-3 is the start of a new episode that is occurring within the larger context established at the end of Acts 2. Acts 2:40 contains the most recent aorist verb and stats that three thousand people were added to the church. Acts 2:41-47 contain a string of imperfect verbs which provide details about what is happening in the church in Jerusalem. So, broadly speaking for this is the TT for Acts 3:1-3, but the presence of δὲ 'developmental marker' in 3:1 and the change in participants tells us that we're dealing with a new episode. Thus, there aren't any specific constraints on the TT of the verbs in 3:1 from the broader context.

The verbs in 3:1-2 tell us that Peter and John are going up to the Temple around noon (6th hour) and that the lame man is being carried in at this time. Since ἐβαστάσζετο 'he was being carried' is

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[3]This kind of interpretation would apply to Acts 2:41 where the aorist verb *they were baptized* is likely referring to around 3,000 people.

[4](Levinsohn 2000) agrees but states this tendency in terms of foreground (aorist) and background (imperfect)

[5]In Bary's analysis aorist verbs occur at the established TT and then push it forward so that the next predicate occurs following the event described by the aorist. Imperfective verbs occur at the established TT and do not move it forward.

[6]They convert a point or process into a process or state.

[7]They convert the time period into a point.

[8]They converts a process or state into a <process, state> (achievement) expression.

[9]They convert a <process, state> into a <point, state>. These expressions specify the length of the TT and suggest that the predicate is a process.

[10]They convert a process into a <process, state>. These expressions suggest that a process was ongoing for a specified time period. This could be open to an iterative or habitual interpretation.

imperfect it share the same TT as ἀναβαίνον 'they were going up'. There are not mismatches in RT and TT for these verbs so no coercion happens. Then we encounter the verb ἐτίθουν 'they were placing' and the phrase καθ' ἡμέραν 'daily'. The previous verb doesn't push the TT forward, but it's clear because of relative clause and the presence of *daily* that we have a different TT from the previous two verbs.

In the phrase καθ' ἡμέραν, the preposition distributes its argument along a trajectory, in this case through time (R. Aubrey and M. Aubrey 2020). Thus καθ' lengthens the time associated with ἡμέραν 'day' as expected for adverbs like *frequently* and *every day*. Taken as a whole this phrase establishes a TT for ἐτίθουν composed of an indefinite number of days.[11] Before we can judge whether the RT of a verb is compatible with the TT we need to consider what kind of predicate it is and it's typical duration.

What is the typical runtime associated with the predicate?

In considering the typical RT associated with a predicate we are considering lexical aspect or aktionsart. Lexical aspect is often divided into four basic categories: states, activities, achievements, and accomplishments (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997). However, I find that (Pulman 1997)'s taxonomy is easier to apply. They are shown in the table below. Note that <point, state> and <process, state> are pairs of a point or process that results in a state.

(Van Valin and LaPolla 1997)	(Pulman 1997)	Meaning
State	State	Persists over time, homogeneous, and is cumulative
Activity	Process	Persists over time and is cumulative
	Point	Viewed as a whole "without distinguishing internal structure" (Pulman 1997) and without regard for consequent state (Moens and Steedman 1988)
Achievement	<point, state>[12]	A point that results in a consequent state, or following (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997) an instantaneous event followed by a change in state or activity
Accomplishment	<process, state>	A process that results in a state

Table 2: Predicate types

States and activities/processes both occur over a period of time and are cumulative, meaning that if at one point something holds and it holds at the next time, then it holds for both times. States are homogeneous which means if we pick any two points within RT of the state, both of the points will be

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[11](Pulman 1997) notes that expressions such as *frequently* or *each/every + a time period word* take a point and convert it into a state or process (see the Section section 7).

[12]The main difference between (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997) and (Pulman 1997)'s conception is that point is simple an action viewed as a whole and that it may not be instantaneous whereas a Achievement is instantaneous. The meaning of a point is compatible with (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997)'s conception of Achievements.

the same.[13] A point considers an event as a whole without any "internal structure" (Pulman 1997) and no result state. Achievements (<point, state>) involve a point or instantaneous change that results in a new state. Accomplishments (<process, state>) are similar but a Activity or process results in the state.

Returning to ἐτίθουν 'they were putting', we have an action done by the people carrying the lame man that results in the state of him being in a different place. Thus, we have a <process, state> predicate. At this point if we tried to fit ἐτίθουν with the TT we would end up with an interpretation where it takes an unspecified number of days for the man to be placed by the Temple gate. Our interpretation is in violation of the DP because we know that it typically does not take an unspecified number of days to put someone somewhere. This is where coercion operators step in to resolve the mismatch.

Do we need to shorten or lengthen the runtime of the predicate?

