

Towards a more perfect interpretation of imperfect verbs

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

Ted Woodhouse

12 September 2023

Why?

Greek imperfect tense has flexible semantics

Various translations (began, tried, V+ing, simple past)

Resources don't always help (Grammars list 7-9 “types” of imperfects).

Goal: Offer a set of questions to help guide our interpretation of imperfect verbs

Definitions

A few definitions

Imperfect: traditional name for a Greek “tense” (past time ref, imperfective aspect)

A few definitions

Imperfect: traditional name for a Greek “tense” (past time ref, imperfective aspect)

Tense: relationship between moment of speech and topic time (TT)

A few definitions

Imperfect: traditional name for a Greek “tense” (past time ref, imperfective aspect)

Tense: relationship between moment of speech and topic time (TT)

Aspect: relationship between TT and runtime (RT) of predicate

Typical imperfect verb

[TT] < Moment of speech
-----RT-----

Imperfective aspect: TT inside of RT. No claim about completion of the predicate.

Typical imperfect verb

Typical aorist verb

[TT] < Moment of speech
 --RT--

Perfective aspect: RT inside of TT. Predicate usually viewed as complete.

Example

Acts 3:1-3

Πέτρος δὲ καὶ Ἰωάννης **ἀνέβαινον** εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν ἐπὶ τὴν ὥραν τῆς προσευχῆς ..., καὶ τις ἀνὴρ χωλὸς ... ὑπάρχων **ἐβαστάζετο**, ὃν **ἐτίθουν** καθ' ἡμέραν πρὸς τὴν θύραν τοῦ ἱεροῦ ... τοῦ αἰτεῖν ἐλεημοσύνην παρὰ τῶν εἰσπορευομένων εἰς τὸ ἱερόν, ὃς ἰδὼν Πέτρον καὶ Ἰωάννην μέλλοντας εἰσιέναι εἰς τὸ ἱερὸν **ἠρώτα** ἐλεημοσύνην λαβεῖν. (SBLGNT)

Now Peter and John **were going up** to the temple at the hour of prayer And a man lame from birth **was being carried**, whom they **laid** daily at the gate of the temple ... to ask alms of those entering the temple. Seeing Peter and John about to go into the temple, he **asked** to receive alms. (ESV)

Verbs

All imperfect

Verbs	ESV Translation
ἀνέβαινον ‘they were going up’	were going up
ἐβαστάζετο ‘he was being carried’	was being carried
ἐτίξουν ‘they were placing’	they laid
ἠρώτα ‘he was asking’	asked

- RT of ἀνέβαινον and ἐβαστάζετο fit the TT.

- RT of ἀνέβαινον and ἐβαστάζετο fit the TT.
- ἐτίθουν doesn't fit with καθ' ἡμέραν 'every day/daily'.
placing doesn't typically take multiple days to accomplish.

- RT of ἀνέβαινον and ἐβαστάζετο fit the TT.
- ἐτίθουν doesn't fit with καθ' ἡμέραν 'every day/daily'.
placing doesn't typically take multiple days to accomplish.
- ἡρώτα

Why not aorist?

Was he asking a really long question?

Translator's Notes Acts (Blood and Christensen 2021)

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

Questions

Why do we understand that *έτίθουν* has a habitual interpretation?

How should we understand *ήρώτα*?

And why?

Solution

Aspect Coercion

Aspect coercion is the reinterpretation of the default meaning of an aspect based on contextual factors.

Aspect Coercion

Aspect coercion is the reinterpretation of the default meaning of an aspect based on contextual factors.

It happens to “avoid a semantic mismatch” between elements in an utterance (C. L. Bary 2009, 8) and is guided by the ...

Aspect Coercion

Aspect coercion is the reinterpretation of the default meaning of an aspect based on contextual factors.

It happens to “avoid a semantic mismatch” between elements in an utterance (C. L. Bary 2009, 8) and is guided by the ...

Duration Principle (DP): 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. (C. Bary and Egg 2012)

Aspect coercion involves the interaction of many elements.

