Periphrastics

A periphrastic is the combination of a linking verb and an adverbial participle (usually nominative case) which together express a single idea. This construction is used in place of a single finite verb. The linking verb is usually a form of εἰμί, though sometimes γίνομαι (e.g., Mark 1:4; 9:3, 7), ὑπάρχω, and possibly ἔχω are used.

Although periphrastic use is very common in language in general (some languages such as English use the periphrastic construction as the predominant verb form, e.g., “I was eating”), it is not nearly as common in Greek. When it is used it often (not always) has a “certain emphasis” (BDF, 179 §353 (1); see also MHT 2:451; Zerwick, §360 [who calls the instance in Acts 25:10 “a stronger and more picturesque expression”]; BDAG, s.v., εἰμί, 286.11.e, f.). In classical Greek this “emphasis” was often a matter of duration of time, but such usage is often not present in the Koine, especially when a text is heavily influenced by an Aramaic style as is the case with Mark. (Howard suggests that this may be a more likely use in John and Paul, but not elsewhere in the NT; MHT 2:451.)

Periphrastics are common in Mark—much more so than Matthew (25 versus 3). This is perhaps a reflection of Mark’s mother-tongue being Aramaic. (Matthew, though also a native speaker of Aramaic, writes more polished Greek.) The Aramaic influence in Mark is debated by various scholars, though the general consensus seems to point to some Semitic influence, if only as mediated through the LXX (i.e., the frequent use of periphrasis in Mark may be viewed as a Septuagintalism). Periphrasis is much more common in Aramaic than in Hebrew. Periphrasis begins to appear in later Hebrew, perhaps by influence from Aramaic. For Hebrew examples and discussion, see Waltke & O’Connor, 629–30, §37.7.1.c. (e.g., Esth 6:1, וַיָּרָאָה כַּאֲפֵי, “and they were read”); for Aramaic, see...
Rosenthal, 55 §177 (e.g., Dan 2:31, where the participle precedes the verb [word order is very loose in the Aramaic sections of Daniel]: יָנַחְתָּיָהוֹ you were seeing”).

To translate a periphrastic, parse the equivalent single-verb form by using the person, number, and mood of the linking verb and the tense, voice, and lexis of the participle, then translate accordingly. For example, ἦν ... ἐνδεδυμένος (Mark 1:6) functions as a prf mid ind 3rd sg of ἐνδύω: the linking verb ἦν is an impft act ind 3rd sg εἰμί, and supplies the semantics: indicative mood, 3rd person, singular; the participle ἐνδεδυμένος is a prf mid ptc masc nom sg of ἐνδύω, and supplies the semantics: perfect tense, middle voice, and the lexical form ἐνδύω.

Periphrastics are best cataloged according to verbal aspect. Thus in Mark there are imperfective periphrastics (imperfect of εἰμί with a present participle, e.g., 1:22, ἦν διδάσκων), stative periphrastics (imperfect of εἰμί with a perfect participle, e.g., 15:46, ἦν λελατομημένον), and future imperfective periphrastics (future of εἰμί with a present participle, e.g., 13:13, ἔσεσθε μισούμενοι). There are no perfective periphrastics in Mark (it is debatable if they occur elsewhere). The future imperfective periphrastic is the only way to express imperfective aspect in a context of expectation (i.e., future time). The time value comes in part from the future form of εἰμί, whereas the imperfective aspect comes from the participle.

Not every instance of a linking verb with an adverbial participle is a periphrastic. Scholars differ as to how this is determined and how any given instance is to be evaluated. Some suggest that the only basis is “appropriateness in the context” (Fanning, 311). Others propose more specific guidelines such as denying as periphrastics any constructions with words intervening between the verb and the participle except conjunctions and words which explicitly modify the participle (Porter 1994, 45–46; see his more extensive discussion in 1993, 441–86). All instances in Mark in which εἰμί and the participle are immediately adjacent are, indeed, periphrastics. In this Handbook each instance is evaluated in light of its context and the difference is noted in debatable examples. This is an area that deserves further study since a decision one way or the other can make an interpretive difference in a passage (see, e.g., the discussion at Mark 1:13).