

Olsen, Mari Broman. *A Semantic and Pragmatic Model of Lexical and Grammatical Aspect*. Outstanding Dissertations in Linguistics Series. New York: Garland Press, 1997.

This specialized volume is the published version of the author's Ph.D. dissertation at Northwestern University (1994). It addresses verbal aspect, which is a major issue in contemporary linguistic theory with considerable significance for New Testament study. Following the pioneering work of Stanley Porter and Buist Fanning that explored this area in terms of New Testament Greek, Olsen's work represents one of the first major studies to interact with and critique these proposals.¹

For those unacquainted with the topic (which probably includes most pastors who studied Greek in seminary prior to the mid-1990s, and perhaps many current students as well), an introductory explanation of verbal aspect is not only helpful but essential. The issues that underlie Olsen's book evidence a contrast between traditional explanations of the Greek verb and more recent discussion that has arisen from modern linguistic study. It will be helpful to survey several related facets of the verb: tense, *Aktionsart*, and aspect. Readers who received their training in Greek a number of years ago may find the differences substantial.

Tense is the expression of a time relationship by the grammatical form of the verb (called *grammaticalization*). Although it seems "normal" to English speakers, not all languages have tense as defined here. As Moisés Silva points out, "whereas English verbs, whatever else they do, always seem to indicate time reference, a rather large number of languages around the world manage quite nicely, thank you, with verbs that do not by themselves have that reference. The speakers of these languages, of course, can

¹Stanley Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*. Studies in Biblical Greek, vol. 1 (New York: Peter Lang, 1989) and Buist Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

indicate the time through lexical and other means (*yesterday, tomorrow*, the context of the utterance, etc.), but the verbal form itself gives no hint.”²

Beginning Greek grammars have typically taught the Greek tenses as indicators of absolute tense, at least in the indicative mood: present tense is present time (thus λύω is translated, “I am loosing”), aorist tense is past time (ἐλυσά, “I loosed”), etc. The discussion seldom goes beyond this point. Many students continue to exegete Scripture on this basis for as long as they use Greek as a tool (which, unfortunately, is often not very long). It is thus not uncommon to hear pronouncements that a particular event refers to punctiliar action in past time because the verb is an aorist tense. Intermediate and advanced grammars have been more careful in this area. Many twentieth-century works include *Aktionsart* (see below) in their explanation of tense, though often retaining temporal reference as a parallel category.

A current discussion in Greek grammar is whether or not Greek verbs grammaticalize time at all. Instead, some contend that the only significance of tense forms is to indicate *aspect* (defined below). Although this sounds like a novel idea to some (and is too often dismissed without a hearing), it has been argued persuasively by K. McKay and Stanley Porter. As McKay puts it, “the tenses of ancient Greek do not signal time except by implication from their relationship to their context. Most of the tenses could be used with present, past, or even future reference, depending on the time indicated mainly by other factors in the context. ... The context must be the deciding factor in every instance.”³ Nor is this a totally new concept. Robertson pointed out many years ago that the *tense* “is a misnomer and a hindrance to the understanding of this aspect of the verb-form. Time ... is not the original nor the general idea of what we call tense. Indeed it cannot be shown of any verb-form that it had originally any reference to

²Moisés Silva, *God, Language and Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 112–13.

³K. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), 39–40.

time. We must therefore dismiss time from our minds in the study of the forms of the tenses as well as in the matter of syntax. It is too late to get a new name, however.”⁴

Buist Fanning’s approach to verbal aspect is very close to McKay’s and Porter’s in many areas, but Fanning parts company with them regarding the question of temporal reference. He contends that the tenses do include time reference in the indicative mood (*Verbal Aspect*, 17–19, 29, 113–14). Likewise Dan Wallace’s new grammar argues that “in general, time is absolute in the indicative, relative in the participle, and non-existent in the other moods.”⁵ Fanning and Wallace treat examples of verb forms used contrary to their traditional temporal category as exceptions to the rule. Porter, by contrast, argues that there are too many such exceptions to handle in that fashion and consequently jettisons temporal reference altogether as a grammaticalized feature of the verb. The verb forms are therefore not tenses in the technical sense. The terms *aorist tense*, *present tense*, etc., are merely traditional designations of morphological forms.

The German word *Aktionsart* (“kind of action”) became a common term in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century discussion of the Greek verb. Robertson, for example, defined three *Aktionsarten*: punctiliar, durative, and perfected state.⁶

These correspond to the aorist, present, and perfect tense forms. By this he intends to describe in some way the actual nature of the action (or state) described by the verb. A present tense describes “linear or durative *action*,” and the perfect “the continuation of perfected or completed *action*.” His definition of the aorist is slightly different, however, in that it indicates “momentary or punctiliar” action “*regarded as a whole*.”⁷ This third definition comes closer to aspect than *Aktionsart*. It also illustrates a common problem

⁴A. T. Robertson, *A Grammar of the Greek New Testament in the Light of Historical Research*, 4th ed. (Nashville: Broadman, 1923), 343–44.

⁵Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996).

⁶Robertson, *Grammar*, 823–24.

