

TENSE AND ASPECT IN GREEK

A Greek finite verb is composed of at least two morphemes: stem + personal ending. The stem indicates the meaning, while the personal ending indicates the person and number, and often the voice (three characteristics fused into one morpheme). But the verb also contains other information, either packed into the stem, or added by means of another morpheme. Two closely associated pieces of other information are called "tense" and "aspect." In the indicative mood,¹ these two are an obligatory, coordinated pair. In all other moods, verb forms can identify aspect without identifying tense. Infinitives and participles can also identify both tense and aspect, or just aspect without tense. Verb forms cannot identify tense without identifying aspect. The fact that tense and aspect are coordinated explains why, when we parse a verb, we do not have to name the aspect – it's identified in the name of the tense.

Tense. The characteristic of a verb which points to a time of occurrence relative to the time of utterance is called a "tense," from Latin *tempus* = "time" (not etymologically related to the English adjective and verb "tense," which is from Latin *tensus* = "having been stretched"). Morphologically speaking, English (like Proto-Indo-European) has only past and non-past forms, so English uses non-past forms to indicate future time as well as present time. Greek indicative verbs can point to three different times: past, present or future. Greek indicative verbs have morphologically distinct future stems, which form simple (one-word) future verb forms.² In the future tense, two of the aspects are formally identical, as shown in the table below.

Aspect. The characteristic of a verb indicating how the user regards its degree of completion or result (beginning, duration, repetition, achievement, permanent effect, etc.), but *not* relative to the time of utterance, is called "aspect," from Latin *aspectus* = "the act of looking at." Greek verbs identify actions or states as having one of three different degrees of completion or result: ongoing, completed (with continuing results) and simple occurrence (completed but not marked as to whether the results are continuing).

English has three such categories also, sometimes called "progressive" (ongoing), "perfective" (completed with continuing results), and "simple" or "unmarked." In Greek, since the verb *stem* expresses aspect, most of the words made from verb stems can also express aspect, including finite verbs of any mood, infinitives (verbal nouns) and participles (verbal adjectives).³ A commonly noted difference between Greek and English verbs is that English has no

¹Mood is an obligatory characteristic of verbs which reflects the user's state of mind about the verb. The indicative mood covers factual expressions, but it is also the general-purpose mood, covering every other state of mind which is not morphologically expressed as conditional, wishful, contrary-to-fact, or commanding. We will have a separate handout on mood when we get there.

²In case you're wondering, the Greek future tense probably developed from the PIE desiderative, a stem-characterizing element.

³The other class of verbal adjectives in *-τός* and *-τέος*, which are not participles, are formed from only one stem per verb, and do not differ in meaning according to the aspect of that stem.

distinctively formed "aorist," the Greek and PIE aspect of simple/unmarked occurrence, but the English unmarked present or past serves quite well for that purpose. "Aorist" means "indeterminate" and it has been the name of the Greek forms since at least the 2nd century BCE (Dionysios Thrax).

Tense-aspect: an indicative verb form in Greek *must* express both time and aspect. Three possible times and three possible aspects yields a grid of nine possible tense-aspect combinations. Greek has a fairly complete realization of this grid in its simple (one-word) verb forms. The seven named grammatical "tenses" of Greek are really tense-aspect combinations in the indicative, covering eight of the nine possibilities.

TENSE-ASPECT GRID FOR GREEK INDICATIVE VERBS:

		TENSE:		
		PAST	PRESENT	FUTURE
ASPECT:	ONGOING ACTION	imperfect	present	future
	SIMPLE/UNMARKED OCCURRENCE	aorist	[none]	future
	COMPLETED WITH CONTINUING RESULTS	pluperfect	perfect	future perfect

TRANSLATING GREEK TENSE-ASPECT INTO ENGLISH

An English strong verb has a *maximum* of five simple (one-word) forms (except the verb "be" with eight), and a weak verb has only four, including all tenses, aspects, voices, moods, infinitives and participles. Greek verbs vary more than English verbs in the extent of their realizations, but a normal Greek verb has around 300 simple forms, not including infinitives, participles and other verbal adjectives. An English verb has a *maximum* of two tense-stems: past and non-past. A normal Greek verb has six tense-stems: present, future, aorist, perfect, perfect middle and aorist passive.

Despite the great difference between English and Greek in the number of simple verb forms and tense-stems, the Greek tense-aspect combinations have common realizations with sensible names in English. By using simple verbs with unmarked aspect, and by using compound (more than one word) verbs, English verbs can translate the tense and aspect (and voice and mood, for that matter) of most Greek verbs quite closely.

Using unmarked aspect in English. English simple verb forms are unmarked as to aspect, while compound verb forms can specify ongoing or perfective aspect. Therefore, you may often use either a simple or compound English verb to translate a Greek verb, as shown below.

