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The Status of the 'Progressive Aspect' in the Hellenistic Greek of the New Testament

Věnováno k uctění památky mého profesora Antonína Bartoňka

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Abstract

In this paper, I want to revisit the issue of the status of the 'progressive aspect' in Hellenistic Greek which I have dealt with in the *Encyclopedia of Ancient Greek and Linguistics* (2014: pp. 346–350). The entire issue is placed within the contexts of (i) larger cross-linguistic evidence for the existence of the progressive aspect in other Indo-European languages, and (ii) language contact of the colloquial Syro-Palestinian variety of Hellenistic Greek with Aramaic and Hebrew. It is shown that the verbal system of Hellenistic Greek included innovative analytic formations coexisting with aspectual and temporal categories inherited from Classical Greek.

During the period of Hellenistic Greek we witness the rise and spread of numerous analytical formations in the verbal system, specifically in the imperfective aspect (Present and Imperfect) and in the perfect (Perfect, Pluperfect), see Aerts (1965), Bubenik (2010). This tendency continued through the medieval period and ultimately it resulted in a complete rebuilding of the perfect system. In parallel with other new Indo-European languages Modern Greek ended up with analytic formations by combining the auxiliary ἔχω ['exo] 'I have' with the infinitive (ἔχω λύσει ['exo 'lisi] 'I have solved, loosened') or the passive participle in dialects (ἔχω λυμένο ['exo li'meno]). It goes without saying that this process of restructuring the synthetic morphology of the perfect (retrospective) aspect lasted centuries (diatopic and diachronic details are available in Moser 1988).

However, unlike some new Indo-European languages, Medieval and Modern Greek have not paradigmatized the periphrastic formations of Hellenistic Koine (available in New Testament) which combine the copula with the present participle of the type εἰμὶ / ἦν λύων 'I am / I was loosening'. *Grosso modo*, these formations correspond to the progressive (continuous) aspect of several Western and Eastern Indo-European languages:

English, Spanish, Lithuanian, Hindi (without trying to be exhaustive): 'I am / was working'.

(1) (English)   I am working (Progressive Present)
                     I was working (Progressive Past)

     (Spanish)   estoy trabajando (Progressive Present)
                     estaba trabajando (Progressive Past)

     (Lithuanian) esù be-dirb-ãs (M) be-dirb-ánti (F) (Progressive Present)
                     buvaũ be-dirb-ãs (M) be-dirb-ánti (F) (Progressive Past)

     (Hindi)   cal rah-ā hū̃ (M), rah-ī hū̃ (F) 'I am going' (called Continuous Present)
                     cal rah-ā th-ā (M), rah-ī th-ī (F) 'I was going' (Continuous Past)

It will be observed that English may form the progressive aspect even in the prefect (*I have been working*) but Spanish cannot (*estuve trabajando). The present participle in English and Spanish is not marked for gender but the 'more conservative' East Indo-European languages (Lithuanian and Hindi) do so. The continuous aspect in Hindi attaches the participial form of *rah-nā* 'stay, remain' to the root *cal* 'go' (hence the marking for gender in *rah-ā* vs. *rah-ī*); in the past continuous the gender is double-marked since the past form of the copula is based on the grammaticalized participle of the lexical verb *sthā-* 'stand' (*sthi-ta* > *tthā* > *thā*). Another fairly well known type of forming the progressive aspect is found in Arabic which combines the copula (in the Perfect) with the finite form of the main verb in the Imperfective (*kān-a ya-ktub-u* lit. he-was 3/Sg/M+write+IPFV 'he was writing').

