

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO VERBAL ASPECT IN NEW TESTAMENT GREEK¹

by
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Books and articles on verbal aspect in NT Greek have been part of the cutting edge of Greek grammar and syntax for about two decades. The conversation accelerated with the published dissertations of Stanley E. Porter and Buist M. Fanning,³ and by the early 1990s, D. A. Carson observed, “From now on, treatments of the verbal system of New Testament Greek that do not probingly interact with Porter and Fanning will rule themselves outmoded.”⁴ The growing literature on verbal aspect has validated Carson’s observation, but despite this mass of literature, it “has caused a good degree of unrest,”⁵ and NT

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³Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament*, ed. D. A. Carson, Studies in Biblical Greek 1 (New York: Lang, 1989); Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990).

⁴“An Introduction to the Porter/Fanning Debate,” in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 80 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), p. 25.

⁵Constantine R. Campbell suggests that part of this “unrest” stems from the following: (1) “the way in which it is perceived that verbal aspect threatens to undermine traditional analyses of Greek. So much has been built on these analyses that to undermine them could (it is imagined) have incalculable consequences for the status and conclusions of research that has been accepted for generations”; (2) “the highly complicated and technical nature of the issue and the academic discussion concerning it. The debate is considered by some to be inaccessible, out of reach, and too difficult to comprehend, let alone synthesize”; (3) “the fact that scholarship is divided on the issue, and there is no clearly accepted position that trumps the rest”; and (4) “the insecurity that readers of Greek face when it comes to applying verbal aspect. What difference does it make? How much should be made of the insights gained from verbal aspect? What conclusions may one legitimately draw, and how confident may we be in asserting such conclusions?” (*Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative: Soundings in the Greek of the New Testament*, ed. D. A. Carson, Studies in Biblical Greek 13

scholarship has taken a surprisingly long time to integrate advances in verbal aspect with NT studies.⁶ As this process of integration accelerates, many wise pastors and teachers will want to be informed about verbal aspect and its practical value with reference to preaching and teaching.

This essay briefly introduces verbal aspect in NT Greek. It is merely an explanatory introduction to verbal aspect, not a defense of it (although the author is admittedly postured in favor of it). At the risk of being reductionistic, this essay attempts to summarize an overwhelmingly complex debate. It targets pastors and seminarians with at least a few years of Greek training, and it assumes that the reader knows virtually nothing about verbal aspect. It is admittedly not an easy read for those first encountering some of the concepts and linguistic jargon, but investing the time and energy to understand the basic issues regarding verbal aspect theory is worth the effort.

THE MEANING OF VERBAL ASPECT THEORY

Verbal aspect theory distinguishes between a tense-form's⁷ semantics and pragmatics. Semantics refers to the a-contextual meaning, that is, a tense-form's meaning apart from a specific context. Pragmatics refers to contextual meaning, that is, its meaning in a specific context.

According to verbal aspect theory, the semantics of a tense-form indicates only the author's or speaker's subjective portrayal of an action (aspect), and the overall pragmatics indicates the action's objective nature (*Aktionsart* and time). Aspect concerns how authors or speakers want their audiences to view an action, and *Aktionsart* concerns the actual type or quality of an action.

For example, authors or speakers can choose to portray an action with the same verb in both the aorist and imperfect. When Jesus miraculously multiplied loaves to feed large crowds, the Synoptics emphasize Jesus' distributing the loaves by using the aorist for breaking

[New York: Lang, 2007], pp. 1–2).

⁶Cf. D. A. Carson's observation: "It is always a bit disconcerting to discover how much work on aspect theory has been done, and how little of it has crossed into the world of New Testament scholarship" (Series Editor Preface to Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, p. xiii). Campbell credits Porter and Fanning for beginning "a paradigm shift that is still taking place in our understanding of the Greek verbal system" (*Verbal Aspect*, p. 2).