- Aspect: Lexical and grammatical
- Adverbials
- Arguments and complements
- Contextual and world knowledge

Examples

1. John was breaking the window. (lexical vs. grammatical aspect)

Examples

1. John was breaking the window. (lexical vs. grammatical aspect)
2. John was breaking windows. (argument vs. aspect(s))

Examples

1. John was breaking the window. (lexical vs. grammatical aspect)
2. John was breaking windows. (argument vs. aspect(s))
3. Fifty people were baptized at church today. (argument vs. world knowledge)

Examples

1. John was breaking the window. (lexical vs. grammatical aspect)
2. John was breaking windows. (argument vs. aspect(s))
3. Fifty people were baptized at church today. (argument vs. world knowledge)
4. Fifty people ran a 5k. (argument vs. world knowledge)

Proposal

Questions to consider

- What do know now about the TT?

Questions to consider

- What do know now about the TT?
- What do we know about the RT of the predicate (typical duration, arguments, etc)?

Questions to consider

- What do know now about the TT?
- What do we know about the RT of the predicate (typical duration, arguments, etc)?
- Did the event actually take place?

Questions to consider

- What do know now about the TT?
- What do we know about the RT of the predicate (typical duration, arguments, etc)?
- Did the event actually take place?
- Is there are mismatch between the TT and RT?
 - No: basic imperfective semantics are Ok
 - Yes: Do we need to lengthen or shorten the RT?

What do we know about the TT?

TT relative to context:

- Aorist verbs push TT forward
- Imperfect verbs occur at previously established TT (C. Bary and Egg 2012), what do we know about it?
- Imperfects often indicate background information, but not always.

What do we know about the TT?

TT relative to context:

- Aorist verbs push TT forward
- Imperfect verbs occur at previously established TT (C. Bary and Egg 2012), what do we know about it?
- Imperfects often indicate background information, but not always.

Other elements in the context?

- Adverbs
- Temporal phrase (participles), etc.

What do we know about the RT of the predicate?

- Predicate type (next slide)
- Arguments/complements
- Typical duration

Predicate types (lexical aspect)

Aktionsart*	(Pulman 1997)	Meaning
State	State	Persists over time
Activity	Process	Persists over time
	Point	No internal structure, no result state
Achievement	⟨point, state⟩	Point that leads to result state, instantaneous?
Accomplishment	⟨process, state⟩	Process/Activity that leads to result state

* (Van Valin and LaPolla 1997)

What do we know about the RT of the predicate?

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

TT: καθ’ ἡμέραν ‘daily/each day’ lengthens TT

Predicate type: ⟨process, state⟩ too short

= DP violation

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

TT: καθ’ ἡμέραν ‘daily/each day’ lengthens TT

Predicate type: ⟨process, state⟩ too short

= DP violation

Event actually happened

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

TT: καθ’ ἡμέραν ‘daily/each day’ lengthens TT

Predicate type: ⟨process, state⟩ too short

= DP violation

Event actually happened

Need to lengthen the RT of the predicate

Coercion operators

- Lengthen:
 - **Iterative**: often specific number of iterations
 - **Habitual**: “law-like generalization”
- Shorten: **Inceptive** (inchoative, ingressive)
- Modify (broader context):
 - **Conative*** (attempts)
 - **Likelihood*** (threats)

* Not technically an operator, but can affect duration

(Bertinetto and Lenci 2010) and (Pulman 1997)

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

TT: Adverbial καθ’ ἡμέραν ‘daily/each day’ lengthens TT

Predicate type: ⟨process,state⟩ too short

Modification: Lengthened

Iterative or Habitual?

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

TT: Adverbial καθ’ ἡμέραν ‘daily/each day’ lengthens TT

Predicate type: ⟨process,state⟩ too short

Modification: Lengthened

Iterative or Habitual?

“law-like generalization” → Habitual

ἐτίθουν ‘they were placing’

ἠρώτα ‘he was asking’

TT: short, but would usually be an aorist

Predicate: process or point, not usually long duration

Actually happened: Yes

Modification: Lengthened

Not “law-like generalization” → Iterative

Other examples

John 5:9

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

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

- “began walking” NLT
- No comments from TTN or UBS.