In New Greek dialects the compound forms of the copula and the present participle are only found in Tsakonian (*émi orú* (M), *orú-a* (F) 'I see'; *éma orú* (M), *orú-a* 'I saw'). Here they function as a simple present and imperfect, i.e. not as the progressive aspect (the simple uncompounded forms are used only in modal meaning after the particle *na*, e.g. *na ftén-u* 'that I make', *na ftén-ere* 'that you make'). In other words in Tsakonian the progressive aspect was grammaticalized as the tense category (they could be traced back to undocumented progressive forms of the type *εἰμὶ (M) ὁρῶν, ὁρῶσα (F)). In this context it should be mentioned that in the extinct dialect of Propontis the aorist was formed analytically by combining the perfect participle with the copula [gravó ma] 'I wrote' paralleling Attic-Ionic/Hellenistic γε-γραφ-ώς εἰμί. In Northern Tsakonian there are traces of the use of the perfect participle instead of the present participle as in [emi apostakú] 'I open my legs'], cf. εἰμί ἀφεστηκώς; see Liosis (2014: pp. 446–450).

The changes which were taking place during the Hellenistic period were due to language-internal and external factors. Language-internal changes during this period were studied in many works; on the other hand, language external-factors have been elevated to a systematic study much more recently; see Hickey (2010) for the essentials of contact explanations in linguistics (convergence, grammaticalization, borrowing and code-

switching). Our enterprise is demanding in that it involves early contact scenarios where in the absence of living speakers we have to rely on written documents (papyri, biblical texts, inscriptions): namely, the contact of Hellenistic Koine with Coptic in Egypt, Hebrew and Aramaic in Palestine and Syria, and other languages in newly settled areas of Asia Minor (cf. Bubenik 1989, 2010).

In what follows we will concentrate on the 'colloquial' variety of the Hellenistic Koine – the Greek of the New Testament, a collection of 27 short works written by men without a higher education during the 1st CE. The two 'classics' dealing with the rise of periphrastic formations in the imperfective aspect are the monographs by Björck (1940) and Aerts (1965) and there are extensive sections on 'periphrastic conjugations' in the grammar of the NT Greek by Blass & Debrunner (1961, 1990), earlier grammars of the Old Testament Greek (Thackeray 1909) and the NT Greek (Moulton & Howard 1938), and later special studies (Fanning 1990, McKay 1994); for the papyri one has to consult Palmer (1946) and Gignac (1981). In what follows the NT data are quoted according to Nestle (1921).

In terms of their documentation Blass & Debrunner (1961: p. 179) observe that the periphrasis is rare in the present, while the periphrases in the imperfect, future, infinitive and even the imperative are 'widely employed' in the NT.

An example of the periphrasis in the present is found in the 2 Corinthians [9.12]:

(2) ὅτι ἡ διακονία...οὐ μόνον ἐστὶν προσαναπληροῦσα τὰ ὑστερήματα τῶν ἁγίων
'for the rendering of this service not only supplies the wants of the saints' (instead of the finite form προσαναπληροῖ)

The examples of the periphrasis in the imperfect are plentiful; salient examples are in (3):

(3) Καὶ ἦν διδάσκων τὸ καθ' ἡμέραν [Luke 19.47]
'And he was teaching daily'

Σαῦλος δὲ ἦν συνευδοκῶν τῇ ἀναιρέσει αὐτοῦ [Acts 8.1]
'And Saul was consenting to his death'

Καὶ ἦν μετ αὐτῶν εἰσπορυόμενος καὶ ἐκπορευόμενος εἰς Ἱεροσαλήμ [Acts 9.28]
'And he was entering and exiting with them in Jerusalem'
(King James Bible 1611/1952 translates the progressive aspect by the simple past/ preterit: 'So he went in and out among them at Jerusalem')

ἤμην φυλακίζων καὶ δέρων … τοὺς πιστεύοντας ἐπὶ σέ [Acts 22.19]
'I was imprisoning and beating those who believed in you'
(King James 1611/1952: 'I imprisoned and beat those who believed in you')

It will be observed that English with its progressive aspect possessed grammatical means to capture the progressive aspect of the NT. Earlier translators, however, did not hesitate to violate the rules of their languages by calquing their translations on the Greek original. St. Jerome in his translation into Latin (3') simply combined the copula with the present participle found in the Greek original:

(3') Et erat docens quottidie
    Saulus autem erat consentiens neci eius
    Et erat cum illis intrans et exiens in Ierusalem
    Ego eram concludens in carcerem et caedens eos, qui credebant

Similarly, the translator into Old Slavic (Old Church Slavonic) calqued his translation of Luke (19.47) by combining the copula in the aorist with the present participle: И бѣ оучѧ по всѧ дни (the modern Bulgarian translation, however, displays the monolectal form of the imperfect И поучаваше всѣки день).