⁷"Tense-form" is a clearer way of specifying what traditional Greek grammars label "tense," which refers to part of the verb's morphology. There are six tense-forms in NT Greek: present, imperfect, future, aorist, perfect, and pluperfect. "Tense-form" is more precise and less confusing because in English "tense" refers primarily to the time of an action. Greek verbs that have a present tense-form, for example, frequently do not refer to the present time in context.

them and the imperfect for distributing them (ἐδίδου, from δίδωμι).⁸ John 6:11, however, depicts the very same action differently, choosing to portray the distribution as a whole by using the aorist (δεδόκεν, from the related διαδίδωμι).⁹ In other words, since the Synoptics and John describe the very same action (i.e., distributing bread) with different tense-forms (i.e., imperfect and aorist), an action does not require a certain tense-form. Rather, the distinction is based on how an author or speaker decides to portray an action.

Linguists and grammarians who adhere to verbal aspect theory are not unanimous on all the nuances (especially with reference to the future, perfect, and pluperfect tense-forms), but the following distinction between semantics and pragmatics is fundamental: aspect concerns semantics, and *Aktionsart* and time concern pragmatics.¹⁰ See Table 1.

*Table 1. Aspect : Semantics ::
Aktionsart and Time : Pragmatics*

Aspect : Semantics	<i>Aktionsart</i> and Time : Pragmatics
Aspect: the author's or speaker's subjective portrayal of an action	<i>Aktionsart</i> and time: the action's objective nature
Semantics: a tense-form's meaning apart from a specific context	Pragmatics: a tense-form's meaning in a specific context

For example, in Rom 12:1 Paul urges believers “to present [παραστήσαι]” their “bodies a living and holy sacrifice.” The morphology of παραστήσαι is aorist active infinitive; its tense-form is aorist. Verbal aspect theory distinguishes between this tense-form's semantic and pragmatic values. (1) Semantically, the aorist indicates that Paul is depicting the action as a whole. He could have chosen, however, to depict the action differently by using a different tense-form. (2) The pragmatic meaning is based on a complex of contextual features. It is fallacious, for example, to argue that because παραστήσαι is aorist, the action refers to a once-for-all-time dedication.¹¹

⁸See Matt 15:36; Mark 6:41; 8:6–7; Luke 9:16; cf. 24:30.

⁹This use of ἐδίδου in the Synoptics is even more striking when considering that authors generally use the aorist rather than the imperfect when using δίδωμι to depict an action. In the NA²⁷, δίδωμι occurs in the aorist 120 times and the imperfect only twelve times.

¹⁰Cf. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 24–26.

¹¹For brief discussions of its pragmatic value, see Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), p. 750; Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), pp. 643–44; William W. Combs, “Romans 12:1–2 and the Doctrine of Sanctification,” *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal*

Table 2 attempts to clarify the meaning of verbal aspect theory by contrasting it with other familiar views.

Table 2. Four Major Views of the Greek Verb Tense-Forms

View	The Semantics of Tense-Forms	Explanation
1. Time	Absolute time	Tense-forms grammaticalize (i.e., indicate by their morphology) absolute time (aorist = past time, present = present time, etc.).
2. <i>Aktionsart</i>	The objective nature of an action	Tense-forms grammaticalize (1) the kind or type of action (i.e., <i>Aktionsart</i>) in all verbs and (2) absolute time in indicative verbs and relative time in participles.
3. Aspect plus time	The subjective portrayal of an action (plus time)	Tense-forms grammaticalize (1) the way an author or speaker subjectively portrays an action and (2) absolute time in the indicative mood and relative time in participles, although tense is only one element among others such as lexis and context in determining time. ¹²
4. Aspect	The subjective portrayal of an action	Tense-forms grammaticalize <i>only</i> the way an author or speaker subjectively portrays an action. They do not grammaticalize anything about the action’s objective nature or time. ¹³

Although some grammarians define aspect and *Aktionsart* differently,¹⁴

11 (2006): 12–14.

¹²This definition of aspect represents the view broadly shared by Buist M. Fanning, Moisés Silva, and Daniel B. Wallace (and Kenneth L. McKay to a lesser degree since he is a bit closer to view four) since they will not say that tense-forms grammaticalize *only* aspect in the indicative mood.