- present tense: is *always* ongoing in Greek, so you can use the English compound present progressive:

λύω = I am releasing

But the English simple present, because it is unmarked as to aspect, can also indicate ongoing present:

λύω = I release, I do release (the latter mostly in questions and negations)

- imperfect tense: is *always* ongoing in Greek, so you can use the English compound past progressive:

ἔλυον = I was releasing, I kept releasing, I started releasing, etc.

But the English simple past, because it is unmarked as to aspect, can also indicate ongoing past:

ἔλυον = I released, I used to release, I started to release, etc.

- aoist tense: is *never* ongoing in Greek.⁴ Since the English simple past (sometimes called the "preterite") is unmarked as to aspect, it can indicate simple occurrence in the past:

ἔλυσα = I released, I did release

In fact, the Greek aorist tense, often characterized as "simple occurrence," is indefinite as to aspect (ἄοριστος means "without boundary"), so the English simple or unmarked past corresponds very closely. But you may *not* use an English past progressive to translate an aorist.

- future tense: is either ongoing or simple occurrence in Greek, so you may use the English unmarked compound future, or the future progressive, or the present in its future sense (unmarked or progressive):

λύσω = I will release, I will be releasing, I am going to release, I release [tomorrow], I am releasing [tomorrow]

Using compound verbs in English. Using an English compound (multi-word) verb is mandatory to specify either progressive or perfective aspects, and to translate all passive verbs. English verbs have relatively few inflected forms, but English has a great wealth of compound structures and auxiliary verbs with which to fine-tune the verbal meaning. The tense-aspect names of English compound verbs correspond fairly closely to their uses in translating Greek verbs.

The following partial synopsis gives examples of standard translations of the Greek tense-aspect combinations in the indicative. A "synopsis" of a verb shows its forms for a specified person and number, across the specified tense-stems, voices and moods.

⁴Except perhaps in the "gnomic" aorist, which is often translated with the English present tense. The gnomic aorist expresses a general, proverbial truth, something which has happened in the past, happens now, and is bound to happen in the future – as in the English sayings "curiosity killed the cat" (*sc.* and is killing cats today and will keep killing cats in the future) or "faint heart never won fair lady."

SYNOPSIS OF A GREEK INDICATIVE VERB, ACTIVE AND PASSIVE,
SHOWING STANDARD ENGLISH TENSE-ASPECT TRANSLATIONS

The following charts show the first person singular of a regular Greek verb, in all tense-stems, but only in the active and passive voices and the indicative mood. The middle voice has no systematic English equivalent and must often be translated with alternative vocabulary or with a phrase. The other Greek moods (except for future optative in indirect discourse, not attested before Pindar) do not show tense.

Note that the Greek grammatical tense names automatically contain both tense and aspect (see tense-aspect grid above), so it is only necessary to specify aspect for the future tense, which is formally identical in its two possible aspects. Also note that even in Greek some verbs are compound: the future perfect has no simple (one-word) realization in the active voice, although it does in the passive voice.

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR, ACTIVE VOICE, ALL TENSES:

<u>Greek verb form</u>	<u>Tense-aspect</u>	<u>English translation(s)</u>	<u>Tense-aspect</u>
λύω	present	I release I am releasing I do release (often in questions)	present unmarked present progressive present unmarked
ἔλυον	imperfect	I was releasing I kept releasing, etc. I used to release, etc.	past progressive past progressive past unmarked
λύσω	future, simple future, ongoing	I will release I will be releasing	future unmarked future progressive
ἔλυσα	aorist	I released I did release	past unmarked past unmarked
λέλυκα	perfect	I have released	present perfect
ἔλελύκη	pluperfect	I had released	past perfect
λελυκῶς ἔσομαι	future perfect	I will have released	future perfect

FIRST PERSON SINGULAR, PASSIVE VOICE, ALL TENSES:

<u>Greek verb form</u>	<u>Tense-aspect</u>	<u>English translation(s)</u>	<u>Tense-aspect</u>
λύομαι	present	I am released I am being released	present unmarked present progressive
ἐλυόμην	imperfect	I was being released I kept being released, etc. I used to be released, etc.	past progressive past progressive past unmarked
λυθήσομαι	future, simple future, ongoing	I will be released I will be being released	future unmarked future progressive
ἐλύθην	aorist	I was released	past unmarked
λέλυμαι	perfect	I have been released	present perfect
ἐελύμην	pluperfect	I had been released	past perfect
λελύσομαι	future perfect	I will have been released	future perfect ⁵

⁵English can also make a future perfect passive progressive, "I will have been being released," which has the longest string of auxiliaries of any discrete English tense-aspect expression. I couldn't find any examples of this occurring in Greek, but it might be possible.