⁷*Ibid.*, 823, emphasis added.

with earlier discussions: the failure to distinguish between aspect and *Aktionsart*. Contemporary discussion has not reached unanimity as to the exact distinction between aspect and *Aktionsart*, but it has agreed that they are distinct elements of the verb.

As suggested above, the bulk of recent discussion has focused on the nature and role of verbal aspect in distinction from *Aktionsart*. Both Porter and Fanning agree that aspect relates to how a speaker chooses to portray an action. Aspect is defined by Porter as “a morphologically-based semantic category which grammaticalizes the author/speaker’s reasoned subjective choice of conception of a process.” He explains later that “rather than reflecting a temporal distinction or a differing objective characterization of the kind of action [*Aktionsart*], each choice of verb tense reflects an attempt by the speaker to grammaticalize his conception of the process.”⁸ The functional names that Porter uses to describe the three aspects in Greek are: *perfective* (the aspect of the aorist forms), *imperfective* (present and imperfect forms), and *stative* (perfect and pluperfect forms). Perfective aspect views the action as a whole, imperfective as a process, and stative depicts an existing, complex state of affairs.

Aspect does not describe the action in an objective way but is rather the speaker’s (subjective) choice to portray it either as a whole, as in process, or as an existing state. The same event may be described from more than one perspective. An event that occurs over a lengthy period of time can be described with the perfective aspect if the speaker wants to refer to the entire event; e.g., Rev. 20:4, ἐβασίλευσαν μετὰ τοῦ Χριστοῦ χίλια ἔτη—note that the aorist form (ἐβασίλευσαν) is used to describe an event that continues for a rather lengthy period (χίλια ἔτη, 1,000 years!). Likewise an event that takes a relatively short time can be described using the imperfective aspect; e.g., Mark 2:5, ὁ Ἰησοῦς ... λέγει τῷ παραλυτικῷ, τέκνον, ἀφίενταί σου αἱ ἁμαρτίαι—the present form (ἀφίενταί) is used to describe an event that was instantaneous.

⁸Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, xi, 86.

This reviewer would suggest the following summary of these terms.⁹ *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. 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).¹⁰ Imperfective aspect 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.

Aktionsart is a description of the actional features ascribed to the verbal referent as to the way in which it happens or exists. The Vendler taxonomy as adapted to describe the *Aktionsart* of Greek verbs in the New Testament by Fanning and Olsen is probably the best such system developed to date. 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. (That 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.) Appropriate descriptions of these

⁹This summary is drawn from the writer's dissertation that was submitted this spring to Central Baptist Seminary (Minneapolis): "Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect."

¹⁰Note 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 comment as to whether or not it has been completed. Many writers confuse or ignore this distinction.

classes include state, activity, accomplishment, climax, or punctual. Classification is on the basis of the dynamicity, durativity, or telicity carried by a combination of lexis and context.

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. Thus in the statement, ἐσθίει μετὰ τῶν ἁμαρτωλῶν (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.

The web of semantic factors comprised by aspect, lexis, and *Aktionsart*, along with other grammatical and contextual factors (adjuncts, deixis, etc.) may be referred to 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 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. They 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.

The exegetical implications of this approach to the verb are obvious.¹¹ If Porter's explanation of tense and aspect is correct, then temporal reference should not be assumed based on a facile identification of the tense form. Instead temporal indicators in the context must be sought to determine the appropriate time. Likewise it will be important to focus on lexis and context (not tense form) before determining the nature of the action involved. Consideration should also be given to the possible reasons for the writer's use of a particular aspect.

With that rather extensive background (which is more than necessary for many books), we can now turn our attention to Olsen's work. She uses the term *aspect* as a general term that relates to the "internal temporal constituency" of a situation. This she divides into two categories: grammatical aspect expresses a *view* of that internal temporal constituency (classed as perfective or imperfective, 59–116), and lexical aspect, which expresses the *nature* of the internal temporal constituency of the situation (25–57). Perfective aspect is defined as indicating a completed situation, imperfective as an ongoing situation (7). To describe the nature of the situation (lexical aspect), she employs Vendler's taxonomy to classify the inherent temporal properties of the verb stem. Aspectual meaning is compositional, i.e., the entire clause must be considered since it is the combination of multiple elements (modifiers, etc.) that produces the full aspectual

¹¹Few commentaries address these issues (D. A. Carson's recent commentary on John is one of the better examples of this [*The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991)]), but the exegete may not bypass them for that reason. D. A. Carson (*Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996]) and Moises Silva (*God, Language and Scripture*) present the practical exegetical significance of these matters in much greater detail. These books are highly recommended to the pastor or missionary who desires to keep abreast of developments in Greek grammar. Although the volumes on aspect by Porter and Fanning are "heavier" than many will care to read, several intermediate grammars reflect each of these positions in a more readable form: Stanley Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (2d ed., Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, and Richard Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek* (Nashville: Broadman, 1994). Of these, Porter's volume is perhaps the most useful on this subject. Wallace is encyclopedic in scope and is a valuable reference work for the pastor; it replaces the larger reference grammars for most practical purposes. Young has a good summary of aspect theory, but he has not adequately integrated it with his discussion of the use of the various tenses.

meaning (14–17). This feature of Olsen’s work stems in part from her use of *aspect* as an umbrella term. “Aspectual meaning” above must be understood as the combined force of grammatical and lexical aspect.