¹³This definition of aspect represents the view broadly shared by D. A. Carson, Stanley E. Porter, Rodney J. Decker, and Constantine R. Campbell. For a comparison and contrast between views three and four in Table 2, see Porter and Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics*, pp. 18–82; Porter, “Greek Grammar and Syntax,” in *The Face of New Testament Studies: A Survey of Recent Research*, ed. Scot McKnight and Grant R. Osborne (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2004), pp. 90–92.

¹⁴Daniel B. Wallace, for example, argues, “It is important to distinguish *aspect* from *Aktionsart*. In general, we can say that *aspect* is the unaffected meaning while *Aktionsart* is aspect in combination with lexical, grammatical, or contextual features.... It is not technically correct to say that aspect is subjective while *Aktionsart* is objective (although some grammars suggest this kind of distinction). Such a statement tacitly

this essay uses Table 2's definitions, which highlight a distinction that linguists have maintained for the last century, namely, that *Aktionsart* ties a verb's tense-form to its objective nature.¹⁵

By the late-1800s, the first view, absolute time, was no longer the majority view. The second, *Aktionsart*, has remained the view most widely taught in seminaries and assumed in most commentaries. I personally taught some combination of the second and third views to first- and second-year Greek students for several years.¹⁶ Table 3 (below) reproduces verbatim a foundational handout on the tense-forms that I prepared for first-year Greek students. It is a combination of views two and three: (1) it focuses on the kind of action, and (2) it explains that "the action is viewed" in a certain way, rather than claiming that the tense-form itself indicates the objective nature of the action.

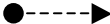
assumes that there is a one-to-one correspondence between language and reality. *Aktionsart* is not actually objective, although it may be *presented* as more in tune with the actual event" (*Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], p. 499, emphasis in original). Wallace's objection seems to read philosophical considerations into grammatical definitions, perhaps to reflect postmodern discussions regarding language and reality. Linguists and grammarians who describe *Aktionsart* as objective, however, do not intend such distinctions.

¹⁵Stanley E. Porter asserts, "The theory of *Aktionsart* is the supposition that the verb tenses of Greek are used to convey how an action objectively occurs" (*Idioms of the Greek New Testament*, 2d ed. [Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999], p. 27, emphasis in original). Cf. idem, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 86–87; idem, "Greek Language and Linguistics," in *Studies in the Greek New Testament: Theory and Practice*, ed. D. A. Carson, Studies in Biblical Greek 6 (New York: Lang, 1996), p. 13; idem, "Greek Grammar and Syntax," p. 89; Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 31, 85; idem, "Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek: Issues in Definition and Method," in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics*, ed. Carson and Porter, p. 48; Richard A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), p. 106.

¹⁶The distinctions in Tables 1 and 2 were not clear to me. My confusion was due in part to the lack of clarity between *Aktionsart* and aspect in standard Greek grammars. For example, BDF says, "The original function of the so-called tense stems of the verb in Indo-European languages was not that of levels of time (present, past, future) but that of *Aktionsarten* (kinds of action) or aspects (points of view)" (Friederich Blass and Albert Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, ed. and trans. Robert W. Funk [Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1961], p. 166). Cf. Ernest De Witt Burton, *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek*, 3d ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1898), p. 30; H. E. Dana and J. R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1957), p. 178; C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, 2d ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 5.

Table 3. Aktionsart/Aspect Plus Time in the Indicative

Tense = Time* + Kind (*The tense indicates *time* of action only in the indicative mood.)

Tense	Time	Kind	Diagram	Explan- ation	Examples
Present	Pre- sent	Linear, progres- sive, con- tinuous		The action is viewed as in progress.	I am studying.
Imperfect	Past				I was studying.
Future	Future	Simple, undefined		The action is viewed as a whole. (This does not neces- sarily de- note punctiliar [point-in- time] ac- tion.)	I will study.
Aorist	Past				I studied.
Perfect	Past	Com- pleted		The action is viewed as completed but having continuing results.	I have studied.
Pluper- fect	Past				I had studied.