   Returning to Greek, it should be observed that the latter example ἤμην φυλακίζων καὶ δέρων ... 'I was imprisoning and beating ...' is a translation of Paul's speech given in Aramaic (Ἑβράιδι διαλέκτῳ) and that its original could be in the periphrastic construction (progressive aspect) combining the copula and the participle. Unfortunately, the Aramaic originals of Hellenistic works (the Gospels according to Matthew and Mark (?), Joseph's *Jewish Wars*) have not come down to us but this construction is well documented in Hebrew and Aramaic biblical texts.

(4) hāyāh   ʕōbēd̲   ʔəd̲āmāh [Gen. 4.2 in Hebrew]
    was   till+PRES PART   soil
    'He was tilling the soil'

(5) wə=k̲ol   dī   lā lɛ-həwē   ʕāb̲ēd̲ [Ezra 7.26 in Aramaic]
    and=everybody who not 3SgM+be+IPFV   do+PRES PART
    'and anybody who will not be doing'

(6) ʔənā həwēt̲ī   qāʔēm [Aramaic translation of Deuteronomy 10.10]
    I   be+PERF+1Sg   stand+PRES PART
    'I was standing' (but the Hebrew original displays a simple perfect עמדתי [ʕāmad̲tī] 'I stood').

There are also instances of the periphrastic infinitival construction as in Luke [9.18] καὶ ἐγένετο ἐν τῷ εἶναι αὐτὸν προσευχόμενον 'and it came to pass when he was praying'; here the opening *kaì egéneto* (Hebrew ויהי [*wa-yəhī*]) followed by the articular infinitive corresponds to the Hebrew construction of *bə* + infinitive (בהיותו מתפלל [*bi-hyōt̲ō miṯpallēl*]).

An example of the future tense periphrasis is in (7):
(7) καὶ οἱ ἀστέρες ἔσονται ἐκ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ πίπτοντες [Mark 13.25]

'and the stars will be falling from heaven'
(versus the finite form in Mt [24:29] καὶ οἱ ἀστέρες πεσοῦνται ἀπὸ τοῦ οὐρανοῦ).

On the other hand, the future tense periphrasis with μέλλω 'intend to do, be about to do' continues the construction amply documented at the two previous stages of Ancient Greek (Homeric and Classical). Strictly speaking, we are not dealing with a periphrastic tense but an inceptive aspect: contrast the sigmatic future λύσω 'I will loosen' with the inceptive μέλλω λύειν 'I intend / I am about to loosen'. This construction can also express the future in the past as in Luke [7.2] ἤμελλε τελευτᾶν 'he was at the point of death' (cf. Latin *erat moritūrus*) which is impossible with the simple future. This construction also replaces the disappearing non-finite forms of the infinitive λύσειν and the participle λύσων (> μέλλειν λύ(σ)ειν and μέλλων λύ(σ)ειν). As mentioned by Blass & Debrunner (1961: p. 181) one of the advantages of the analytic construction was its ability to be used in the absolute construction to indicate relative time where the future participle is not available: μέλλοντος δὲ τοῦ Παύλου ἀνοίγειν τὸ στόμα 'but when Paul was about to open his mouth' [A 18:14], cf. the Latin absolute construction with the present participle *incipiente autem Paulo aperire os* (but the future participle cannot be used *ἀνοίξοντος... and *apertūrō ...).

