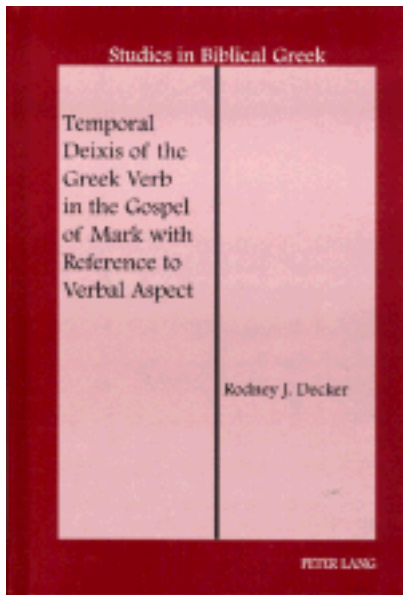


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Decker, Rodney J.

Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect

Studies in Biblical Greek 10

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At a holiday party I was asked the ever-expected, "What do you do?" My answer that I was a scholar in biblical studies was met with, "Is there still anything left to work on in that field?" Surprisingly, even sympathetic biblical scholars reading this review might utter the same question about New Testament Greek. In the past decade, however, a quiet but seminal line is being played out in scholarship on verbal aspect in Hellenistic Greek.

While scholars of Greek have noted for more than a generation that Greek "tense" is not naked presentation of chronological time, the precise semantic value of aorist, imperfect, and present "tense" has remained elusive. Stanley Porter (*Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament*, 1990) and B. M. Fanning (*Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek*, 1990) have been in the forefront of debate among New Testament critics. There are many similarities and strikingly subtle differences in their work. Both remain intensely loyal to a structuralist linguistics (as opposed to a Chomskiesque approach) that emphasizes grammatical analysis based on actual usage, analysis of broad discourses, pragmatics, and the rigid insistence (fundamental but easily forgotten in grammar studies) that language is intended to be a *communicative* system.

Decker's *Temporal Deixis* begins with an introduction and analysis of prior scholarship on verbal aspect (very briefly presented—both a strength and a weakness, particularly in light of the complex, subtle, and extraordinarily difficult to articulate differences between various positions), and for this service alone Decker should be thanked. Further, he is careful to distinguish *Aktionsart* (“the progress or modifications of an action” [17], that is, the state of completion of an act) and aspect (“the temporal relationship between the event time and a reference time,” according to the speaker’s interests [17]).

One of Porter’s major arguments is that Greek does not grammaticalize time in the form of the verb, but relies on deictic indicators to signal temporal relationships. The significant semantic factor connected with the form of the verb is not time but aspect. (1)

Decker accepts Lyons’s definition of deixis (pronounced “dike-sis”) as “the location and identification of persons, objects, events, processes and activities being talked about, or referred to, in relation to the spatiotemporal context created and sustained by the act of utterance.” Or, the cumulative communicative means brought to bear in relating the thing spoken about to the thing spoken—the context flagged by the entire vocabulary and clause structure of a sentence or paragraph. Should Porter be correct, morphological transformation in Greek verbs does not communicate time but rather aspect; temporal sense must then be communicated by deixetic means (normally adverbs, clauses, etc.).

Porter’s thesis depends on “contrastive substitution,” which

is a linguistic method that notes either the occurrence of identical forms (in this case, verbal forms) in different contexts or different forms in the same context. If the same verb form can be used in different temporal contexts, and if different verb forms may be submitted in the same time context, and this without changing the temporal reference of the statement, then there is strong evidence that temporal reference is not the proper explanation of the meaning of the form. (34)

Both Fanning and Porter have developed their approaches to verbal aspect in Hellenistic Greek alongside a general, developing body of literature exploring aspect in Attic and Homeric Greek (most of it nicely included in Decker’s bibliography).