Contrast Table 3 with Table 4 (below), which represents view four with Stanley E. Porter’s terminology.¹⁷

¹⁷Cf. Campbell’s four tables, which summarize the views of Porter, Fanning, Olsen, and himself. Campbell, unlike Porter, sees only two aspects, and the tense forms within each carry differing degrees of spatial quality: in the perfective aspect, the aorist expresses remoteness, and the future is non-spatial and indicates future time; in the imperfective aspect, the perfect expresses heightened proximity, the present proximity, the imperfect remoteness, and the pluperfect heightened remoteness (*Verbal Aspect*, pp. 242–43). Campbell opens his lightly revised dissertation with this straightforward definition: “Verbal aspect refers to the manner in which verbs are used to view an action or state. An author/speaker will portray an event either from the inside, as though it is seen as unfolding [i.e., imperfective aspect], or from the outside, as though it is seen as a whole [i.e., perfective aspect]” (p. 1). He clarifies, “The simplest way to define aspect is as ‘viewpoint.’ This refers to the way in which the author/speaker chooses to depict an activity or state, the usual opposition being ‘internal’ (*imperfective*) and ‘external’ (*perfective*)” (p. 8).

Table 4. *Aspect*

Tense-Form	Grammaticalizes Aspect	Explanation: The author or speaker views the action as...
Aorist	Perfective	complete (not necessarily completed), as a whole
Present/Imperfect	Imperfective	in process, ongoing
Perfect/Pluperfect	Stative	a state of affairs or condition

At this point in this essay, Porter's definitions of aspect may be more understandable. Porter offers "a concise definition of verbal aspect" that is laced with linguistic terminology:

Greek verbal aspect is a synthetic semantic category (realized in the forms of verbs) used of meaningful oppositions in a network of tense systems to grammaticalize the author's reasoned subjective choice of conception of a process.¹⁸

In another work Porter gives more user-friendly definitions that explain his linguistic terminology.

In Greek, *verbal aspect* is defined as a semantic (meaning) category by which a speaker or writer grammaticalizes (i.e. represents a meaning by choice of a word-form) a perspective on an action by the selection of a particular tense-form in the verbal system. The semantic features (the "meanings") of the different verbal aspects are attached to the tense-forms. The verbal aspects are therefore morphologically based (i.e. form and function are matched). Verbal aspect is a semantic feature which attaches *directly* to use of a given tense-form in Greek. Other values—such as time—are established at the level of larger grammatical or conceptual units, such as the sentence, paragraph, proposition, or even discourse (see Chapter 21). The choice of the particular verbal aspect (expressed in the verb tense-form) resides with the language user, and it is from this perspective that grammatical interpretation of the verb must begin.¹⁹

Porter elsewhere explains that aspect theory "states that verbal tense-forms are selected by language users not on the basis of the action in itself but on the basis of how they wish to conceive of and conceptualize an action."²⁰

¹⁸ *Verbal Aspect*, p. 88. Campbell notes, "Whilst an important technical definition, this may leave the non-specialist somewhat confused. The key to Porter's definition is his 'conception of a process'; in other words, aspect is how the author *conceives* (or *views*) the particular process or activity" (*Verbal Aspect*, pp. 8–9).

¹⁹ *Idioms*, pp. 20–21, emphasis in original.

²⁰ "Greek Grammar and Syntax," p. 89. See also Rodney J. Decker's clear definition of aspect, which agrees with Porter. *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect*, ed. D. A. Carson, Studies in Biblical Greek

OBJECTIONS TO VERBAL ASPECT THEORY

Adherents of views two and three in Table 2 have at least three major objections to view four (aspect).

1. If a tense-form's semantics does not grammaticalize time, then what determines time? Answer from adherents of view four: pragmatic factors determine time. These include lexis (a word's basic semantic range or dictionary meaning), context, and especially deixis (temporal indicators such as temporal adverbs or the narrative's flow). Deictic indicators are one of the major ways Greek indicates time.

2. Both the present and imperfect tense-forms grammaticalize the imperfective aspect, and both the perfect and pluperfect tense-forms grammaticalize the stative aspect. What, then, is the difference between each pair (present/imperfect and perfect/pluperfect)? Answer from adherents of view four: the key distinction is remoteness, which often involve remoteness in time, space, or emphasis (e.g., backgrounding and foregrounding in discourse).