The status of analytic formations involving the imperfective participle remains contentious. Its beginnings, as discussed by Aerts (1965: pp. 5–26), lie in pre-Hellenistic Classical Greek. Porter (1989: p. 478) concluded that "Semitic intervention into periphrastic constructions in the NT cannot be supported" but admits that "perhaps its use ... is aided by Septuagint precedent". More recently this issue was re-examined on the basis of the Septuagint (Pentateuch) by Evans (2001: p. 256). He cautiously concluded that of the 68 examples in the entire Greek Pentateuch over 57% of examples "closely imitate" similar Hebrew expressions, 28% are "comparatively free" and nearly 15% are free of any "formal motivation" from the Masoretic text. Given the fact that in the NT Greek only the combination with the copula in the past is relatively common (while that in the future is less common and in the present it is isolated), I have suggested (2010: p. 48) that it might be plausible to argue that the progressive aspect was "systematized" in the OT and NT Greek to a much higher degree than in any other work in a "literary" version of the Hellenistic Koine as a result of the influence from the Semitic background of their translators and authors. This is not to claim that its use reached the paradigmatic status which it possessed in contemporary Mishnaic Hebrew and Middle Aramaic. The same bilingual speaker in Aramaic (הוה מלמד [həwāh məlámmid] or [həwāh məlmmḗḏ] 'he was teaching') and Greek could alternate between ἦν διδάσκων 'he was teaching' and ἐδίδασκε(ν) 'he taught'; the former ἦν διδάσκων would reflect the colloquial variety of the regional Syro-Palestinian Koine, the latter ἐδίδασκε(ν) would be used when the same speaker resorted to the more formal register of Hellenistic literary works. To provide a credible contemporary parallel, the overuse of the progressive aspect in Indian English (as in *I am knowing it*) reflects its larger scope in Indic languages (cf. Hindi *maĩ use jāntā hū̃* I him/it know+PRES PART be+1Sg 'I am knowing him/it'). The relative frequency of the progressive aspect in the Egyptian (Ptolemaic) Koine can also be understood in

terms of the influence from the New Egyptian substrate which possessed a number of periphrastic tenses. In any case, as emphasized by Evans (2001: p. 257), further research in this area has to come up with some "natural frequencies of occurrence in extra-Biblical Greek" to adjudicate properly the Pentateuch frequencies. Later on, during the Medieval period the progressive aspect was used "as an alternative expression of continuity" (Browning 1983: p. 38). However, the later development towards Modern Greek was not in the direction of the innovative analytic formation since no contemporary variety of Greek – with the exception of Tsakonian – systematized / paradigmatized it.

It is imperative to put the above discussion of the rise of analytic formations in the context of internal changes documented in the Classical language. Classical Greek had already made use of compounding in the formation of the mediopassive modal forms (subjunctive and optative). These formations are based on the mediopassive participle in -μένος in combination with the modal forms of the copula (in 8):

(8) Mediopassive Perfect Indicative λέ-λυ-ται   Subjunctive λε-λυ-μένον ἦ
     Mediopassive Pluperfect Indicative ἐ-λέ-λυ-το   Optative λε-λυ-μένον εἴη

Already in the Classical language this periphrasis had been extended to the active modal forms combing the active perfect participle with the modal forms of the copula (in 9):

(9) Active Perfect Indicative λέ-λυ-κ-εν   Subjunctive λε-λύ-κ-η ~ λελυκὼς ἦ
     Active Pluperfect Indicative ἐ-λε-λύ-κ-ειν   Optative λε-λύ-κ-οι ~ λε-λυ-κ-ὼς εἴη

In Hellenistic Greek there are further extensions of periphrasis found in the formation of the following categories:

(a) The future perfect [both active (λε-λύ-σ-ει) and mediopassive (λε-λύ-σε-ται)]:

(10) ἔσομαι πεποιθώς [Hebrews 2.13]
     'I will put trust'
     ἔσται λε-λυ-μένον [Mt 16.19]
     'It shall be loosed'

(i.e. not the synthetic passive future or λυ-θή-σε-ται or the mediopassive future λε-λύ-σε-ται). It should be observed that in the active the future perfect can be formed only from the *k*-perfect (ἑστήξω [he-stḗ-k-s-ō]) while it cannot be formed from the ablaut perfect πέποιθα 'I trust' (*pe-poíth-s-ō).

