

Ch. 15, Introduction to Verbs

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This material replaces key sections of ch. 15 of Mounce (2d ed.) to provide more technical terminology, to clarify a few key points, and make a few changes where I happen to disagree with Bill. These changes will save you from unlearning grammatical concepts further down the road in your study of Greek. To simplify these matters, the information below completely replaces the material in Mounce. A good bit of it is word-for-word identical, other parts are revised to various degrees. No indication is given as to which is which. (You can obviously compare it with the book if you really want to know!)

English Grammar

15.1–6. [OK “as is.”]

15.7. Be sure that you observe Mounce’s introductory statement to this section: “**Tense** in *English...*” (italics added). The category of tense is quite different in Greek.

15.8. **Aspect and Aktionsart.**

English *does express* what we call *aspect*, although that terminology isn’t often used (probably rarely if ever in high school English). For example, what is the difference between these two statements?

- I studied last night.
- I was studying last night.

The first sentence—“I studied last night”—merely says that an event occurred last night. It does not give you a clue as to the precise nature of your study time other than it happened. It views the action as a *simple* event. This is called *complete or perfective aspect* (action “viewed as a whole”). From the statement alone we don’t know if your study was a hasty glance over your vocabulary cards that took 30 seconds or if you spent 4 hours of uninterrupted, concentrated study. Nor does it tell us if you finished studying or if you still have more to do. We typically add an *-ed* to English verbs to indicate perfective aspect, though there are other ways to do it also. In English, perfective aspect usually refers to events in the past (“I studied,” “I ate,” etc.), but it can also be used for present time (“I study,” “I eat”).

The second statement—“I was studying last night”—pictures the action of studying as an ongoing action, a process, something that took place over a period of time. (Note that we still don’t know how long you studied or whether or not you finished.) This is called *incomplete or imperfective aspect* (action “viewed as a process”). In English we usually use a helping verb and append *-ing* to the end of the verb to indicate this. In English, imperfective aspect is often used of events in the present (“I am studying,” “I am eating”), but it can also be used to refer to past time (“I was studying,” “I was eating”).

This difference between a simple event and a process is what we mean by *aspect*.

15.9. **Completed and punctiliar.** The complete/perfective aspect is not the same as what is sometimes called *punctiliar action*. The English punctiliar describes an action as occurring in a single point of time. For example, “I hit the ball.” (Punctiliar is actually a category of *Aktionsart*, not aspect; see below.)

15.10–11. [OK “as is.”]

Greek Grammar

15.12–15. [OK “as is.”]

15.16. Tense. In English, *tense* refers to the *time* when the action of the verb takes place. If you study your Greek right now, then the verb is in the *present tense* (“study”). If you are planning on doing it tomorrow, then the verb is in the *future tense* (“will study”). If you did it last night [I’m sure that you did!], then the verb is in the past tense (“studied”). In other words, in English the terms *tense* and *time* refer to the same thing, i.e., when the subject of the verb performed the action.

15.16a. Tense (Greek). The term *tense* is used differently in Greek grammars; it is quite easy to become confused. It perhaps would be easiest at first simply to use *tense* and *time* interchangeably. But this would build a significantly erroneous misconception into your basic thinking that will constantly get in the way of proper exegesis down the road. So, from the very beginning, we will use exact terminology.

In Greek a verb form carries *only* the grammatical meaning of *aspect*; it does *not* express *time*. For example, the aorist form refers only to the way the verb is formed/spelled (to be technical, we could say the “morphology”): the grammatical form that identifies perfective aspect. It tells us *nothing* about *when* the event occurred. An aorist form may describe an event in the past (it often does), the present, the future, or an “omnitemporal” event (one that is always true), as well as one that is timeless (i.e., one for which time is irrelevant: 1 + 1 is 2). The same principle is basically true of the other forms: present, imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect.¹

The complicating factor is that traditional Greek grammars have used the same name for the *form* of the Greek verb as English does for the *time* of the action: *tense*. In this grammar, Mounce uses the term “tense” to refer only to the *form* of the verb. When he wants to refer to *when* the action took place, he uses the term *time*. It would be even better if we could jettison the term *tense* altogether and just refer to the *form* of the verb (and, indeed, that is what I will do in class), but the tradition is well entrenched so we are probably stuck with an infelicitous term.² Just be sure not to confuse *tense* (as it is used in Greek) with *time* (i.e., *tense* in English).