3. Does not the semantics of the future tense-form grammaticalize future time? The answer from adherents of view four is not unanimous, though they agree that the future tense-form is anomalous. Porter argues that the future tense-form grammaticalizes expectation, which is usually future-referring.²¹ Fanning and Campbell argue that the future tense-form is an exception and that it is properly a *tense* that grammaticalizes future time.²² Kenneth L. McKay, who does not fit squarely in view four, argues that the future tense-form expresses intention and consequently simple futurity.²³

10 (New York: Lang, 2001), p. 26. I explored one facet of verbal aspect theory in an unpublished paper in April 2007: "A Test Case for *Aktionsart* vs. Verbal Aspect Theory in New Testament Greek: Aorist and Imperfect Indicative Verbs Joined by KAI and Sharing the Same Subject." The target construction, which occurs 142 times, is significant because the juxtaposition of the aorist and imperfect heightens their contrast. I concluded that although *Aktionsart* works in many cases, it often does not work. Aspect, however, sufficiently explains the target constructions without exception. Three categories of examples substantiate this: (1) authors or speakers can choose to portray an action with the same verb in both the aorist and imperfect; (2) authors or speakers can choose to portray an action with either the aorist or imperfect; and (3) in spite of strong lexical leanings, authors or speakers may choose to break the general pattern in order to portray an action in a certain way. The bottom-line conclusion is that shifts between the aorist and imperfect indicatives are due not to *Aktionsart* but to aspect.

²¹ *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 403–39; *Idioms*, pp. 43–45.

²² Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 120–24; Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*, pp. 127–60.

²³ *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek*, ed. D. A. Carson, Studies in Biblical Greek 5 (New York: Lang, 1994), 34.

THE EXEGETICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF VERBAL ASPECT THEORY

Considering verbal aspect theory leads to a legitimate practical question: so what? Or put with more sophistication: what exegetical significance does this have? This is an important question because the desire for accurate exegesis is often what starts and fuels discussions like this.

Embracing aspect theory rather than the *Aktionsart* (view two in Table 2) does not drastically change translations, exegesis, or doctrine. Its primary significance is that it changes how one expresses (and perhaps more importantly, how one does *not* express) an exegetical argument with reference to a verb's tense-form. It is invalid to argue that a certain tense-form necessitates a particular pragmatic meaning.

For example, verbal aspect theory implies that it is illegitimate to argue along this line: "This particular aorist tense-form (semantics) *means* that this action was instantaneous or decisive (pragmatics)." That confuses semantics with pragmatics and bleeds the aorist tense-form for too much meaning. While still reaching many of the same pragmatic distinctions as *Aktionsart* (e.g., an iterative or ingressive action), aspect theory adds a perspective to the exegesis of Greek verbs that is more nuanced, subtle, consistent, and genuinely explanatory. Decker explains and illustrates:

The web of semantic factors comprised by aspect, lexis, and *Aktion-sart*, along with other grammatical and contextual factors (adjuncts, deixis, etc.) is referred to in this volume as the verbal complex. Thus a statement that 'the meaning of the verbal complex of x...' is to be understood as an inclusive, pragmatic statement (usually employed at the level of clause) summarizing the total semantic value of the verb and its adjuncts in a particular context, including aspect, lexis, *Aktionsart*, and contextual factors.

The categories often used in traditional grammars (such as tendential, gnomic, or iterative) are not appropriate to either aspect or *Aktion-sart* in the sense defined above. For example, using the definitions above it would not be accurate to say that διηκόνει (Mark 1:31) is an iterative imperfect.²⁴ It could, however, be said that in this context the combination of imperfective aspect with the lexis of διακονέω (which has an *Aktionsart* character of activity) and the contextual factors (the woman had been bed-ridden) together describe an iterative situation. It is unnecessary in most cases to spell out these details; a shortened reference is adequate: the phrase καὶ διηκόνει αὐτῷ describes an iterative activity.²⁵

²⁴Decker includes an endnote here (p. 177): "N. Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of MHT, 3:67."

