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Excerpt

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## I

THE LANGUAGE OF THE  
NEW TESTAMENT

Without using intolerably cumbrous and pedantic methods, it is nearly impossible to define a particular phase of some language with strict accuracy. Consider, for instance, the many types and intermerging gradations of dialect current in England alone. The difficulty of reaching precision in such cases makes careful writers hesitant about the use of such labels as 'Hellenistic' and κοινή (short for κοινή διάλεκτος, i.e. *a language in common or widespread use*). But, broadly speaking, both these labels are habitually applied to the new language whose establishment came with the rise of Alexander of Macedon, otherwise Alexander the Great (who reigned from 336 to 323 B.C.). To call it a new language serves to emphasize the fact that it is not simply Classical Greek growing senile and going into a decline—a mistake which it is easy for anybody to make who comes straight from a Classical education to the study of the New Testament. Κοινή is not, as it were, pure gold accidentally contaminated, but something more like a new and serviceable alloy. The dominant component is the Attic dialect—not because it was the most widely spoken dialect at the time, but apparently because it had a certain vitality which asserted itself: in fact (as D.-B. § 2 puts it) Hellenistic Greek is a compromise between the rights of the stronger minority (i.e. Attic) and the weaker majority (other dialects).<sup>1</sup>

The fact that, roughly speaking, a single alloy did emerge was due, it is said, to the unifying power of Alexander's conquests. Colonies in earlier Greek history had been more or less uniform: by definition, they were the budding-off from some one species of city—Ionic, Attic, etc. But Alexander's colonies were not monochrome but mixed; and this must have been a new and powerful factor in blending the dialects: probably the most powerful, in fact, until the advent of printing.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Of these, the opinion of Thumb (as presented in *Beg.* II, 32) specifies Ionic: '... the κοινή in its nascent stage was formed by a dominant influence of Attic crossed by an Ionic counter-current.'

<sup>2</sup> I owe this observation to Mr N. G. L. Hammond, of Clare College, although he is not responsible for the form in which it is expressed.

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Besides this, the very scope of Alexander's empire must have accelerated the formation of a κοινή διάλεκτος: '...in the days of Macedonian ascendancy the old boundary lines grew fainter: soldiers of fortune, diplomatists and traders freely moved from place to place, and lost their fineness of ear for purity of speech, while some sort of official language was required for the uses of government and the intercourse of educated men.'<sup>1</sup> In our own day broadcasting must be 'ironing out', for better or for worse, some of the local varieties of speech; and, undoubtedly for the worse, certain types of 'cinema' film are certainly breeding a barbarous vocabulary. The Macedonian dialect itself does not appear to have constituted more than a negligible component in the new alloy. What counted in the growth of the language was not the origin of the impulse to unity, but the respective degrees of assertiveness in its components.

But to speak in general terms about the establishment of this new lingua franca, known as Hellenistic Greek or κοινή, is, of course, not to deny that it, too, varied considerably at different times and places, or according to the idiosyncrasies of individuals even at the same time and in the same region. Polybius the historian (who died c. 128 B.C.) is usually claimed as its earliest representative; and there are many gradations of style and quality from his time onwards, including the extremely colloquial character of some of the papyri. Indeed, at any period the literary style was probably very different from the colloquial (see *Beg.* II, 31); and although the genius of Christianity made at least some of the New Testament writers into creators of great literature (cf. Milligan in M.M. xix, xx), still Josephus (for example) writes in a markedly more literary style than that of his near contemporary St Luke, with the exception of comparatively few passages from the latter.

Within the general field, therefore, of Hellenistic Greek as a whole, there is a wide and fascinating range of variety; and it is the style of the New Testament writers in particular which here claims our attention; while they, in their turn, vary among themselves. St Luke (probably a Gentile and perhaps the only one among the writers of the New Testament) is usually claimed as the most accomplished of them in respect of style. But it needs to be said that his Gospel and the Acts (which is by many scholars regarded as substantially his work also) are so uneven in style that it is probable that he used sources

<sup>1</sup> W. W. Capes, *The History of the Achaean League as contained in the Remains of Polybius* (1888), xv.