A coercion operator is simply a way method to modify the default semantics of a predicate to fit the context. In this section we'll discuss some of the most common and practical coercion operators. At their core these operators either lengthen or shorten the RT of the predicate. The definitions given below are based on (Bertinetto and Lenci 2010).

The following operators lengthen the typical RT of a predicate.

(7) **Iterative:** An iterative operator lengthens the RT of the event by interpreting it as happening multiple times. It differs from Habitual in that there is usually a number of iterations in the context[14] or it is clear that this is not a "general" state of affairs, but is specific to a given context.
(8) **Habitual:** This operator means that the event occurs an unspecified times, but it describes a "law-like generalization" for its argument that holds for the relevant period.[15]

These can be pictured as taking the TT and RT relations in (Listing 1) and transforming them into the following for Iterative and Habitual respectively.

Listing 4: Iterative operator

```
    [     TT     ]
 - - - - - - - -
```

Listing 5: Habitual operator

```
    [     TT     ]
  <- - - - - - ->
```

Both are pictured with dotted lines to show that the predicate is repeated but the arrows in (Listing 5) show that number of repetitions is unspecified.

The following operator shortens the typical RT of a verb.

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[13]In other words if something is green for a given period and we pick two periods within that period, it will be green in the same way for both periods.

[14]Note that these iterations may be specified by elements like "twice" or "three times", or by other contextual factors such a specific number of subjects or objects as we saw in (5)

[15]Formally both of these could be considered as converting a point predicate to a process (Pulman 1997) or state (De Swart 2000). In the case of ἐτίθουν another operator would need to compress the process part of the <process, state> predicate into a point. Pulman calls this operator bundle. The opposite of bundle is stretch which lengthens a point into a process (Pulman 1997).

(9) **Inceptive:** This operator focuses on the beginning of an action without implying that it was completed. When this is applied to <point, state> or <process, state> predicates the resulting state is may or may not be viewed as holding depending on the context (Pulman 1997).

Inceptive (also called Inchoative or Ingressive) can be pictured as follows. The two diagrams show that sometime within the TT the predicate begins but exceeds the TT's end point:

Listing 6: Inceptive operator

```
[      TT     ]
|------------>

[      TT     ]
    |--------->
```

The Inceptive operator is useful when it would not make sense for the RT of a predicate to exceed the start of the TT.[16]

These last two are not coercion operators *per se*, though they may modify the typical RT of a predicate. Coercion can contribute to these interpretations of the imperfect so they are worth considering here. They usually apply to predicates with inherent end points (bounded or telic predicates) since any part of a state or process predicate would count as that predicate having occurred.

(10) **Conative:** This usually means that an action was attempted, but may not have succeeded. (Wallace 1996) notes that this may also mean that it was never actually attempted. This interpretation is essentially a result of imperfective semantics that assert that something happened without any assertion of its completion.

(11) **Likelihood:** This means that an action was likely to happen or about to happen (threats), but may not have actually taken place. This operator often applies in situations where there is a duration mismatch between the TT and a point predicate by focusing on an "preparatory" action that would normally bring the point predicate about (C. L. Bary 2009). Thus, Likelihood actually lengthens the RT by shifting from the predicate itself to an implied preparatory process.

Both Conative and Likelihood can be pictured as shown in (Listing 1) though they can also change its focus (Likelihood).

In the case of ἐτίθουν we know that we need to lengthen its RT so it matches the TT established by καθ᾽ ἡμέραν 'daily'. Inceptive would shorten the RT so the DP rules it out. It is clear the placing did succeed so Conative and Likelihood don't fit. This leaves Iterative or Habitual. Habitual fits better with the TT since it expresses a "law-like generalization" without a specific number of occurrences of the event. This fits well with what we said about *daily* in section 6. Thus, by means of the Habitual operator we have converted the RT of ἐτίθουν so it matches the TT established by *daily* and satisfies the DP.

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[16](C. Bary and Egg 2012) notes that Progressive can also shorten the duration of a predicate by causing it to refer to a shorter part of the event denoted by the predicate(C. Bary and Egg 2012), however this operator is unnecessary for imperfect verbs because imperfective aspect asserts that something happens without making any claim about its completion. This would be perfectly compatible with with only part of a process taking place. It may however be useful in coercing aorist verbs.

Summary so far

Aspect coercion is triggered when there is a mismatch the TT and the RT of a predicate to resolve the mismatch. The selection of a coercion operator is guided by the DP and these operators may lengthen (Iterative, Habitual, LIkelihood), shorten (Inceptive), or shift (Likelihood) the RT of the predicate in order to satisfy the DP.

Before we look at a few more examples, I would like to offer a series of questions we can work through as we consider how to interpret imperfect verbs.