15.16b. Time (Greek). A logical question to ask next would be: if Greek “tense” (i.e., *form*) doesn’t indicate time, then how do we know to what time a writer refers? There is no sweet, simple answer. The short answer is *context*. The technical answer is that Greek uses deictic indicators in the context, which, along with other pragmatic³ factors, help us determine the writer’s intended time reference. That may seem subjective to us, but it is only because of our English language, which, no matter what else it may do, always indicates time as part of the verb. There are a number of other languages in the world, however, which get along quite nicely, thank you, without any temporal reference at all in the verbal system.

15.17. Aspect. Because it is different from English (or perhaps we should say, is not discussed much in English—it does exist) *aspect* and *Aktionsart* in Greek seem more complicated than they really are. In English one of the most significant features of the

¹Some of these do not have the full range that is evident in the aorist form, but the principle is true: the form does not identify a particular time relationship.

²As Dr. Engle will tell you, “hardening of the categories” is a difficult disease to treat!

³*Pragmatics* is one subdivision of *semantics*—a field of linguistic study.

verb is what is called *tense*, by which English indicates the *time* relationship of the action: past, present, or future. The Greek verb, by contrast, does *not* indicate the time of the action by the form of the verb. In other words, Greek verbs do not have *tense* like English verbs (even though the term *tense* is traditionally used in Greek, it refers to something different from what it does in English). Instead Greek verbs express *aspect* and *Aktionsart*. The basic genius of the Greek verb is the ability to express *what type of action* the speaker/writer wants to describe.

An example that shows the importance of these distinctions is Jesus' words to his disciples: "If anyone wishes to come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mark 8:34). The Greek words translated as "deny" and "take up" are simple event statements (perfective aspect) while "follow" is a process statement (imperfective aspect). The aspect of "deny" and "take up" does not tell us anything about the nature of those actions except that they are to occur. But the aspect of "follow" is portrayed by the writer as a process. (This could be described in much more technical terms, but this simplified description will serve for now.)

In Greek, aspect and *Aktionsart*, though related concepts, must be distinguished. Both relate to the type of action that is involved. Aspect is the category that tells us how the author portrays the situation (as a whole, as a process, or as a state). It is a subjective category in that a writer may choose to portray the *same* situation as *either* a complete event *or* as a process *or* as a state. (Note that all of the "study statements" above describe the *same* situation.) This is the category that is expressed in Greek by the *form* of the verb. That is, how the verb is spelled (stem, endings, etc.) tells us how the writer has chosen to portray/view the situation. (See the explanation of the three aspects below.)

Aktionsart is not the same as aspect. *Aktionsart* is a statement of the *actual nature* of the action/situation. This is not based on the *form* of the verb (the form specifies aspect), but on a combination of lexis (what the word means) and context. This area has not yet received adequate study by NT scholars, though some important work has been done.⁴ There is not yet a standardized terminology, though terms such as state, activity, accomplishment, climax, or punctual are often used.⁵ Classification is on the basis of factors such as dynamicity, durativity, or telicity carried by a combination of lexis and context. We will not focus much attention on *Aktionsart* in our first year study (more on that comes next year in Greek Reading), but it is important to keep the distinction clearly in mind. What too frequently happens is that inexact statements are made that describe the *Aktionsart* of a word on the basis of the verb form—but this confuses *Aktionsart* and aspect. (See the "Summary" at the end of this section for further discussion.)

In Greek there are *three aspects* (the illustration above only used two of them).⁶

⁴The most significant study of *Aktionsart* in relation to NT Greek is Buist Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in NT Greek* (Oxford, 1990) [hereafter cited as FVA].

⁵These are Fanning's categories. Other classifications use: state, activity, accomplishment, achievement, semelfactive, and stage-level state.