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## VARIETIES OF STYLE

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(oral or written) and often incorporated them; and it may be also that he deliberately varied his style, making it more and less Semitic according to the setting of the scene. At any rate St Luke is less uniformly elegant than the anonymous writer to the Hebrews, who has a considerable sense of the rhetorical and the poetic, and a style which has glitter if not warmth. At the other end of the scale is the author of the Apocalypse, who writes like a person who, nurtured in a Semitic speech, is only just learning to write in Greek. He is capable of horrifying grammatical blunders and patently Semitic idioms, but is not thereby prevented from achieving extraordinary power and sometimes a quite unearthly beauty. Few can now believe that the John of the Apocalypse is the same as the author (or authors) of what are commonly called the Johannine writings—the Gospel and the three Epistles. These are in a very simple, ‘paratactic’ style (sometimes, at least, with a Semitic tinge), but are mostly free from grammatical mistakes. In an utterly different style, St Paul’s Epistles surge along with the fervid heat of a very agile mind and a highly-strung temperament, thinking and feeling as an Aramaean, but thoroughly familiar with the vocabulary of the Greek world.

The arrival of papyrus fragments from Egypt upon the philologists’ desks marks a new era in the study of New Testament Greek. Till then, despite shrewd forecasts from some great men, most of the scholars—even the finest—had allowed their exegesis to be dominated (perhaps half unconsciously) by two misleading ideas: one was that Classical standards could be applied to the language; and the other was that, if Biblical Greek differed from Classical Greek, it was also quite distinct from contemporary ‘secular’ Greek. But the discovery and editing of piles of documents from the waste paper dumps of ancient Egypt (the only place with a climate and conditions such that so fragile a material could survive)† revolutionized Biblical scholarship; and A. Deissmann and J. H. Moulton, among others, revealed a large number of words and idioms which, while previously classed as belonging exclusively to ‘Biblical’ Greek, could in fact be demonstrated by the papyrus scraps to have been part of the ‘secular’ currency.

A fresh chapter is thus opened in the story of New Testament interpretation. But one word of caution is perhaps necessary. The pendulum has swung rather too far in the direction of equating Biblical with ‘secular’ Greek; and we must not allow these fascinating discoveries to blind us to the fact that Biblical Greek still does retain

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certain peculiarities, due in part to Semitic influence<sup>1</sup> (which must be far stronger in the New Testament than in an equivalent bulk of colloquial or literary 'secular' Greek, even allowing for the permeation of society by Jewish settlements), and in part to the moulding influence of the Christian experience, which did in some measure create an idiom and a vocabulary of its own.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> W. F. Howard (M.-H. 414 n. 1) aptly quotes Père Lagrange (*S. Luc.*, xcvi): 'Il n'en est pas moins vrai que lorsqu'un helléniste ouvre le NT, en particulier les évangiles, il se trouve transporté dans les tentes de Sem. L'exagération de quelques hellénistes a été, reconnaissant chaque objet comme déjà vu dans le domaine de Japhet, de prétendre qu'il en venait toujours.'

<sup>2</sup> For a valuable review of various features of the language, see L. Radermacher's *Koine* (Akademie der Wissenschaft in Wien, 1947).

## II

## THE TENSES

## A. 'Aktionsart'†

The *ethos* of English verbs concentrates attention mainly on the *time* to which an event is referred—past, present, or future. In Greek, on the other hand, this is probably not the most fundamental question; and the interpretation of many N.T. passages depends not a little on the recognition that, to the Greek mind, another consideration appears to have presented itself first—namely the *nature* of the event, or (to use a German word which has become a technical term of grammarians) the *Aktionsart* ('the kind of action'). Generally speaking, the first question that the Greek writer seems to ask himself is not 'When did (or will) this happen?' but 'Am I conceiving of it as protracted or as virtually instantaneous?' Moulton has represented this pictorially by popularizing the terms 'linear' and 'punctiliar' to denote the two chief contrasted types of action—protracted like a line and focused into a point.<sup>1</sup>

In English the idea of protracted action can as a rule only be conveyed by the use of some auxiliary word or words; e.g. 'to be releasing' is a 'linear' phrase, while 'to release' is (or at least may be) 'punctiliar'; 'he was releasing' is 'linear', but 'he released' is definitely 'punctiliar'. Greek, however, expresses this distinction more neatly by altering the form of a single word; e.g. βάλλειν (Present Infinitive) is 'to be throwing', while βάλειν (Aorist Infinitive) is simply 'to throw'; βάλλειν is 'linear', but βάλειν is 'punctiliar'. Thus, the first question to ask about a Greek verb stem is whether it expresses 'linear' or 'punctiliar' *Aktionsart*.