²⁵Decker clarified in private correspondence that he is not arguing for an iterative sense here, but only using Turner's terminology to suggest how it ought to be phrased. (Turner seems to conflate the iterative, customary, ingressive, and progressive uses.) Decker, like many others, would describe this phrase as an ingressive

...Such terms [like iterative] are relevant as descriptions of the verbal complex, but not of specific verbs or specific forms of verbs. This approach...seeks to balance formal and contextual contributions, form and function, semantics and pragmatics.”²⁶

Aspect theory contributes to exegesis by explaining the author’s perspective of a situation. It also serves as a helpful discourse function in narrative.²⁷ Aspect theory does not, however, solve all the problems with reference to exegetically challenging verbs. It has many limitations because it deals with the semantics—not the pragmatics—of a verb’s morphology. It is just one more tool at the exegetical workbench.

A SUGGESTED STRATEGY FOR STUDYING VERBAL ASPECT THEORY

The corpus of works on verbal aspect theory in NT Greek is initially daunting to those with little exposure to it, even if they have completed at least two or three years of formal Greek study. It is daunting because of its large quantity and technical quality. This remains the case even if researchers limit themselves to only the most significant works.²⁸ Since verbal aspect theory flows directly out of modern linguistics, works on linguistics are also significant for understanding verbal aspect theory.²⁹ A helpful strategy for studying verbal

activity, though he would not explicitly translate it “she began to serve them” (as do, e.g., NET, NRSV, ESV, HCSB; cf. NIV).

²⁶ *Temporal Deixis*, pp. 27–28.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 53–56.

²⁸ See, e.g. (in chronological order), Porter, *Verbal Aspect*; Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*; the five essays by Carson, Porter, Fanning, Daryl D. Schmidt, and Moisés Silva in Part 1 of *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics*, ed. Porter and Carson; Kenneth L. McKay, “Time and Aspect in New Testament Greek,” *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1992): 209–28; *idem*, *New Syntax of the Verb*, pp. 35–38; Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, pp. 105–31; D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 65–78, 84–85; Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 494–512; Porter, *Idioms*, pp. 20–61; Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, pp. 1–59, 157–98; Porter, “Greek Grammar and Syntax,” pp. 89–92; Robert E. Picirilli, “The Meaning of the Tenses in New Testament Greek: Where Are We?” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 48 (September 2005): 533–55; Gary A. Long, “Tense and Aspect,” in *Grammatical Concepts 101 for Biblical Greek: Learning Biblical Greek Grammatical Concepts Through English Grammar* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2006), 60–77; Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*. See the corresponding bibliographies in these works (esp. those by Porter) for additional works.

²⁹ See, e.g. (in addition to the discussions on linguistics contained in the works listed in the previous footnote), R. R. K. Hartmann and F. C. Stork, *Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* (New York: Wiley, 1972); Bernard Comrie, *Aspect: An Introduction to the Study of Verbal Aspect and Related Problems*, Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976); *idem*, *Tense*, Cambridge Textbooks in Linguistics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Peter

aspect theory is to read a selection of key works, starting with lighter, more elementary readings and working up to heavier, more advanced ones. I would suggest reading the following works (which do not completely agree with each other) in roughly this order:

1. Porter, "Greek Grammar and Syntax," pp. 89–92.
2. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, pp. 65–78, 84–85.
3. Long, "Tense and Aspect," pp. 60–77.
4. Picirilli, "Meaning of the Tenses," pp. 533–55.
5. McKay, *New Syntax*, pp. 35–38.
6. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek*, pp. 105–31.
7. Porter, *Idioms*, pp. 20–61.
8. Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, pp. 494–586.
9. Decker, *Temporal Deixis*, pp. 1–59, 157–98.
10. Porter and Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics*, pp. 18–82.
11. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*.