What difference would any of this make? In Porter's approach to linguistics, the semantic payload of any given word, phrase, or sentence is directly proportionate to the number of options a speaker has in the articulation of the thought. While this is without doubt true in lexical choice, Porter insists it is equally true in terms of verbal aspect. In Hellenistic Greek, temporal concerns do not control nor restrict (nor even always explain) the semantic significance of a given verb. Verbal "tense" may be chosen based on "chronological" time, clausal needs, states of action, or emphasis—any one of which is apparent only after examining the entire discourse unit. Even my oversimplification of the thesis here should show that there are indeed some interesting new ideas in the study of Greek; if Porter is correct, standard works such as A. T. Robertson or Blass, de Brunner, and Funk will become of relevance mostly to scholars of the history of New Testament criticism.

Decker's book asks, very matter of factly, "[I]s Porter right?" (62). Much of the work in verbal aspect has remained, thus far, highly abstract and theoretical; while many passages from the New Testament have been produced as examples within arguments, little has been done to explore aspect in a sustained reading of a biblical text. Decker, agreeing with Porter, suggests that a correct approach to verbal aspect will likely have three criteria: inclusiveness (i.e., ability to incorporate data with few, if any exceptions), rationality, and productivity. (62).

[A] plausible case can be made for Porter's thesis, at least on a theoretical basis, using selected examples to demonstrate the approach. The following chapters endeavor to demonstrate that the theory is an adequate and consistent explanation of both the deictic temporal reference system of Greek as well as the aspectual system of the language as exemplified in an extended passage of narrative text. (62)

In essence, granting the inherent rationality of Porter's ideas, Decker intends to systematically explore an extended block of text (the whole of Mark) to determine the inclusiveness of Porter's approach to verbal aspect. The selection of Mark is particularly interesting, given Mark's notorious use of *kai euthus* and other temporal adverbs as well as more than occasional reliance upon the "historical" present tense. After a general survey, Decker narrows to four passages that confirm for him that "Porter's theory does, indeed, work consistently and adequately in handling the data of the text" (148).

Decker offers a stunningly thorough survey of temporal aspects in Mark, greatly aided and enhanced by computer-generated searches but betraying many quiet

hours spent with the text. Throughout the work, his notation is meticulous, careful (though in the distracting form of end notes) and wonderfully edited (though there are unexplained shifts in spelling between “deixitic” and “deicitic”). Decker openly admits his work is a light revision of his Th.D. dissertation. His chapters have admirably clear summaries and transparent structures; he does, however, tend to repeat himself and to assume fairly broad familiarity with the literature. The subject seems to demand densely written, difficult texts, and Decker’s prose certainly continues this tradition; though introductory in some respects, *Temporal Deixis* requires a familiarity with at least Fanning and Porter. Decker is too abrupt in dismissing ancient grammarians (42) and often places important information and commentary in the end notes. His survey of contemporary grammars of Attic Greek should be broadened to include those by Quinn, Groton, and the Joint Association of Classical Teachers; he might find them very interesting. Finally, Decker does not articulate the way different views on verbal aspect result in dramatically different *readings* of a given pericope; though his work is a genuine and useful attempt to embed theoretical grammar in a specific text, Decker’s work remains ethereal in many ways.

Sadly, *Temporal Deixis* ends when it is becoming most interesting. What is happening in the nonindicative moods (particularly the subjunctive) and in the future tense? What would a Chomsky-based linguistics of New Testament Greek look like, and how would it differ from Decker’s approach? How might the status of Hellenistic Greek as the second language for many New Testament writers affect verbal choices? Finally, what real, measurable difference does Porter’s understanding of verbal aspect make to the translation and reading of particular texts in Mark? In many ways, one goes away feeling there has been less said than could have been, and often there has been more detail than was required (though the work, in Decker’s defense, sets out to be exhaustive in survey).

Temporal Deixis would be a good supplement to an intermediate Hellenistic Greek grammar. It will be of most interest and use to scholars of linguistics, New Testament Greek, and verbal aspect in general; Decker’s goal is a modest but necessary step forward in the state of the question. I am certain he will gladly take the “criticism” of being intellectually stimulating and provocative. There may yet be quite a bit to work on in New Testament Greek.