It ought to be added that both in Greek and English there are some verbs which, owing to their very meaning, can only be *either* 'linear' or 'punctiliar' (not both). Thus, 'to snatch' is necessarily 'punctiliar', and the Imperfect, 'he was snatching a few moments of sleep', can, in the nature of the case, only refer in reality to the protracted *result* of a 'punctiliar' act—'he was *enjoying* the rest which he snatched' (at a given moment—'punctiliar'). And conversely, 'to enjoy' is, for obvious reasons, necessarily 'linear'. So in Greek (as Moulton, *Proleg.*

<sup>1</sup> See, especially, *Proleg.* 109 and n.

110, points out) ‘the root of ἐνεγκεῖν, like our *bring*, is essentially a “point” word’ and has no Present stem; whereas ‘that of φέρω . . . *bear*, on the other hand, is essentially durative or “linear”, and therefore forms no Aorist stem’.<sup>1</sup> Similarly λέγω, *say*, has an Imperfect ἔλεγον but no Aorist; while εἶπον, *said*, has no Present or Imperfect (though it is a question whether the durative nature of the stem λεγ- can be pressed. See *M.T.* § 57).

Many fascinating exceptions and modifications will present themselves in due course, but meanwhile it may make for clear thinking if we add the next step, namely—*Time of Action*. When the Greek does proceed to what, as I have suggested, is for the English mind the prior consideration—namely the question ‘When?’—he indicates this by taking his stem—whether linear or punctiliar—and adding the appropriate termination and, if necessary, prefix.

The process may be represented in tabular form:

- |                         |  |
|-------------------------|--|
| 1. Pres. Indic. Act.    | βάλλω, I am throwing (‘linear’ event in the present).  |
| 2. Imperf. Indic. Act.  | ἔβαλλον, I was throwing (‘linear’ event in the past).  |
| 3. Fut. Indic. Act.     | βαλῶ, I shall throw (mostly ‘punctiliar’ event in the future).   |
| 4. Aor. Indic. Act.     | ἔβαλον, I threw (‘punctiliar’ event in the past).  |
| 5. Perf. Indic. Act.    | βέβληκα, I have thrown (‘punctiliar’ event in the past, related in its effects to the present).              |
| 6. Pluperf. Indic. Act. | ἔβεβλήκειν, I had thrown (‘punctiliar’ event in the past, related in its effects to a time itself now past). |

It will be seen that, whereas the stem of the verb indicates the *Aktionsart* (the *kind* of action—whether ‘linear’ or ‘punctiliar’) the *time* of the occurrence is expressed by termination and prefix.

The tenses will now be reviewed, chiefly with reference to the Indicative mood, but with allusions, where occasion seems to offer, to similar principles in other parts of the verb. The *Aktionsart* of participles is discussed separately.

<sup>1</sup> I have quoted this as an interesting and provocative point. But it seems to me questionable whether one can really argue that φέρω has no similar Aorist stem *because* it is essentially linear, and vice versa. Most present stems are essentially linear, but that does not necessarily prevent them from having a not dissimilar Aorist stem.

1. **The Present Indicative.** The Greek Present Indicative normally denotes 'linear' action in present time, and it is therefore wise, in any given instance, to start by seeing whether it can be translated by the English periphrastic Present (see below, p. 17); e.g. (*M.T.* § 8) Matt. xxv. 8 αἱ λαμπάδες ἡμῶν σβέννυνται, *Our lamps are going out.*

The English simple (i.e. not periphrastic) Present normally denotes not 'linear' but 'punctiliar', or at most repeated, action in present time; and, in consequence, the English simple Present is often equivalent to a Greek Aorist; e.g. *I approve* (i.e. *I am pleased with—*referring to an immediate reaction), εὐδόκησα (e.g. Matt. iii. 17); *I know what I will do*, ἔγνων τί ποιήσω (Luke xvi. 4).

