

Recent work on the narrative tenses in Classical Greek has tended to focus on the pragmatic reasons why authors choose a particular tense (see e.g. Bakker (1997) and Sicking and Stork (1997)). Thus, for instance, Sicking and Stork: “The primary function of the [historical present] is to lift out from their context those narrative assertions that are essential for what the speaker has stated to be his immediate concern” (165). Such accounts have greatly enhanced our understanding of tense in Greek, but they leave certain questions unanswered. How do we account for the use of the historical present (HP) when it occurs in clauses that seem to be as essential for the speaker’s purpose as clauses in which the aorist is found? And how does this pragmatic function arise in a verb form that supposedly has imperfective aspect? After all, since imperfective aspect is generally said to be used most often for backgrounded information (but cf. Napoli 2006: 63–4), it is curious that it has come to do quite the opposite in the case of the HP.

As an alternative way of determining the function of the HP, we can take advantage of Thucydides’ frequent use of τοῦ αὐτοῦ/ἐπιγιγνομένου θέρους/χειμῶνος. By holding this temporal expression constant, we can examine variation between the present, aorist, and imperfect that exists even when the narrative context—that of Thucydides adding another factual event to his annalistic account—is kept as uniform as possible. Now the most common tense to be used after these expressions is, unsurprisingly, the aorist (44×), followed by the HP (15×) and imperfect (8×). What stands out about the HP is that the events it relates are not treated imperfectively as vivid and on-going. Quite the contrary, they are if anything even more punctual and telic than those presented by the aorist. This can be seen partly in the actionality of the verbs that favor the HP (e.g. γίγνομαι, πείθω, ἀποκτείνω, ἀποπέμπω) and partly in the particular contexts in which the HP is found (e.g. compared to the aorist, it is unusually common with singular subjects and objects and with adverbial expressions, like εὐθύς, that denote suddenness). A similar situation obtains in Xenophon, who frequently uses the HP with ἀφικνέομαι, another prototypically telic and punctual verb. We may also verify this result by working from the opposite direction: Thucydides never uses the HP with the accusative of extent of time, strongly suggesting that the HP is incompatible with durativity.

What are the implications of these results for our understanding of the diachronic development of aspect in Greek? As is well known, the HP is not found in Homer. This absence is easily explained once we see that the HP in Classical Greek occurs overwhelmingly in punctual, telic contexts. Given Napoli’s convincing demonstration that the opposition between present and aorist in Homer is above all an opposition between imperfective and perfective aspects (and the closely connected actional categories of durative/atelic and punctual/telic respectively), it should not surprise us that a use of the present tense that goes against this aspectual distinction has not yet arisen.

## References

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