John 5:9

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

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

TT	Predicate	Occured	Modification	Conclusion
Start limited	process	Yes	Shorten	Inceptive → NLT

Matthew 3:14

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

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

TNN does comment here, “attempting to stop something from happening” (Groff 2016). UBS explains it very well (Newman and Stine 1992).

Matthew 3:14

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

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

TT	Predicate	Occured	Modification	Conclusion
-	Process	No	Shorten/shift focus	Conative

Luke 8:42

ὅτι θυγάτηρ μονογενῆς ἦν αὐτῷ ὡς ἑτῶν δώδεκα καὶ αὕτῃ
ἀπέθνησκεν.

for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she **was dying.**

UBS (Reiling and Swellengrebel 1993) and TNN (Allen and Neeley 2010) indicate that she was would soon die, but hadn't yet.

Luke 8:42

ὅτι θυγάτηρ μονογενῆς ἦν αὐτῷ ὡς ἑτῶν δώδεκα καὶ αὕτῃ
ἀπέθνησκεν.

for he had an only daughter, about twelve years of age, and she **was**
dying.

TT	Predicate	Occured	Modification	Conclusion
Too long	⟨point, state⟩	No	Lengthen	Likelihood

Matthew 27:30

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

And they spit on him and took the reed and **struck** him on the head.
UBS and TNN don't discuss it

Matthew 27:30

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

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

TT	Predicate	Occured	Modification	Conclusion
Too long	point	Yes	Lengthen	Not “law-like” → Iterative

Conclusions

Conclusion

- Imperfect has a wide range of meanings

Conclusion

- Imperfect has a wide range of meanings
- Translation resources don't always comment or may not support their conclusions

Conclusion

- Imperfect has a wide range of meanings
- Translation resources don't always comment or may not support their conclusions
- Aspect coercion + Duration Principle can guide our interpretations

Conclusion

- Imperfect has a wide range of meanings
- Translation resources don't always comment or may not support their conclusions
- Aspect coercion + Duration Principle can guide our interpretations
- Coercion operators modify duration to fit TT

Conclusion

- Imperfect has a wide range of meanings
- Translation resources don't always comment or may not support their conclusions
- Aspect coercion + Duration Principle can guide our interpretations
- Coercion operators modify duration to fit TT
- Proposed a set of questions to help work through these steps.

Questions

Bibliography

- Allen, Jerry, and Linda Neeley. 2010. *Translator's Notes on Luke: Notes*. Dallas: SIL International.
- Bary, Corien, and Markus Egg. 2012. “Variety in Ancient Greek Aspect Interpretation.” *Linguistics and Philosophy* 35, no. 2, 111–134. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10988-012-9113-1>.
- Bary, Corien LA. 2009. *Aspect in Ancient Greek. A Semantic Analysis of the Aorist and Imperfective*. Thesis, Nijmegen: Radboud Universiteit.

- Bertinetto, Pier Marco, and Alessandro Lenci. 2010. “Iterativity Vs. Habituality (and Gnomonic Imperfectivity).” Scuola Normale Superiore. Laboratorio di Linguistica.
- Blood, David, and Steve Christensen. 2021. *Translator's Notes on Acts: Notes*. Dallas: SIL International.
- Groff, Randy, ed. 2016. *Translator's Notes on Matthew: Notes*. Dallas: SIL International.

Newman, Barclay Moon, and Philip C. Stine. 1992. *A Handbook on the Gospel of Matthew*. UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies.

Pulman, Stephen G. 1997. “Aspectual Shift as Type Coercion.” *Transactions of the Philological Society* 95, no. 2. Wiley Online Library: 279–317.

Reiling, J., and J. L. Swellengrebel. 1993. *A Handbook on the Gospel of Luke*. UBS Handbook Series. New York: United Bible Societies.

Van Valin, Robert D., and Randy J. LaPolla. 1997. *Syntax*. Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.