1. What is do we know about the TT from the context?

    a. What does the wider context tell us?
    b. What do adverbials, complements, or arguments tell us?
2. What do we know about the type and typical RT of the predicate from its lexical aspect or its arguments/complements?
3. Based on context does the event actually take place?

    a. No: Does it appear that it was attempted or wanted to be attempted? (Stop here or continue to 3. b)

        i. Yes: Conative
        ii. No: Likelihood
    b. Yes: Is there a mismatch between the TT and the duration of the predicate?

        i. No: Basic imperfective meaning is fine (e.g. ongoing)
        ii. Yes: Does the duration need to be lengthened or shortened?
            i. Lengthened: Does the context specify a number of occurrences for the event?
                • Yes: Iterative (or possibly Likelihood)
                • No: Habitual
            ii. Shortened: Did the event actually happen?
                • Yes: Inceptive
                • No: Conative or Likelihood

Examples

In the following sections we will apply the questions proposed in section 9 to passages from the New Testament. In some cases our translation resources are helpful, in which case working through the questions allows us to verify their conclusions, and in others they offer no comment.

John 5:9

In John 5:9, shown in (12), we find an imperfect verb περιεπάτει 'he was walking' translated with *began* or *started* in some translations (NET, NLT, LEB) but not all (NIV, ESV).

(12) καὶ εὐθέως ἐγένετο ὑγιὴς ὁ ἄνθρωπος καὶ ἦρε τὸν κράβαττον αὐτοῦ καὶ **περιεπάτει**. Ἦν δὲ σάββατον ἐν ἐκείνῃ τῇ ἡμέρᾳ.

And at once the man was healed, and he took up his bed and **walked**. Now that day was the Sabbath. (ESV)

Immediately the man was healed, and he picked up his mat and **started walking**. (Now that day was a Sabbath.) (NET)

Instantly, the man was healed! He rolled up his sleeping mat and **began walking**! But this miracle happened on the Sabbath, (NLT)

(Kelly, Anderson, John, and Anderson, Joy. 2020) does not offer specifically comment on this verb but cites "began to walk" in the source line (presumably form NRSV) and "walked" in the example sentences; The UBS handbook on John (Newman and Nida 1993) does not comment. Likewise the World Biblical Commentary (Beasley-Murray 1999) and International Critical Commentary (Bernard 1929) do not comment on the verb form.

We are left to decide on our own whether to follow ESV or NLT. Working through our questions from (section 9), we can see that ἐγένετο 'he became/was' and ἦρε 'he picked up' are aorist verbs which push the tell us that he was healed and then picked up his mat. Since aorist verbs push the TT forward, the 'walking' occurs just after the TT of 'picking up'. There are not any relevant adverbials in the context and the arguments of the verb do not affect the TT. As a result, we have an TT with hard start time but flexible end time. Based on the context is seems that the walking actually happened so a Conative or Likelihood reading is ruled out. Is there a mismatch (Question 3.b) between the TT and the typical duration of walking? Typical imperfective aspect means that the TT is included in the runtime (RT) of the verb as shown in (Listing 1), however in this case we have a situation like shown below in (Listing 7) so we do have a violation of the DP and we need to shorten the beginning of the RT to fit the TT (Question 3.b.ii).

Listing 7: John 5:9

```
[     TT     ]
|----RT------->
```

This matches the situation described by the Inceptive operator (see Listing 6) so we can resolve the mismatch by applying it.[17]

Matthew 3:14

In Matthew 3:13-16 Jesus comes to be baptized by John. In verse 14, shown in (13), John 'is preventing' (διεκώλυεν) which is an imperfect verb. Considering the TT, we find that most recent aorist verb is in 3:7 where John is speaking to the Pharisees and Sadducees, but the τότε 'then' in verse 13 shifts the TT forward to when Jesus παραγίνεται 'comes' (historical present and imperfective aspect). The TT here is flexible, but logically cannot begin until Jesus arrives (Question 1). *preventing* is most likely a process predicate and the arguments and complements do not influence its RT (Question 2). Given John's words here it is clear that he is actually attempting preventing Jesus (Question 3, 3.a), but does not succeed as show in verses 15-16. Thus a Conative reading is the best fit in the context.

(13) ὁ δὲ Ἰωάννης **διεκώλυεν** αὐτὸν λέγων· Ἐγὼ χρείαν ἔχω ὑπὸ σοῦ βαπτισθῆναι, καὶ σὺ ἔρχῃ πρός με;

   John **would have prevented** him, saying, "I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?"

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[17]Other possible Inceptive imperfects include John 7:14 and 13:22. Matt 9:19 is a great example as it involves an imperfect verb following an aorist participle which is the same as a case discussed by (Hollenbaugh 2020). Mark 5:13 is also very interesting because it contains a series of aorist verbs followed by an imperfect which seems best to take as inceptive; (Bratcher and Nida 1993) and (Groff and Neeley 2008) do not comment on how to understand the imperfect here.

