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On Translating the Greek Aorist into English

1. Introduction

As Roman Jakobson famously put it, “equivalence in difference is the cardinal problem of language and the pivotal concern of linguistics” (1959/2000: 114). This statement seems particularly fitting to both the theory and practice of translation, up until recently quite commonly regarded as a branch of applied linguistics. Equivalence has long been the key term in defining the essence of translational activity: “Whoever takes upon himself to translate contracts a debt; to discharge it, he must pay not with the same money, but the same sum” (West 1932 in Nida 1964/2000). This fundamental notion of equivalence has led some to the conclusion that “no linguistic specimen may be interpreted by the science of language without a translation of its signs into other signs of the same system or into signs of another system” and has drawn the attention of many to “the urgent need for ... differential bilingual grammars ... defining what unifies and what differentiates the two languages in the selection and delimitation of grammatical concepts” (Jakobson 1959/2000: 115). Based on this realization, implicitly present in the translational thought for centuries, numerous contrastive studies have emerged; more importantly, however, the scholarly paradigm encouraging the exploration and representation of peculiarities of one language in terms of the structures found in another language has developed and established itself. This paper is an attempt to illustrate the application of this paradigm to the Greek-English interface: in particular, to translating the Greek aorist into English. (“Greek,” being a very broad label, referring to a language spanning over four millennia and often subdivided into dialects, shall hereinafter be used specifically with reference to the so-called Hellenistic Greek, in use between ca 300 BCE and 300 CE; in short, the language of the New Testament [hereinafter NT].)

2. The aorist: tense or aspect?

The complexity of the Greek verbal system is proverbial; it is certainly enough to throw linguists venturing a systematic description of the aorist into despair. In fact, there was little agreement even among ancient Greeks regarding the proper description of their own language in this respect. Some early grammarians suggested a tripartite tense system, with the aorist as one of the four subspecies of the past tense (along with imperfect, perfect and pluperfect), differentiated on the basis of relative recency (Binnick 1991: 11–12). This “four pasts” theory, however, failed to account adequately for the contrasts between the three stems (present, aorist, and perfect) used to create the four past tense forms. Therefore an alternative theory emerged, based on the recognition of both “sound and sense” relations between the six tense forms: “the present, like the imperfect, represents an incomplete action, whereas both the perfect and the pluperfect represent complete ones; the future, like the aorist, is indefinite and can represent either complete or incomplete action” (Binnick 1991: 13).

Yet this observation raises another problem because the distinction between complete and incomplete action is typically associated with the category of aspect rather than tense. This is clearly the approach taken by Lyons, who classifies the aorist as part of the “Greek aspectual system,” arguing that “the three-term opposition of perfective, imperfective, and aorist in Greek is ... the resultant of two binary distinctions: perfective (or completive) *v.* non-perfective, and durative *v.* non-durative” (1968: 315). In this classification the aorist is “doubly unmarked,” as seen in the following table:

Table 1. Binary oppositions in the Greek aspectual system (according to Lyons 1968)

<i>perfective</i>	<i>imperfective</i>	<i>aorist</i>
[+ completive]	[- completive]	[- completive]
[- durative]	[+ durative]	[- durative]

The chief defect of this classification, however, is its dependence on the analogy to the Slavic aspectual system (as evidenced by the labels “perfective” and “imperfective”). Moreover, regardless of its theoretical usefulness, it is hardly applicable to actual linguistic forms since aspect in Greek has no distinct marking. In view of the fact that the Greek verbal forms combine “aspect with tense and, arguably, voice and mood as well” (Binnick 1991: 158), grammatical labels applied to the Greek system by way of analogy to either Latin (tense) or Slavic languages (aspect) do not seem to account for it adequately.

The numerous competing analyses of the Greek aspects and tenses presented in the last century or so varied broadly in their treatment of the aorist,¹ leading

¹ It is neither possible nor necessary to discuss them here in detail: for a brief critical overview see Binnick 1991: 162–169.

to considerable terminological confusion. Even though English-speaking authors of handbooks of Greek typically classify the aorist as tense (e.g. Moulton 1908; Robertson 1919; Summers 1995; Wallace 1996), they indicate that the term *tense* is to be understood differently than in English:

Even in the indicative the time element is subordinate to the kind of action expressed. A double idea thus runs through tense in the indicative: (kind of action, time of the action).

(Robertson 1919: 825)

In general, *tense* in Greek involves two elements, *aspect* ... and *time*. Aspect is the primary value of tense in Greek and time is secondary, if involved at all. In other words, tense is that feature of the verb that indicates the speaker's presentation of the verbal action (or state) with reference to its aspect and, under certain conditions, its time.