Lexical aspect is evaluated in terms of a privative opposition between dynamic, durative, and telic features. (Note that this approach differs from the systems of Fanning and Porter described above which employ equipollent opposition.) Not all of these features must be specified for a particular verb; other elements in the sentence may, however, mark these features (thus demonstrating the importance of viewing aspectual meaning at the sentence level). The combination of such features of a particular word and the contextual adjuncts present in the sentence result in privative classifications (adapted from Vendler) of state, activity, accomplishment, achievement, semelfactive, and stage-level states. Meaning which comes from marked categories of a word’s semantic value may not be canceled. However, unmarked categories may be canceled by contextual elements. The meaning of these unmarked categories is the provenance of pragmatics, not semantics (25–57).

Grammatical aspect is explained in terms of how the situation is viewed in regard to the event time (ET) and the reference time (RT). If the action is viewed from the perspective of the event time’s nucleus, imperfective aspect is used. If the perspective is from the coda of the event time, perfective aspect is employed.

The terminology Olsen uses is to be understood as follows. Event time (ET) is “the time during which a situation holds or develops.” The interval described by ET is comprised of two elements: the nucleus (the period during which the event is developing or existing) and the coda (the point at which the nucleus terminates). Reference time (RT) refers to the (temporal) vantage point of the speaker (past, present, future). Lexical aspect describes the time spanned by the event time (as state, activity, accomplishment, achievement, semelfactive, or stage-level states); grammatical aspect (perfective or imperfective) refers to the viewpoint from which this description takes place. Olsen has a

notation system that enables a concise (if cryptic) statement of these relationships. As one example, Imperfective: [ET RT]@nucleus. This is read: the grammatical aspect “imperfective” describes action from the perspective of the event time intersecting with reference time at the nucleus (61–65).

Tense is simpler in Olsen’s system than in many other treatments because some temporal elements of situations are already explained by grammatical or lexical aspect. Tense describes the relationship between the reference time and a deictic center (C). The deictic center, often the time of speaking, is contextually determined by pragmatic implicature. If RT is prior to C, the tense is past; if RT is located at C, the tense is present; and if RT follows C, it is future (61–65, 117–21).

Although most of Olsen’s cross-linguistic work is illustrated from English, she does include a chapter in which she applies her theory to the Greek of the New Testament. This entails the view that Greek grammaticalizes both tense and aspect as summarized in the following chart (adapted from 202).

Tense:	Past	Present	Future	Unmarked
Aspect:				
Imperfective	Imperfect			Present
Perfective	Pluperfect	Perfect		Aorist
Unmarked			Future	

Olsen describes this privative opposition model (which applies only to the indicative mood) as follows.

I apply my semantic analysis of tense to show that tense is indeed present (contra Porter), but not in all forms (contra Fanning and the traditional grammars). I argue that the present and aorist forms are unspecified for tense and that the pure tense analyses and Fanning’s tense-aspect model fail to explain why these forms are not limited in temporal reference. I argue that the imperfect, perfect, pluperfect, and future forms are limited in temporal reference, and that Porter’s claim that they lack temporal reference comes from an overly simplified tense model (202).

Features of verbs that are marked in this privative opposition do not “shift”—their marked meaning (whether of grammatical or lexical aspect) remains unchanged by contextual factors. Unspecified features, however, may be modified pragmatically by other constituents (“implicature”). “They may be interpreted as either lacking the relevant feature (i.e. as atelic, stative or punctiliar), or, in the appropriate pragmatic context, as similar to their marked counterparts (i.e. telic, dynamic or durative)” (206). The marked features therefore fall into the area of semantics whereas unmarked ones are classed with pragmatics. The major thrust of Olsen’s work in the New Testament is to demonstrate how these two areas interact on a principled basis. The principle of “cancelability” is the basis for her argument (199–270; for a summary, see 199–206).

It appears that Olsen’s work in the Greek New Testament is somewhat secondhand. Her examples and statements regarding the text usually come from other grammars; there is little evidence that she has grappled extensively with the text herself.¹² This may be necessary for a linguist who has not specialized in Greek, but it carries some inherent limitations. Although the linguistic technicality of Olsen’s work will result in its obscurity among New Testament students, it is of value to the specialist for providing a rigorous linguistic description of both aspect and time. Her alternative model employs a different system of opposition and is based on a different linguistic system than either Fanning or Porter. Resolution of these differences can only be accomplished on a linguistic level; exegetical work does not encompass these issues, although they do intersect at some points.

¹²There is at least one glaring error in reading the text of the New Testament. In Matthew 2:13 she glosses ἄγγελος as *behold* rather than *angel* (222). I noted other errors of varying seriousness. The reference to Caesar on page 228 should be Festus. The references to Acts 1:18 should be 1:16 (229) and James 5:23 should be 5:2–3 (234). (These last two are probably typos.) All four of these errors were present in the dissertation and were not corrected in the published version.