(b) The mediopassive perfect imperative (λέ-λυ-σο):

A rare example of the passive imperative in the 2nd person is found in the magic papyri:

(11) ἴσθι πεφυλακτηριασμένος [PGM I 4.2626 f.]

'be furnished with a phylactery'
(i.e. not the synthetic passive future πεφυλακτηρίασο).

An example for the 3rd person imperative:

ἔστωσαν ὑμῶν αἱ ὀσφύες περιεζωσμένοι [Lk 12.35]
'let your loins be girded'

(c) The indicative forms of the mediopassive perfect and pluperfect (λέ-λυ-ται and
ἐλέλυτο):
The analytic formations of the mediopassive perfect and pluperfect in the indicative
are numerous but so are their synthetic counterparts. The perfect form γέγραπται
'it is/has been written' co-occurs with γεγραμμένον ἐστίν [Jn 6.31], and the pluper-
fect ἐ-πε-γέ-γραπ-το 'it had been written' [A 17.23] with ἦν γεγραμμένον [Jn 19.19f.].
The combination of the participial form of the copula with the mediopassive participle
(γεγραμμένον ὄν) can express the passive progressive "to express still more forcibly the
persistence of the new state of things" (Blass & Debrunner 1961):

(13) ὄντες ἀπηλλοτριωμένοι [Ephesians 4.18]
    '(being) alienated'

(d) The active pluperfect forms (ἦν λελυκώς):
Examples of the analytic active pluperfect formations based on the active perfect par-
ticiple competed with those based on the aorist participle which existed in the classical
language (ἦν λύσας) e.g. ἦσαν προεωρακότες [pro-e-ōra-k-ót-es] 'they had previously
seen' [A 21.29] i.e. not the synthetic active pluperfect προεωράκεσαν [pro-e-ōrá-ke-san].
In the NT Greek the earliest examples of the periphrasis with the aorist participle are
documented in the passive (cf. Blass & Debrunner 1961: p. 180):

(14) ὅστις ἦν ... βληθεὶς ἐν τῇ φυλακῇ [Lk 23.19]
    'who had been thrown into prison'

Summarily, while we can portray the Classical verbal system as based on the three-way as-
pectual opposition and a temporal opposition of past versus non-past (with an aspectual
future realized as a perfective non-past), we can portray the innovative aspectual system
of the early Christian literature represented by the NT as possessing a three-way opposi-
tion of tense (Present, Past, Future) with an additional progressive aspect. The construc-
tion μέλλω λύειν 'I will solve' goes back to the Classical inceptive aspect 'to be about to
do' but it can also be used as an analytic future (Modern Greek future continues another
volitional construction θέλω (I want) λύειν (INF) 'I want to solve' > θα (FUT) λύσω (I
solve) 'I will solve').
While the active perfect forms were still very much around we also noticed the pe-
riphrasis for the pluperfect based on the aorist participle ἦν λύσας; in the mediopassive

perfect the analytic formations in the indicative competed successfully with the inherited synthetic forms.

Table 1: Tense/Aspect system of Classical Greek and the Innovative Formations of Hellenistic Greek

Active	Present	Past	Future
Imperfective	λύ-ω	ἔ-λυ-ον	λύ-σ-ω
Perfective (Aorist)	ἔ-λυ-σα		
Perfect	λέ-λυ-κ-α	ἐ-λε-λύ-κ-η	λε-λύ-σ-ω
Med-Pass Perfect			
Indicative	λέ-λυ-ται	ἐ-λέ-λυ-το	λε-λύ-σε-ται

Innovative Analytic Formations of Hellenistic Greek

Progressive	εἰμὶ λύ-ων	ἤμην λύ-ων	ἔσομαι λύ-ων
Inceptive > Future	μέλλω λύ-ειν	ἤμέλλon λύ-ειν (Fut in the Past)	
Med-Pass Perfect	λε-λυ-μένον ἐστίν	λε-λυ-μένον ἦν	λε-λυ-μένον ἔσται

We should also notice the innovative middle voice forms of the copula in the past ἤμην, ἤμεθα (Classical ἦν, ἦμεν) built on the pattern of the inherited middle future ἔσομαι.

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