(Wallace 1996: 496)

The ultimately unresolved question whether the aorist should be viewed as tense or aspect (or a combination of these and, possibly, other categories) demonstrates a general methodological difficulty that arises when “the categories of one language ... [are] straightforwardly applied to another” (Binnick 1991: 158). It seems that comparing the Greek system to those of other languages – most notably to the Slavic aspectual system (Fanning 1990: 16–17; Binnick 1991: 158 ff) – has advanced the understanding of it in some ways but hindered in others.

Fortunately, in recent years this difficulty has been recognized by some who tried to describe the Greek verbal system “from the inside”. S.E. Porter, drawing from the work of M.A.K. Halliday in systemic linguistics, argues that the Greek aspects can be arranged according to a network of choices (Figure 1). “The use of an aspect by an author entails a semantic choice from within the system which requires an increasingly specific semantic choice as one moves through the system. Each aspect is meaningful in relationship to the others” (Mathewson 2006) – and not by virtue of its perceived correspondence to aspectual forms typical of other languages.

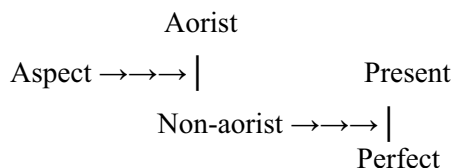


Figure 1. Network of choices in the Greek aspectual system (according to Porter 1989)

In this model, “the basic opposition is between the aorist and non-aoristic aspects. Then a further decision is required between the two non-aoristic aspects, the present and perfect, with the perfect offering a more specific semantic choice” (Mathewson 2006).

3. Aspect vs. Aktionsart

Another distinction is often made between aspect and Aktionsart, defined in ontological rather than phenomenological terms (Wallace 1996: 499). The difference is explained thus:

Aktionsart involves how the action actually occurs; reflects the external, objective facts of the occurrence; focuses on something outside the speaker. This is usually expressed lexically, either in the inherent meaning of the lexical form or in the derivational morphology ...

Aspect involves a way of viewing the action; reflects the subjective conception or portrayal by the speaker; focuses on the speaker's representation of the action. This is usually expressed grammatically ... by tense-inflection and tense-stems.

(Fanning 1990: 31)

Grammar books typically describe the aorist – in terms of aspect – as presenting “an occurrence in summary, viewed as a whole from the outside, without regard for the internal make-up of the occurrence” (Fanning 1990: 97 in Wallace 1996: 554). “The aorist takes its name (*aóristos*, *unlimited*, *unqualified*) from its ... denoting merely the occurrence of an action, without any of the limitations ... as to *completion*, *continuance*, *repetition*, etc., which belong to other tenses” (Goodwin 1889: 12 ff in Binnick 1991: 164–165).

In terms of Aktionsart, the aorist has a number of specific uses, often incorporated under labels such as constative, ingressive, consummative, gnomic, epistolary, proleptic, or dramatic (Wallace 1996: 557–565). Evidently, it is used to cover a very broad range of semantic situations.

4. Translating the aorist into English

The difficulties involved in a linguistic analysis of the Greek aorist immediately come to the surface in cross-linguistic encounters, one of which is translation. At the Greek-English interface there arises an obvious problem of non-equivalence traceable to two interrelated factors: (1) in English, tense and aspect are analyzable as distinct grammatical categories; and (2) the English aspectual system, though essentially tripartite, is quite differently structured: not only do the perfective and the progressive contrast with unmarked (simple) forms but they also combine quite freely with one another (unlike the Greek aspectual distinctions). How to render the aorist in English, then? It seems that almost any act of Greek-to-English translation requires that this question be addressed – clearly so in case of the NT in which the aorist is the most prevalent tense.² What follows is an overview of various attempts to deal with this issue.

² The specific breakdown of each tense in the New Testament is as follows: Present–11,583; Aorist–11,606; Imperfect–1682; Future–1623; Perfect–1571; Pluperfect–86 (Wallace 1996: 497).

4.1. Aorist generally translated as past simple, sometimes as perfect

19th century comparative studies of the Indo-European languages brought with them a dual awareness of both the differences and similarities between linguistic systems. Despite the commonly shared recognition of only partial correspondence between the grammatical structures of Greek and English, the comparative mindset nevertheless led some scholars to offer their solutions to the problem of translating the aorist.