Cotterell and Max Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1989); Stanley E. Porter, "Studying Ancient Languages from a Modern Linguistic Perspective: Essential Terms and Terminology," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 1 (1989): 147–72; Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds., *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 80 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994); Max Turner, "Modern Linguistics and the New Testament," in *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, ed. Joel B. Green (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), pp. 146–74; David Alan Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek: A Survey of Basic Concepts and Applications*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995); Jeffrey T. Reed, "Modern Linguistics and the New Testament: A Basic Guide to Theory, Terminology, and Literature," in *Approaches to New Testament Study*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and David Tombs, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 120 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), pp. 222–65; Porter, "Greek Language and Linguistics," pp. 7–20; Carl Bache, *The Study of Aspect, Tense, and Action: Towards a Theory of the Semantics of Grammatical Categories*, 2d ed. (New York: Lang, 1997); Mari Broman Olsen, *A Semantic and Pragmatic Model of Lexical and Grammatical Aspect*, ed. Laurence Horn, Outstanding Dissertations in Linguistics (New York: Garland, 1997); Stanley E. Porter, "The Basic Tools of Exegesis of the New Testament: A Bibliographic Essay" and "The Greek Language of the New Testament," in *Handbook to Exegesis of the New Testament*, ed. Stanley E. Porter, vol. 25 of New Testament Tools and Studies, ed. Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman (New York: Brill, 1997), pp. 27–34, 113–14; Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, eds., *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctures*, Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series 168, Studies in New Testament Greek 5 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999); David Alan Black, "The Study of New Testament Greek in the Light of Ancient and Modern Linguistics," in *Interpreting the New Testament: Essays on Methods and Issues*, ed. David Alan Black and David S. Dockery (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2001), pp. 230–52; Stanley E. Porter and Matthew Brook O'Donnell, "The Greek Verbal Network Viewed from a Probabilistic Standpoint: An Exercise in Hallidayan Linguistics," *Filologia Neotestamentaria* 14 (2001): 3–41; Stanley E. Porter, "Linguistic Criticism," in *Dictionary of Biblical Criticism and Interpretation*, ed. Stanley E. Porter (London: Routledge, 2007), 199–202.

12. Campbell, *Verbal Aspect*.
13. Decker, "The Poor Man's Porter," Oct. 1994, available at <http://www.ntresources.com/documents/porter.pdf>.
14. Porter, *Verbal Aspect*.

I made the mistake of reading Porter's *Verbal Aspect* first, and I would strongly discourage newcomers from doing that. Not having a solid background in linguistics, classical Greek, or verbal aspect theory, I found it to be an exceptionally challenging and technical Greek monograph.

One additional work to add near the top of the above list is D. A. Carson's lengthy appendix in his forthcoming *The Epistles of John*,³⁰ which promises to be the first commentary that fully incorporates verbal aspect theory.³¹ Carson's lengthy appendix on verbal aspect theory will be current with developments in verbal aspect studies and may prove to be the most accessible explanation available.

CONCLUSION

Most contemporary NT studies reflect one of three views of the Greek verb: *Aktionsart*, aspect plus time, or aspect. *Aktionsart* refers to the objective nature of an action, and aspect refers to the author's or speaker's subjective portrayal of an action. The former concerns pragmatics and the latter semantics. The net result of applying aspect theory to exegesis is not radically different interpretations. Instead, advocates of aspect theory argue, it enhances exegesis with increased nuance and the avoidance of common linguistic missteps.

The question with which NT interpreters must wrestle is, Which view on the nature of the entire Greek verbal system has the greatest explanatory power? A growing number of linguists and NT Greek grammarians are convinced that the answer is verbal aspect theory.

³⁰NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming).

³¹This is not to say that no other exegetical commentaries demonstrate awareness of verbal aspect theory. To the contrary, several are sensitive to it, avoid common linguistic gaffes, and interact with works such as Porter's *Verbal Aspect*. Cf. D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), pp. 184, 487, 519, 557, etc.; Moo, *Romans*, pp. 118, 193, 222, 226, 371, 382, 385, 397, 536, 558, 658, 677, 679, 734, 799, 863, etc. (though cf. 98, 146, 869); David E. Aune, *Revelation*, Word Biblical Commentary 52A–B (Nashville: Nelson, 1997–1998), pp. clxxxiv–clxxxviii, 77, 216, 430, 642, etc.; Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), pp. 119, 169, 322, 363–64, 389, 422, 462, etc. Another noteworthy volume, scheduled for publication in December 2007, is Stanley E. Porter, *Romans*, Readings: A New Biblical Commentary (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, forthcoming), which will no doubt incorporate verbal aspect theory, although appearing in a series that focuses more on genre and rhetoric than detailed exegesis of every verb.