⁶The names for the three aspects used here are more technical than Mounce's terms. They come from the field of linguistics. By learning them now, you will know the terms that are most

- **Imperfective aspect** is the technical designation for verbs that describes the action as a *process*. (Some grammars, such as Mounce, call this *continuous aspect*.)
- **Perfective aspect** is the technical designation for verbs that describes the action as a complete event, without commenting on whether or not it is a process. (Note that this is defined as a *complete* event, *not* as a completed one—there is a significant difference. Some grammars, such as Mounce, call this *undefined aspect*.)
- **Stative aspect** is the technical designation for verbs that describes a state of affairs (a condition) that exists with no reference to any progress and which involves no change. (Some grammars, such as Mounce, call this *perfect aspect*.)

If we use this third aspect in a sentence similar to the examples given above, we might say: *I have studied*. The point of this statement is not on the action that took place, and not that it was either a process or a simple event, but on the *state of affairs that exists*: I have studied and therefore I know something. The fact that you spent time doing something (i.e., studying) is really irrelevant to the statement (though sometimes it can be inferred from the context).⁷ The focus is on the “studied state” in which you now find yourself. English has no exact equivalent to stative aspect. It will often be translated as a simple present tense in English (“I am studied” in the sense that “I know”) or sometimes as an English perfect (“I have studied”). A biblical example is Jesus’ statement from the cross: “It is finished.” This cry declared that his work on the cross was now in a state of completion.⁸ You will not encounter stative aspect verbs until ch. 25. We will talk more about them then.

Perfective aspect versus “punctiliar.” One of the primary areas of confusion in Greek exegesis comes when people confuse the Greek perfective aspect with the English punctiliar aspect. Although both are legitimate concepts *in their own languages*, it is *not* legitimate to equate the two. The English punctiliar describes a momentary action as occurring in a single point of time.

Part of the misconception surrounding the Greek perfective aspect is due to the fact that it *can* be used to describe a punctiliar action (e.g., “he fell dead”). However, a verb that refers to a punctiliar action is not punctiliar because of the aspect of the Greek verb but because of the context and the meaning of the words. That is, we know that “fell dead” happens only once—and quickly at that (“punctiliar”)—because of the combination of the two words “fell” and “dead.”

commonly used across a wider range of fields (e.g., you will use essentially the same terms in Hebrew next year, even though they will have slightly different definitions).

⁷You not infrequently will hear some well-intentioned person who misses the point of the stative aspect and finds great exegetical “ore” in the fact that this state is the result of a past, completed act. Although there may well be such an act in the past that gave rise to the present state (“results”), it is invalid to “prove it” from the simple fact that the Greek verb has stative aspect. (Of course, you should also know up front that not everyone agrees with this explanation! But then you want to know what the prof thinks is true—don’t you?!)

⁸Although it is true that this state came about as a result of a previous action and that it will have effects that continue into eternity, that is not what *this verb* says. Jesus’ only point is to describe the state that pertained at the time.

The same Greek verb (“die”) could also be used to portray the same situation as a process by using the imperfective form (“he was dying”) or a state of affairs (“he is dead”).⁹ Although there are some words that naturally are used in one or the other of the aspects because of the word’s meaning, most can be used in any of the three aspects. For example, one of the Greek words for “know” (οἶδα) is always used in the form that expresses stative aspect because the point is: “I am in the state of knowing.” It never means, “I am learning (i.e., coming to know) something.”

The three aspects that we have just described can be identified by the verb forms that are used. The following table lists all the verb forms with their aspects. These aspects never change. That is, aorist forms always express perfective aspect, present forms always express imperfective aspect, etc. (That does not mean that they will always be translated exactly the same way, but that’s another subject for a later time!)

Perfective aspect	aorist form
Imperfective aspect	present and imperfect forms
Stative aspect	perfect and pluperfect forms

There are some general patterns that will facilitate our beginning efforts at translating verbs. We will use a “default” translation of each verb form that often works, even though by doing so we are assuming something that technically isn’t always true.¹⁰ This default will tend to imply certain time references for certain forms (e.g., aorist forms will default to a simple past in English: “I studied”)—you will just have to be sure to remember that the defaults are only for pedagogical purposes as we are learning verbs and are not absolute rules that apply every time in every context.

15.18–25. [OK “as is.”]