E.D. Burton in his book *Moods and Tenses of New Testament Greek* concludes that in the indicative “the Greek Aorist corresponds to the English simple Past ... more nearly than to any other English tense,” although it cannot be considered its precise equivalent. He then goes on to admit that

the Greek Aorist has a wider range than the English Past, since it performs precisely those functions ... which in modern English are performed not by the Past but by the Perfect and Pluperfect. The Greek Aorist, therefore, in its ordinary use not only covers the ground of the English Past, but overlaps in part upon that of the English Perfect and Pluperfect.

(Burton 1898)

To illustrate this overlap, he refers to numerous NT passages in which the present perfect is the most appropriate tense to render the aorist in its various Aktionsarten, e.g. ingressive: ὁ ἀδελφός σου οὖτος νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἔζησεν (“this brother of yours was dead and has come to life,” Luke 15:32) or consummative: πάντες γὰρ ἥμαρτον (“for all have sinned,” Romans 3:23). With reference to πάντες ἥμαρτον translated as “all have sinned” elsewhere he comments:

Whether the same form in Romans 5:12 shall be rendered in the same way or by the English Past depends upon whether it is ... a collective Aorist ... or refers to a deed or deeds in the remote past in which the “all” in some way participated. So far as the tense-form is concerned there is no presumption in favor of one or the other of these interpretations ... The nature of the argument or the author’s thought, as learned from sources outside the sentence itself, must furnish the main evidence by which to decide.

(Burton 1898)

This reference to “sources outside the sentence” on the basis on which one is to determine the correct translation of the aorist indicates that Burton’s initial statement on the relative correspondence between the aorist and the simple past in English should really be viewed in comparative terms, without necessary implications for translation. In other words, he does not formulate systematic principles for translating the aorist into English; instead, every instance is to be considered on semantic and contextual grounds.

4.2. Outside narrations, aorist regularly translated as perfect

At about the same time, a more systematic approach to this problem was developed. In his article succinctly entitled *The Rendering into English of the Greek Aorist and Perfect*, R.F. Weymouth challenges the popular view that the aorist

indicative is largely equivalent to the past simple in English “with only occasional exceptions scarcely worthy of serious notice” (1890: 3). On the contrary, he affirms “that the English Past, used according to the true English idiom, will largely fail to coincide with the Aorist of the Greek verb” (1890: 4). Based on a careful analysis of extensive passages by Thucydides and Herodotus, he distinguishes between narrative and non-narrative uses of the aorist; while the former are to be “almost invariably” translated into English by the past simple, the translation of the latter by means of the perfect is not only recommended stylistically but also controlled by a certain grammatical principle:

[Weymouth] ... contends that scholars have allowed themselves to be misled by the incorrect name of ‘Past Indefinite’ given in most English Grammars to what he prefers everywhere to call the Simple Past. In Greek the *a-oristos* of the Indicative ... is always indefinite ... But in English suppose ‘that soldier alludes to the battles of his earlier days, and engineer to his works &c., all without giving any hint as to the time except only that the event or act was somewhere of other in past time; what is the form of expression? ‘Many a battle *have I fought*’; ... *I have built bridges of all kinds*’ ... This being the regular form in all such cases, he regards it as our true Past Indefinite, and therefore ‘the *normal* equivalent of the Greek Aorist’.

(*Classical Review*, vol. 5, no. 6., Jun. 1891, p. 268)

It should be noted that Weymouth’s insistence on the systematic translation of non-narrative aorist indicative by the English perfect was not only theoretical; 1903 saw the posthumous publication of his *New Testament in Modern Speech* in which this principle had been applied.

4.3. Aorist “translatable into almost every English tense”

In the following decades Weymouth’s translational rule, seemingly settling the question of how to translate the aorist into English, gained some recognition but its universal applicability soon came to be questioned. Moulton agrees that in English “outside narrative we use the periphrastic ‘have’ tense as an *indefinite* past; and it thus becomes the inevitable representative of the Greek aorist when no time is clearly designed,” but at the same time he points out that this requires an interpretative decision as to whether the aorist refers to definite or indefinite time (1908: 135–136). A.T. Robertson is even less optimistic when he writes that “the Greek aorist indicative ... is not the exact equivalent of any tense in any other language. It has nuances all its own, many of them difficult or well-nigh impossible to reproduce in English” (1919: 847). Having said that, he adds:

Certainly one cannot say that the English translations have been successful with the Greek aorist. Weymouth in his *New Testament in Modern Speech* has attempted to carry out a consistent principle with some success. ... From the Greek point of view the aorist is true to its own genius. The aorist in Greek is so rich in meaning that the English labours and groans to express it. As a matter of fact the Greek aorist is translatable into almost every English tense except the imperfect ...