At the same time, it is impossible to generalize. Here, for example, are some English simple Presents ('punctiliar') which correspond perfectly to Greek Presents: *I perceive*, θεωρῶ<sup>1</sup> (John iv. 19, Acts xvii. 22); *I regret*, μεταμέλομαι (II Cor. vii. 8); *we wish*, θέλομεν (e.g. Mark x. 35). Add (with *M.T.* § 13): *I command*, παραγγέλλω (e.g. Acts xvi. 18); *heals*, ἰσται<sup>2</sup> (Acts ix. 34); *it is now permissible*, ἐπιτρέπεται (Acts xxvi. 1); *I wish you to know*, γνωρίζω... ὑμῖν (Gal. i. 11); 'and the numerous instances of λέγω in the gospels'.

Further, there are the following more easily definable uses of the Present tense:

i. *Historical Present* (very frequent in Mark), † e.g. Mark i. 21, 30, Luke viii. 49, John xviii. 28: a familiar idiom also in English.

ii. *Present equivalent to the Future*, e.g. Matt. xxvi. 18 ποιῶ τὸ πάσχα, *I will celebrate the Passover*; xxvii. 63 ἐγείρομαι, *I shall rise*; Mark ix. 31 παραδίδοται (cf. Matt. xxvi. 2), *shall be betrayed*; Luke xiii. 32 ἐκβάλλω... ἀποτελῶ... τελειοῦμαι, *I shall cast out... perform... be perfected*; I Cor. xv. 32 ἀποθνήσκομεν, *we shall die*; xvi. 5 Μακεδονίαν γὰρ διέρχομαι, *I shall go through M.* (for cf. v. 8). Moulton (*Proleg.* 120) says that such Futural Presents differ from the Future tense 'mainly in the tone of assurance which is imparted'. All the above examples could be fairly translated by the idiom 'I am to celebrate', 'I am to rise', etc. In fact, a pure, cold statement 'I shall celebrate' would seem in the first example less than the Greek conveys. Cf. Matt. ii. 4 γεννᾶται, *is to be born*.

<sup>1</sup> But see below, under 'Miscellaneous Notes on Style' (6, p. 198): θεωρῶ may be used for no better reason than that there is no convenient Aorist of this particular verb.

<sup>2</sup> But H. J. Cadbury in *J.T.S.* XLIX, 193-4 (Jan.-April 1948) suggests accenting ἰσται and parsing as a deponent Perfect.

iii. *Conative Present*. The Present tense is sometimes used of action attempted, but not accomplished. Burton, *M.T.* § 11, adduces John x. 32 λιθάσετε, *try to stone*, Gal. v. 4 δικαιούσθε, *try to get 'justified'*, Rom. ii. 4 ἄγει, *is trying or tending to lead*.

iv. *Gnomic Present*—i.e. that used in a γνώμη, a maxim or generalization. This is equivalent to the English frequentative Present: *a good tree [always] bears good fruit*, πᾶν δένδρον ἀγαθὸν καρποὺς καλοὺς ποιεῖ, Matt. vii. 17; *God loves a cheerful giver*, ἰλαρὸν . . . δότην ἀγαπᾷ ὁ θεός, II Cor. ix. 7 (both quoted in *M.T.* § 12). Cf. several examples in Jas. i. 13–15.

v. *Present of Past Action Still in Progress* (*M.T.* § 17): e.g. Acts xv. 21 Μωϋσῆς γὰρ ἐκ γενεῶν ἀρχαίων κατὰ πόλιν τοὺς κηρύσσοντας αὐτὸν ἔχει, *for Moses from generations of old has had in every city them that preached him*. Cf. Luke ii. 48, xiii. 7, xv. 29, John v. 6, II Tim. iii. 15 (where οἶδος is equivalent to a present tense).

vi. For the *Present in Reported Speech*, see below (pp. 153 f.).

*Notes.* (a) In view of the fact that a 'punctiliar' Present is an obvious requisite, it is surprising that we do not find instances of a 'punctiliar' root in the Present side by side with a 'linear', durative root; as though, besides ἀγγέλλω, *I am announcing*, there were a Present ἀγγείλω (cf. Aorist ἠγγείλα), *I announce*. Blass (T.-B. § 56. 4) points out how, although ἀσπάζεται (Present), *sends greeting*, is the regular formula in a letter when the Indicative is used, the Imperative equivalent is the Aorist ἀσπάσασθε; which suggests that if there were a 'punctiliar' Present it would be used in preference to ἀσπάζεται. Perhaps the reason for the lack of such forms is the likelihood of their being confused with Aorists and Futures. III John 15 actually has ἀσπάζου (but Ν ἄσπασαι).

