

## Part Two

### *The Role of Time and Aspect in Greek Verbs*

In *Part One* I taught you that indicative verbs are constructed from just two morphological elements: the **verb stem**, which gives the root meaning of the verb; and an indicative **personal ending**, which indicates the person and number of the subject and tells you whether to hear active or middle nuances in the verb. The meaning of the indicative verb, I told you, is a composite of the meaning of these two morphological elements: **bathe/he** <active or middle sense> means *He is bathing* <active or middle sense>. With some embarrassment I must admit that that was a lie—a useful lie, but a lie nonetheless.

In fact, all indicative verbs contain *four* morphological elements, and the meaning of each verb is a composite of the meanings of those four elements. In *Part Two* you will need to learn the forms and meanings of two additional components: **Time** and **Aspect**.

#### Time

The first new element is **time**. Any indicative verb (even in English) must set the action in time: past, present, or future. If a verb had no time marker, you could not know whether **bathe/he** means *He is bathing*, *He was bathing*, or *He will be bathing*. Consequently, both in English and in Greek, every indicative verb contains a **time marker**.

Taking the time component into consideration, we may schematize Greek verbs in this way:



/ **stem** / **personal ending** <active or middle>

So, the notion

- **past/bathe/he** would mean something like *He bathed*;
- **present/bathe/he** would mean something like *He is bathing*;
- **future/ bathe/he** would mean something like *He will bathe*.

## Aspect

You may consider those three elements adequate to communicate a precise verbal idea to your listener. In fact, though, you want, need, and (even in English) use another element. Consider these two differing notions of past/die/he.

- What's wrong? ... "It's George. *He died*."
- Was he conscious to the end? ... "Yes, he was, and he knew *he was dying*."

Both *he died* and *he was dying* are ways of interpreting past/die/he. And yet they aren't interchangeable, are they? If you switch them, the two sentences don't work. "It's George. *He was dying*" is somehow different from "It's George. *He died*." And we can't say, "He was conscious to the end. He knew *he died*." The two forms contain something that distinguishes them from one another in sense as well as form. But what is it?

Event Aspect and Process Aspect. The element that distinguishes *he died* from *he was dying* is what grammarians call aspect. *Aspect* refers to how the verb causes a listener to look at or envision the action it relates. The examples above demonstrate the two most common aspects: event aspect and process aspect. Physically, every event that humans can speak of is a process, a series of many events. Linguistically, people may choose to speak of an event as an incomplete process (*he was dying*), or they may choose to summarize the process, as it were—to condense it into a single event (*he died*).

The evolution of mammals reputedly took (hundreds of?) millions of years. Linguistically we can speak of that long process in a way that emphasizes the process as still ongoing at the time we are speaking of, or we can speak of it in a way that collapses the entire process into a single event.

- Animal life *was continuously evolving* for 100 million years. [process aspect]
- Mammals *evolved* from earlier life forms. [event aspect]

In effect, setting a verb in process aspect encourages the listener to view the scene as a movie: Life *was evolving*; the man *was dying*; the woman *was growing old*. Setting it in event aspect encourages the listener to view the scene as a snapshot: Life *evolved*; the man *died*; the woman *grew old*.

Both of these aspects can be invoked in all three times—past, present, and future.

- Past: *He fell* [event] or *He was falling* [process].
- Future: *He will die* [event] or *He will be dying* [process].
- In the present, we almost exclusively use process aspect: *He is dying* [process].

About the only people who want to encourage their audience to envision a present action as event rather than process are sports announcers who take advantage of the rhetorical effect of presenting present actions as a series of quick snapshots: "*Jordan drives. He sets. He shoots. Bulls win.*"

So, English is capable of expressing both event and process aspect in all three times (though we very rarely choose to use event aspect in present time).

Process aspect can communicate three different nuances of process.

1. Usually process aspect encourages the listener to view a **single event as a process**:

- **Past**: “<On that one occasion> *he was speaking*.”
- **Present**: “<At today’s meeting> *he is speaking*.”
- **Future**: “<At tomorrow’s ceremony> *he will be speaking*.”

2. Sometimes, though, process aspect encourages the listener to envision a **habitual or customary pattern of actions**:

- **Past**: “<On many occasions> *he was speaking*” (meaning *he used to speak*). Or, *He <often> spoke*. Or, “<Often> *he would speak*.”
- **Present**: “*He <always, often> speaks*.”
- **Future**: “*He will speak <virtually continuously during this year’s campaign>*.”

3. Rather rarely, we use process aspect to highlight **the beginning of an action**.

- **Past**: Suddenly, the car *was moving*. (The car was starting to move.)
- **Present**: Watch out! The wall *is falling* down. (The wall is starting to fall.)
- **Future**: Before you know it, the plane *will be taking off*. (The plane will start taking off.)

Resultant-state aspect. Greek has a third and final way of encouraging the listener to look at a scene: resultant-state aspect, which emphasizes a *condition that has resulted from earlier events*. English sometimes communicates this notion, but not as clearly and systematically as Greek does.

Consider this exchange and particularly the italicized verb:

“Is he ready to play?”