(Robertson 1919: 847–848)

This comment demonstrates an interesting paradox: Robertson, for one thing, stresses the complexity of the Greek aorist resulting in its untranslatability into English by a uniform grammatical form and at the same time praises Weymouth for his consistency in translating it. Evidently, the grammarian's perspective is different from that of the translator; when they come together – at times in one and the same person – some inevitable tension results.

4.4. Aorist translated invariably as present simple

A noteworthy attempt of relieving this tension by reconciling the two perspectives was made by A.E. Knoch in his *Concordant Version* of the New Testament (first published in 1926). This unusual work is based on the assumption that in order for the English reader to appreciate the complete meaning of the original, it is necessary to translate with absolute formal consistency, with each Greek word always represented by the same English word. At the grammatical level, this methodology requires establishing one-to-one correspondences between Greek and English forms in order to ensure exclusive and uniform representation of the original structures in translation. Faced with the necessity to assign an English equivalent to the Greek aorist, Knoch, surprisingly, opts for the present simple. He explains this decision in the pamphlet entitled *The Greek and English Indefinite*, in which he, rather selectively, quotes both Robertson and Weymouth, to finally state the following:

... Greek is proverbially one of the most difficult of languages, the verb is the most complex and elaborate part of Greek grammar, and of the verb the one unsolvable riddle has been the aorist. It is, indeed, the most difficult of the most difficult ... Yet we propose to make it so simple and easy that anyone, with the understanding of an adult, will be able to grasp the essential facts ...

The indefinite changes an act into a fact. It transforms deeds into truth ... Here we have a hitherto secret combination to the great depository of divine truth ... God has deposited the truth in the indefinite ...

If we but glance at such high unfoldings as are found in the first chapter of Ephesians, this fact will force itself upon us. Like a string of pearls we read ... of the One Who *blesses* us (verse 3), Who *chooses* us (4) and *designates* us (5) and *graces* us (6) and *lavishes* on us (8) Who *makes* known to us (9) the secret of His will. Read the passage in the CONCORDANT VERSION at least a dozen times, to wear off the strangeness, meditate on its unlimited scope in time, the aptness of its present application as well as its past and future place, then suddenly change the tense to the past and see what a chill falls upon the whole. Then change the verbs to the present incomplete, Who *is blessing*, Who *is choosing*, etc., and see how the thought shrinks.

As it may be seen from the above passage, Knoch's systematic translational decisions were largely informed by belief (cf. "God has deposited the truth in the indefinite") and are quite indefensible on linguistic grounds. Even if one accepts his somewhat idealized view that "the Greek language is capable of expressing with precision the finest and most delicate shades of meaning," it is doubtful whether "with proper care it is possible to set over into English most (if not all)

of the excellences of the God-given original” by forcing formal correspondence between the structures of both languages. What this approach fails to recognize is that the choice of grammatical forms may often be attributed to the style of a particular author – hence some grammatical differences between parallel passages in the synoptic Gospels – or simply reflect one of various possible manners of presentation. Consequently, what is really produced by the “concordant method” is a peculiar English transcript of the Greek text on the basis of which the reader is able to make some formal observations, but whether this brings him closer to the understanding of the Greek – and the aorist in particular – is highly debatable. (Actually, the same effect could have been produced by e.g. highlighting all occurrences of the aorist in the Greek text with the same color!) Faced with the overall implausibility of Knoch’s method, one critic aptly noted: “It is regrettable that the immense effort and expense invested here could not have been directed to projects which would be of more import to the world of biblical studies. The whole program is based upon a misapprehension of the nature and function of translation” (Walther 1958: 183).

4.5. Aorist translated as “Ebonics aorist”

The last suggestion on how to render the aorist into English to be mentioned here comes from J. Bolden’s brief online article entitled *Bible translation: Ebonics and the aorist tense* (2008). Having noted that “the aorist tense is a verb tense that does not exist in standard English to indicate actions that are ongoing” and that “the lack of this tense in standard English creates all sorts of mistranslation and misunderstanding issues when translating the Bible,” Bolden goes on to offer an ingenious solution to this problem, illustrated by Romans 6:8:

Now if we have died (aorist) with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.