The following summary is taken, unchanged (except for f.n. numbers) from my published dissertation.¹¹ It gives a broader survey of this area, as well as some more pre-

⁹If you want to get very specific, the Greek perfective aspect does not describe what *actually* happened. It describes how the writer chooses to tell you about the action. You could describe a waterfall with an imperfective verb, emphasizing the continual flow of water. You could also use the perfective aspect to describe the same waterfall. This would mean that you did not care whether the water was continually falling or not. It means that you did not care to emphasize the continual flowing. You just wanted to say that the water started at the top and ended at the bottom.

¹⁰ There is no other way to do it in English because *all* English verbs, regardless of what else they do, always carry time reference. The characteristics of our own language force us to add something to the text when we translate even if it is not part of the Greek form. This is a common problem in Bible translation, not only in time reference (and a number of other languages do not have the same past/present/future as does English), but in other grammatical categories as well (such as person).

¹¹Rodney J. Decker, “Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect” (Th.D. diss., Central Baptist Seminary, 1998), 57–63. Now published (same title) in the series *Studies in Biblical Greek*, ed. D. A. Carson, v. 10 (Bern/New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 26–28.

cise, technical definitions. It is provided for those interested in greater understanding; you are not responsible for the material below for class purposes.

Summary of Verbal Aspect

It is essential to identify and define key terms when describing languages. The differences between languages (not immediately apparent to native speakers who use their own language without conscious grammatical selection) must be evaluated based on a standard set of definitions.¹² The survey of this chapter has reflected a range of definitions for the key terms. There is no consistency within either NT studies or in linguistics in this field. Based on the preceding pages, the following categories, terms, and definitions will be employed in the remainder of this dissertation. Since the dissertation proposes to be an examination of Porter's theory of aspect, the definition of that term follows his; the definition of *Aktionsart*, however (which Porter does not treat in any detail), reflects the other studies examined above.

Aspect is the semantic category by which a speaker or writer grammaticalizes a view of the situation by the selection of a particular verb form in the verbal system.¹³ This is a grammatical category expressed by the form of the verb. The view is either perfective, imperfective, or stative and is expressed by the aorist, present/imperfect, and perfect/pluperfect forms respectively. Perfective aspect views the situation in summary as a complete event without regard for its progress (or lack thereof).¹⁴ Imperfective aspect

¹²Different languages express tense (in its traditional sense) and aspect differently. There is no universal way to express these semantic nuances even though aspect appears to be a universal semantic category (tense, understood as a grammaticalized expression of time, does not, however, appear to be universal). Some languages use separate morphemes for tense and aspect (e.g., Russian), others express both categories primarily through the use of auxiliaries (e.g., English), some have overlapping forms that express both tense and aspect (e.g., French), others express one of these categories grammatically and the other contextually (e.g., koine Greek), and some encode only one of these categories (Mandarin, e.g., has aspect but not tense). Olsen, "Model," 4-5 notes some of these examples. This point has particular relevance in two areas: studying and describing a language that uses one or both of these conventions from the perspective of a language that expresses only one of the categories (or that grammaticalizes them differently), and second, translating between two such languages. "Grammaticalized distinctions are obligatory, whereas ungrammaticalized ones are optional" (Binnick, *Time and the Verb*, 34). In the case of translation, some receptor languages may mandate the expression of a category that is not grammaticalized in the donor language. This necessitates a decision by the translator of what to *add* to the translation that is not expressed by his source. The reverse situation necessitates omission of information or paraphrase to communicate the information that is explicit in the donor language. To illustrate in abstract terms, if language A expresses the following categories grammatically: □ ○ □ ▶ ✱, but language B expresses the categories □ ▶ ✱, there will be some adjustments necessary in description and translation. (Binnick [ibid.] gives an excellent example using Turkish and English.)

¹³*Situation* is used here in the sense that Bache defines: "a cover term for all sorts of states, events, actions, processes, activities, etc. In other words, a situation is expressed by a finite predicator plus the sentence functions associated with it (subject, objects, complements and adverbials)" (*Aspect, Tense and Action*, 125).