In this case the Translator's Notes on Matthew explains this interpretation, "The Greek verb that the ESV translates as *would have prevented* refers to attempting to stop something from happening." (Groff 2016). The UBS handbook has a wonderful discussion explaining that a Conative interpretation is appropriate here and explaing the "action was attempted, but not achieved" (Newman and Stine 1992).[18]

Luke 8:42

Luke 8:42, shown in (14), contains an example of the imperfect verb ἀπέθξῃσκεν 'she was dying'. The TT here is established by Jairus coming to meet Jesus and falling at His feet (verse 8:41). Verse 42 is explains the reason that Jairus has done this so, like Acts 3:2, it contains background information and describes a situation that holds at least up to this point and may continue to do so (Question 1). (M. Aubrey 2014) notes that ἀποθνήσκω is an Achievement or <point, state> predicate which means that the there is an instantaneous change resulting in the state of being dead (Question 2).[19]

(14) ὅτι θυγάτηρ μονογενὴς ἦν αὐτῷ ὡς ἐτῶν δώδεκα καὶ αὐτὴ **ἀπέθνῃσκεν**. Ἐν δὲ τῷ ὑπάγειν αὐτὸν οἱ ὄχλοι συνέπνιγον αὐτόν.

for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she **was dying**. As Jesus went, the people pressed around him.

It is clear that the girl has not died yet (Question 3) so the result state of the predicate doesn't hold. Thus, there is a mismatch between the momentary RT of the verb and the TT implied by the context and the imperfective morphology. So we need a way to lengthen the RT of the predicate. Clearly Iterative and Habitual do not fit. A Likelihood reading fits because the result state hasn't happened yet and because it allows us to shift focus to the preparatory events that lead to the result state as discussed in (11).

Translator's notes are helpful, "In this context the form of the Greek verb that the NIV translates as was dying indicates that the girl was in the process of dying. She had not yet died, but she was very ill and close to death." (Allen and Neeley 2010). The UBS handbook also notes that this verb "means that she was about to die." (Reiling and Swellengrebel 1993).

Matthew 27:30

Matthew 27:30, shown in (15), contains the verb ἔτυπτον 'they were hitting.' The Translator's Notes for Matthew only go up to chapter 20 (Groff 2016) and the UBS handbook does not discuss the verb form here (Newman and Stine 1992).

The TT is established by ἔλαβον 'they took', so the *striking* happens after *taking*. This would indicate that our TT has a hard start time (Question 1). ἔτυπτον would be a process predicate based on (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997){93-94}'s predicate type tests, but is clearly punctiliar as it striking happens in a short time as such it is probably best to consider it a point predicate (Question 2).[20]

(15) καὶ ἐμπτύσαντες εἰς αὐτὸν ἔλαβον τὸν κάλαμον καὶ **ἔτυπτον** εἰς τὴν κεφαλὴν αὐτοῦ.

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[18]Galatians 1:23 is another interesting example where the verb ἐπόρθει 'he was destroying' could be understood as a simple imperfect showing Paul's ongoing actions in the past or as a Conative verb since we know that Paul did not succeed in destroying the Faith; given the ποτε 'once' Conative seems likely and that is hope it is rendered by ESV, NIV, NLT, and LEB.

[19]We may not feel this mismatch in English because we are accustomed to saying that someone "is dying", but what we really mean is that the person's condition is weakening such that death is the likely outcome.

[20]This would fit well with how it can be used to mean 'to strike down' which would be a <point, state> or <process,state> predicate.

And they spit on him and took the reed and **struck** him on the head.

The event is portrayed as happening (Question 3). The typical RT of *striking* is shorter than the TT thus we have a mismatch and a DP violation (Question 3.b). We need to lengthen the RT to resolve the mismatch (Question 3.b.ii). The verse does not present the *striking* as something that the soldiers generally did to Jesus (Question 3.b.ii.1), but as a repeated action in a specific time frame. Given that we said the TT has a hard start time, we could also apply Inceptive to fit the newly lengthened RT to the TT which would indicate beginning of an iterative process so we might render it as "began striking".

Conclusion

In this paper we have seen how the Greek imperfect verb has flexible semantics which lead to many possible interpretations as seen in our translations, translation resources, commentaries, and grammars. We have also seen that these resources do not always offer clear guidance on how to understand these verbs in a particular context. To address this issue we have applied the concept of aspect coercion guided by the Duration Principle (section 5) and developed a set of questions (section 9) to help us interpret these verbs in a principled way by considering how the runtime of the predicate may need to be modified to fit topic time. Then we applied these questions to a four example passages that required various coercion operators to solve the mismatch between topic time and runtime to satisfy the Duration Principle.

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