When did we die with him? ... Paul in Greek indicates it is an ongoing process we die with him at all time or outside of time, but this is not apparent in English. So why not borrow from Ebonics the aorist tense? They have one, and the dialect is understandable to most English speakers (even if it sounds less refined). To use it you use the verb *to be* followed by an *-ing* verb ... Using the Ebonics aorist tense will sound ungrammatical but it is accurate ... So we would translate the above as: *Now if we be dieing (aorist) with Christ, we believe (present simple) that we shall live (future simple) with him.*

While this is certainly an innovative suggestion, it fails to address the problem of rendering the aorist into English in its entirety. As it has been noted, the aorist does not by default indicate ongoing actions. Although it is occasionally used “to present a timeless, general fact” by referring not to “a particular event that *did* happen, but ... a generic event that *does* happen” (Wallace 1996: 562), this gnomic usage is quite rare in the NT and should not be extended over more typical uses (certainly not in narrative sections in which it has no “ongoing” value!).

More importantly, however, Bolden’s translational suggestion clearly follows from perceived exegetical significance of the aorist form, not only in Romans

6:8 but elsewhere, as indicated by his introductory comments. This is a relatively common tendency; a number of Bible scholars and commentators tend to argue from the aorist in exegetically significant passages to the kind of event behind it claiming that its use indicates references to “once-for-all” actions (e.g. μετανόησον, “repent,” in Revelation 3:19; ἐκτίσθησαν, “were created,” in Revelation 4:11) or singular rather than habitual acts (e.g. ἁμάρτη, “sin,” in 1 John 2:1). Still, arguments such as these are fundamentally fallacious, as F. Stagg convincingly demonstrates in his paper *The Abused Aorist*, because

the aorist does not necessarily reflect the nature of the action or event it covers ... the action may be momentary, singular, or “once and for all,” but it is not the use of the aorist that makes it such ... The aorist draws no boundaries. It tells nothing about the nature of the action under consideration. The aorist can properly be used to cover any kind of action: single or multiple, momentary or extended, broken or unbroken, completed or open-ended. The aorist simply refrains from describing.

(1972: 222–223)

5. Conclusion

As demonstrated by the above overview, the Greek aorist has received a considerable amount of attention from English scholars and translators of the NT. Over the last two centuries, various – often mutually exclusive – approaches to its translation into English have been advocated. The absence of a clearly corresponding element in the English verbal system evidently results in the aorist being viewed by a number of English authors as the marked form, calling for an emphatic translational counterpart. In addition, the unfamiliar function of the aorist has led some to assume its exegetical significance.

On the basis of these observations some conclusions present themselves. To begin with, the tendency to assign the marked status to the aorist goes precisely against the linguistic evidence outlined in the first part of this paper. “If, as indicated by the primitive nature of its stem, the aorist is the oldest Greek tense, it is understandable that it is also the simplest ... Consequently, ... departure from the aorist is exegetically more significant than the presence of the aorist” (Stagg 1972: 231). To argue otherwise is to impose the grammatical structure of English onto the Greek. Interestingly, this “outside view” seems to have dominated much of the discussion, even going back to the application to the Greek verbal system categories such as tense and aspect by way of analogy to other languages. This is a misguided view of equivalence. From a translational point of view, rather than try to account for the aorist in terms of some universal grammatical categories, it would be more helpful to consider its place within the Greek aspectual system. A valuable contribution in this field has been offered by both Porter (1989) and Mathewson (2006) who advocate viewing the Greek tenses in terms of the three primary aspectual values corresponding to the perception of the action described:

either as a complete whole (aorist), as in progress (present, imperfect), or as a state of affairs (perfect, pluperfect). Mathewson additionally argues that “the aspects of Greek ... often function to signal levels of prominence in discourse (background, foreground, foreground)” (2006). A thorough consideration of this proposal in terms of its relevance to translation would certainly be welcome.

On a more general level, it is noteworthy that some of the approaches to the problem of translatability of the aorist into English discussed above have been given an essentially systematic status by their proponents. In other words, they have been offered in response to the question – whether explicit or implicit – of how to translate (preferably, in a consistent way) the Greek aorist into English. Yet questions of this kind are methodologically flawed in that they fail to distinguish between *la langue* and *le parole*. Although “translating activities must be kept under constant scrutiny by linguistic science” (Jakobson 1959/2000: 115), some caution is recommended because comparative studies, helpful as they are, necessarily deal with *la langue*, whereas translation is a matter of *le parole*. In this way, the ends pursued and questions asked by linguists and translators are not precisely the same; experience shows that systematic solutions to translational problems are more likely than not to result in mistranslation.

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