¹⁴Note that the definition uses *complete*, not *completed*. To use *completed* implies a time-based conception of the situation. *Complete*, by contrast, simply refers to the entire situation with no

views the situation as in progress without regard for its beginning or end. Stative aspect depicts a state of affairs that exists with no reference to any progress and which involves no change. All of these aspects are the speaker's view of the situation. They are sometimes determined by various factors (lexis, grammatical construction, context, etc.) and other times are the speaker's reasoned choice of a viewpoint that best expresses the nuance he desires to communicate. The same situation may often be described by two or even three such viewpoints.¹⁵

Aktionsart is a description of the actional features ascribed to the verbal referent as to the way in which it happens or exists.¹⁶ The Vendler taxonomy as adapted to describe the *Aktionsart* of Greek verbs in the NT by Fanning and Olsen is probably the best such system developed to date.¹⁷ It is not a grammatical category based on the form of the verb, but is a pragmatic category based on the meaning of the word (lexis) as it is used in a particular context.¹⁸ Appropriate descriptions of these classes include state, activity, accomplishment, climax, or punctual.¹⁹ Classification is on the basis of factors

comment as to whether or not it has been completed. Many writers confuse or ignore this distinction (e.g., W. Klein, *Time in Language*, GL, 28 and Olsen, "Model," 7).

¹⁵The definition of *aspect* is based on Porter's *Idioms*, 21–2, with only slight modifications suggested by the discussions of Fanning, Wallace, and Baugh. The term *reasoned choice* does not intend that the speaker makes a deliberate, conscious choice for which he could give a list of reasons. Rather it emphasizes the fact that the choices made by a speaker, though often automatic and subconscious, are reasonable choices that are part of a consistent network of choices made available in his language and they therefore carry semantic value (see Brook, "Authorial Choice," 9–10). This choice describes a "conceptual reality" in that "the situations expressed are projected situations, i.e., still real- or possible-world situations but *real-or possible-world situations as conceived by the locutionary agent and his addressees*" (Bache, *Aspect, Tense and Action*, 55). This is a subjective conception but not solipsistic due to the innate human ability of conceptualization and classification that is shared by all people (despite some elements of cultural difference). Bache explains this as a human genetic endowment (*ibid.*, 57). From a biblical perspective, man's creation as the image of God (which probably includes his language capacity as part of a created rational nature) can account for this ability to communicate intelligibly despite the subjective element involved.

¹⁶This definition draws on those proposed by Bache, Fanning, and Binnick (see above). It is not used with the same meaning that it has in the standard, NT reference grammars, although the definition here may be viewed as a logical, contiguous development from the traditional use as more recent scholars have refined the terminology. Fanning also refers to it as "procedural character" (FVA, 41); Binnick calls it "Aristotelian aspect" (*Time and the Verb*, 170–3, 457–8); Fleischman's choice is "situation type" (*Tense and Narrativity*, 20–2); and Bache has recently proposed that it be referred to simply as "action" (*Aspect, Tense and Action*, 12).

¹⁷Klein, however, has posed a serious challenge to this entire approach. This may indicate that further refinement or modification of this system of describing *Aktionsart* is needed (*Time in Language*, 30–5). Since the criticisms focus on *Aktionsart* rather than aspect, they will not be addressed in this dissertation.

¹⁸That the same word may have different *Aktionsart* values depending on contextual adjuncts suggests that it is not a semantic, word-level category but is a pragmatic, clause-level feature (see Binnick, *Time and the Verb*, 457–8 and Fleischman, *Tense*, 22).

¹⁹These are Fanning's categories (see fig. 4, p. 45). If Olsen's were used, the list would be: state, activity, accomplishment, achievement, semelfactive, and stage-level state. It is not the purpose of this dissertation to resolve the terminology in this area. Part of the question raised by these two taxonomies is whether an equipollent (Fanning) or privative (Olsen) analysis should be used.

such as dynamicity, durativity, or telicity carried by a combination of lexis and context.²⁰

Lexis is not synonymous with *Aktionsart*. While *Aktionsart* is a descriptive category for the kind of a situation described, lexis refers to the semantic, denotative value of the word itself.²¹ Thus in the statement, ἐσθίει μετὰ τῶν ἀμαρτωλῶν (he was eating with the sinners, Mark 2:16), the lexis of ἐσθίει refers to eating (rather than, e.g., running; the context clarifies that the figurative sense of “destroy” is not in view), the aspect is imperfective (present form views it as a process), and the *Aktionsart* is that of an activity (change, unbounded, durative, thus an action in progress without reaching completion). In this example, note that the aspect and *Aktionsart* have complementary, overlapping descriptions (both include some element of process). This is expressed differently, however: aspect expresses a view of the process grammatically, *Aktionsart* expresses it lexically and contextually.²²

The web of semantic factors comprised by aspect, lexis, and *Aktionsart*, along with other grammatical and contextual factors (adjuncts, deixis, etc.) is referred to in this book as the verbal complex.²³ 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 other contextual factors.