“*He has shot* 200 free throws. If he isn’t ready now, he never will be.”

What do you make of *he has shot*? Your first impression may be that it is a statement about a past scene, but not so. To see that clearly, insert a specific time qualifier: “**Two hours ago** *he has shot* 200 free throws.” That’s simply bad English. Why? Because the verb is not a past time verb. It is a statement about present time: “**As of this moment** *he has shot* 200 free throws.” Nothing wrong with that, is there? *Has shot* reports a condition in present time.

But *has shot* reports something different from either the **present event** (*He shoots!*) or either sense of **present process** [*He is shooting*; or, *he <often> shoots*]. “*He has shot* 200 free throws” seems to mean something like, “He finished throwing 200 free throws, and **now** he is in whatever condition someone is in after throwing 200 free throws.”

If we liken **event** aspect to a snapshot and **process** aspect to a movie, we can liken **resultant-state** aspect to an *X-ray*: The subject has already done something, and the speaker points out *the*

## Part Two: The Role of Time and Aspect in Greek Verbs

*condition the subject is in now that he has done that thing.* “The boy *has broken* his arm” = The boy broke his arm <previously>, and **now** he has a broken arm.

**Resultant-state** aspect in English, unfortunately, is not very clear. I suspect that most English speakers hear no difference between. “You arrived too late. The king *died* [**event** aspect] an hour ago” and “The king *has <already> died* [**resultant-state** aspect].” In Greek, though, these conjure up two rather different scenes. In **event aspect**, the listener is invited to envision the **event** of the death (the scene as the king quit breathing). In **resultant-state aspect**, the listener is invited to envision the resulting **state** (the king’s inability to continue governing, for example).

**Resultant-state aspect**, like event and process aspects, can be invoked in any of the three **times**. The time stipulates the time of the *state*. In all resultant-state verbs that state is understood as the result of a previously completed event.

- **Past**: By the time we arrived yesterday *he had died* (i.e., *he was dead <yesterday>*).
- **Present**: I regret to inform you <now> that *he has died* (i.e., *he is dead <now>*).
- **Future**: By the time you arrive tomorrow *he will have died* (i.e., *he will be dead <tomorrow>*).

It turns out, then, that the four semantic components of any indicative verb are

 (aspect) /  (time) / **base** (the raw meaning of the verb) / **personal ending**

So, to review, the form of every indicative verb makes clear that it is set in one of three times:

 The 3 times:

- past
- present
- future

And, the form of every indicative verb indicates that the action should be envisioned in one of three ways:

 The 3 aspects:

-  a **snapshot** showing the **event** of the **subject’s action** <active or middle>.
-  a **movie** showing the **subject** in the **process** of performing an **action** <active or middle>.
-  an **X-ray** of the **subject** that shows the subject’s **condition** in view of the fact that he has already completed some **action** <active or middle>.

## A mental exercise

Before you begin learning specific Greek morphological markers for time and aspect, I want you to practice viewing verbal scenes in different times and different aspects. If you can internalize the concepts, you can learn the mechanisms of Greek tense formation relatively simple.

**Exercise:** Envision what the following verb schemata tell you to. Then, express the scene in English.

1. past /  / *fall* / he.
2. past /  / *fall* / we.
3. present /  / *fall* / we.
4. present /  / *fall* / we.
5. future /  / *fall* / we.
6. past /  / *pay* / she.
7. past /  / *pay* / she.
8. past /  / *pay* / she.
9. present /  / *pay* / she.
10. future /  / *melt* / it.
11. present /  / *melt* / it.
12. past /  / *melt* / it.
13. present /  / *melt* / it.
14. past /  / *melt* / it.

## Part Two: The Role of Time and Aspect in Greek Verbs

15. future /  / melt / it.
16. past /  / melt / it.
17. past /  / break / you
18. present /  / break / you.
19. past /  / break / you.
20. present /  / break / you.
21. past /  / break / you.
22. future /  / break / you.
23. past /  / break / you.

### *Prospectus: What's coming up in Part Two?*

In the following chapters you will learn the seven *tenses* of the indicative. These tenses communicate most of the possible permutations of **time** and **aspect**. The chart below tells which tense communicates which combination of time and aspect.

*The Seven Greek Tenses*

| Time<br>Aspect | Event        | Process         | Resultant-State      |
|----------------|--------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| Past           | Aorist Tense | Imperfect Tense | Pluperfect Tense     |
| Present        | [None]       | Present Tense   | Perfect Tense        |
| Future         | Future Tense | [None]          | Future Perfect Tense |

You don't need to be told how to translate the seven tenses in the chart above. If you pay attention to time and aspect, you can figure out how best to use English to capture the thought of each tense.

## *Greek Before Christmas*

Note: As I stated earlier, Greek has no mechanism for communicating event aspect in present time. (Ancient basketball announcers would probably have used the aorist tense for that purpose.) More surprisingly, although Greek can say *He will die* (future event) and *He will have died* / *He will be dead* (future resultant-state), it has no mechanism for systematically presenting such ideas as *He will be dying* (future process).

In the next several chapters you will learn the seven tenses of indicative verbs listed in the chart above.