Tense Theory [Excerpt from Rod Decker's diss.: "Temporal Deixis of Greek Verb"]

Tense and *time* have frequently been equated and explanations of tense function have been sought on the basis of this temporal correlation.[1] By contrast, Jesperson argues (and this in relation to *English!*) that "it is important to keep the two concepts **time** and **tense** strictly apart."[2] Even if a language closely associates these concepts, the categories must still be conceptualized separately.[3] The preceding section focused on time. This section explores the relationship between the category of time and the morphological category of "tense" in Greek.

Tense is traditionally defined as the "grammaticalised expression of location in time."[4] Many languages (probably most European languages) do use grammatical, morphological categories to express location in time. This is usually expressed in the verbal system, either by inflection or periphrasis.[5] In English, for

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location in time, but aspects are often relevant when considering temporal implicature (use of a particular aspect in a particular context with specific deictic factors)—see ch. 5.

[1]Bull, *Time, Tense, and the Verb,* 1.

[2]O. Jesperson, *Essentials of English Grammar,* 230; see also Comrie, *Tense,* 52–3 and H. Weinrich, "Tense and Time," *Archivum Linguisticum,* n.s., 1 (1970): 31–5.

[3]One should be careful not to assume that there is a relationship between tenses in a language and concern for "time." Contrast the Indo-European languages that have grammaticalized time reference, on the one hand, with Japanese (which has little grammatical tense, but considerable concern culturally for time). On the other hand, many African languages have little concern for time culturally, but have very elaborate grammatical tense distinctions—far more so than European languages (E. Nida, "Implications of Contemporary Linguistics for Biblical Scholarship," *JBL* 91 [1972]: 83).

[4]Comrie, *Tense,* 9.

[5]Not all languages associate temporal reference with the verb. Adjectives may serve this function in Japanese, and Potowatomi employs a past time morpheme on the

example, "verbs, whatever else they do, always seem to indicate time reference, [but] a rather large number of languages around the world manage quite nicely, thank you, with verbs that do not by themselves have that reference."[1] Although tense is an important indicator of time in many languages, it is seldom (if ever) the only factor involved in expressing temporal location.[2]

The discussion will be clarified if Levinson's distinctions between theoretical and language tenses are kept in mind.[3] On one hand there is theoretical, semantic, metalinguistic tense (M-tense) that has a strictly temporal meaning. This is the past, present, future reference and is a deictic category expressed by a wide range of deictic indicators, including (in some languages) verb forms (i.e., tenses). On the other hand, there are the verbal inflections that have traditionally been called tenses—the language tense (L-tense).[4] In any given language, M-tense may be expressed by the same forms that are used to express L-tense or there may be formal differences between them (see figure 10). In a language where L- and M-

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noun (D. Crystal, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language,* 92). Zulu and Haitian French also mark the noun instead of the verb (Bull, *Time, Tense, and the Verb,* 20). Samoan uses adverbs and there are *no* inflections of the verb; Tagalog depends on context and adverbs (Binnick, *Time and the Verb,* 52–3).

[1]M. Silva, *God, Language and Scripture,* FCI, vol. 4, 112. Binnick (*Time and the Verb,* 126) cites Gonda to the effect that "tense is far from being common to any form of human speech."

[2]"In those languages that unequivocably exhibit it, tense is one of the main factors ensuring that nearly all sentences when uttered are deictically anchored to a context of utterance" (S. Levinson, *Pragmatics,* CTL, 77).

[3]Ibid., 77–8.

[4]Hewson (*Tense,* 1) refers to a similar distinction in his reference to the "confusion between what is represented (the event taking place in time) and the means of representation (the linguistic category)."

tenses diverge significantly in meaning it becomes difficult to keep the categories clearly in mind, especially when they are studied or described in the context of a language in which the two are closely related. English draws a tight correlation between M-tense and L-tense. Greek, however, does not.[1]

Fig. 10. L-/M-tense
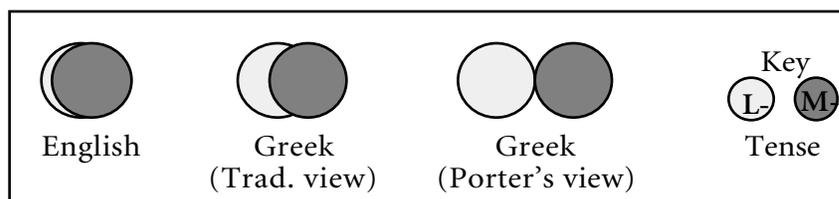
As noted at the end of chapter 1, several contemporary grammarians argue that there is no overlap between these two categories in Greek.[2] In such a case M-tense is expressed strictly by deictic indicators. Greek L-tense is not *tense* in the technical sense defined by Comrie (see above), but is a morphological classification that expresses *verbal aspect*. None of these grammarians use the terminology

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[1]Distinguishing between M- and L-tense is not novel (though those terms may be of recent origin). The major twentieth-century grammars have acknowledged that time is not the primary import of "tense." (See the discussion of this in chapter 1, particularly in relation to Robertson, but also to Burton's and Moulton's grammars.) Porter's approach, however, employs this distinction in a fashion that goes beyond most previous writers.

[2]See the summaries of the work of Porter, McKay, and Young in chapter 1. It might be surprising for some to read the technical, linguistic literature regarding the relationship of time and tense in English where some of these same issues are debated; see, e.g., Lyons, *Semantics,* 2:677–82. He argues that tense "is a category of the sentence," not just the verb (678). Binnick points out that morphologically there are only *two* tenses in English (past and non-past), and these are both used in a wide variety of temporal contexts, modified by various auxiliaries to produce other "tenses" (*Time and the Verb,* 8, 37, 126–7). See also M. Joos, *The English Verb,* 120–1 and Klein, *Time in Language,* 133–6.

of *L-/M-tense.* Their references to tense should be understood in terms of L-tense. When Porter, for example, argues that Greek does not have tense, he means that time is not expressed grammatically in the L-tense system. He would accept the statement that Greek has tense in the sense of M-tense.[1]

Levinson is surely correct when he observes that no language or culture exists in which there is not a system of M-tense. That is, all languages can express temporal relationships. When it is asserted that some languages do not have tense, it must be realized that this refers to the absence of temporal reference in the L-tense system.[2]

A similar relationship may be observed between aspect and tense as between time and tense. As Friedrich points out,

> In some languages, aspect and tense are taxonomically coordinate, and subcategories of each may intersect at the surface, in various ways, tense categories often closely resembling aspectual ones.… In yet other languages, the two categories may be unambiguously differentiated by distinct suffixes, and their relations may be handled by relatively distinct syntactic rules.[3]

The specifics of Greek will be considered in the next section. Here it is adequate to indicate that the two categories must be kept distinct conceptually; it should not be assumed that there is a semantic overlap or equivalence between the two.

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[1]"To state that Greek does not grammaticalize temporal reference, however, says nothing about its ability to refer to time" (PVA, 81).

[2]Levinson, *Pragmatics,* 78.

[3]P. Friedrich, "On Aspect and Homeric Aspect," *International Journal of American Linguistics* (memoir 28) 40 (1974): 6.