The categories often used in traditional grammars (such as tendential, gnomic, or iterative) are not appropriate to either aspect or *Aktionsart* 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 αὐτοῖς describes an iterative activity.

²⁰These three tests of the “situation taxonomy” are those proposed by Olsen, “Model,” 31–45. For Fanning’s rules, see FVA, 128–63.

²¹Fanning refers to this as the “inherent lexical meaning” (FVA, 126); Klein calls it “lexical content” (*Time in Language*, 36, 72–3).

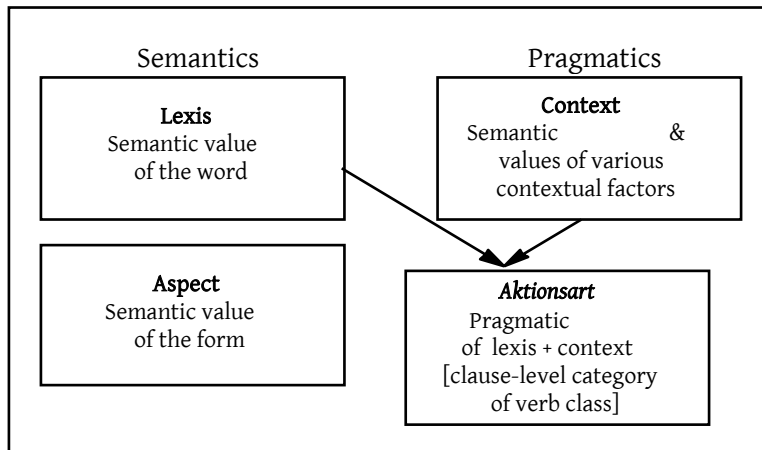
²²The same situation could be referenced with perfective aspect using an aorist form—but note that a different stem would be used (*ἄγ > ἔφαγον).

²³“Verbal complex” is used as a descriptive phrase and is not intended to coin a new technical term. It is what Klein refers to as “the inherent lexical content of full VPs [= verb phrases]” (*Time in Language*, 31). Other terms have been used for this category, but there has been no agreement, at least in the NT field. Olsen uses *aspect* as the broad term and then differentiates grammatical aspect and lexical aspect (“Model,” 9–12), but this does not adequately reflect the contextual factors. The only solution here would be to define aspect as a discourse level phenomenon rather than a grammatical one (Hopper has suggested this: “Aspect Between Discourse and Grammar,” in *Tense-Aspect*, ed. P. Hopper, 5). Another alternative is proposed by Wallace who employs the term *Aktionsart* as the umbrella term (GGBB, 499), but this is decidedly non-standard terminology and makes aspect part of *Aktionsart* rather than distinguishing the two categories.

²⁴N. Turner, *Syntax*, vol. 3 of MHT, 3:67

Porter has made a similar observation: “Terminologically, these names [i.e., iterative, etc.] tend to confuse form and function, as well as semantics and pragmatics. I believe such categories are better seen as lexical and contextual interpretations of a particular grammatical and semantic category.”²⁵ Such terms are relevant as descriptions of the verbal complex, but not of specific verbs or specific forms of verbs. This approach, illustrated in figure 9, seeks to balance formal and contextual contributions, form and function, semantics and pragmatics.²⁶

Fig. 9. The Verbal Complex



²⁵S. Porter, “Tense Terminology and Greek Language Study: A Linguistic Re-Evaluation,” *Sheffield Working Papers in Language and Linguistics* 3 [1986]: 83.

²⁶As Hopper points out, “a form must have a consistent value or else communication is impossible; we cannot have linguistic forms which derive *all* of their meanings *only* from context” (“Aspect Between Discourse and Grammar,” in *Tense-Aspect*, ed., P. Hopper, 4, emphasis added; see also FVA, 81–4).