(b) An interesting instance of the blurring of the *Aktionsart* in the Present *Infinitive* is in Acts ii. 1 συμπληροῦσθαι. See *Beg. in loc.*

2. **The Imperfect.** For the sake of clearness, we start with an elementary statement of the use, and then discuss more interesting nuances.

The Imperfect tense is used when referring to a 'linear' or protracted action in past time:

Pres. Indic. Act. βάλλω, *I am throwing*.

Imperf. Indic. Act. ἔβαλλον, *I was throwing*.

In sharp distinction to this, the Aorist Indicative denotes 'punctiliar', instantaneous action in past time: ἔβαλον, *I threw*.



But there are other, related ideas covered by the Imperfect tense:

i. ἐδίδασκεν (e.g. Mark i. 21), *he began to teach*—the Inceptive Imperfect. This is frequent in the N.T.

ii. ἐκωλύομεν αὐτόν, Mark ix. 38 (Luke ix. 49), probably *we tried to prevent him*—the Conative Imperfect. Cf. (with *M.T.* § 23) Matt. iii. 14, Luke i. 59, Acts vii. 26. Acts xxvi. 11, ἠνάγκαζον βλασφημεῖν (mentioned by Burton, *loc. cit.* and discussed by Moulton, *Proleg.* 129), seems open to doubt, but may be conative—*I tried to compel them to blaspheme*. Moulton (*loc. cit.*) adds Heb. xi. 17 and cf. Luke iv. 42.

iii. ἠύλιζετο, Luke xxi. 37, *he used to spend the night* (parallel to ἦν . . . διδάσκων, see on periphrastic tenses below, p. 17)—the Iterative Imperfect. Cf. Luke viii. 29

ἐδεσμεύετο . . . καὶ διαρῆσσω τὰ δεσμὰ ἠλαύνετο . . . εἰς τὰς ἐρήμους,  
*he* <sup>used to</sup> <sub>would</sub> } *be bound* . . . *and* <sup>used to</sup> <sub>would</sub> } *break the bonds and be driven . . .*  
*into the uninhabited parts.*

The dividing line between these uses of the Imperfect and what has been assumed above as the regular and primary use is obviously vague. The only value of classifying the two as different is to call attention to the need for a study of the context when translating.

iv. ἔβουλόμην . . . ἀκοῦσαι, Acts xxv. 22, *I would like to listen*. This represents an idiomatic use of the Imperfect which might be called the *Desiderative Imperfect*, because it is chiefly used in expressing a wish. It seems to soften a remark, and make it more vague or more diffident or polite; as we might say 'I could almost do so-and-so'. Cf. ἠύχόμην γὰρ ἀνάθεμα εἶναι, Rom. ix. 3, *I could almost pray to be accursed*—the Imperfect softening the shock of the daring statement or expressing awe at the terrible thought. Burton, *M.T.* § 33, mentions Philem. 13 as illustrating this class of Imperfect, but the translation of ἐβουλόμην there is surely complicated by the possibility of its being an 'epistolary' tense (see below, p. 12). The same perhaps applies to his reference to ἤθελον παρεῖναι in Gal. iv. 20.†

v. For the Imperfect in conditional clauses, see some examples below, under 'Conditional Clauses', p. 151.

As with other tenses, the English equivalent varies with the context. E.g. whereas in Greek the Imperfect is used with reference to a continuous action in the past when no interval is contemplated between

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it and the time of speaking, the English equivalent is a periphrastic Perfect or Pluperfect; e.g. Luke viii. 29 *παρήγγελλεν*, *he had been commanding*, Mark vi. 18 *ἔλεγεν γὰρ ὁ Ἰωάννης*, *for John had been saying*.†

**3. The Future.** The Future tense seems to be used chiefly to express ‘punctiliar’ action in the future. To express a ‘linear’ sense, the normal expedient is a periphrastic tense (see below, p. 18). Moulton’s ‘linear’ futures (*Proleg.* 149, 150) do not all seem to be convincing, though admittedly there are some. E.g. *φοβηθήσομαι* in Heb. xiii. 6 (*κύριος ἐμοὶ βοηθός, οὐ φοβηθήσομαι*) does, as he says, look more like *be afraid* (‘linear’) than *become afraid* (‘punctiliar’). Add, from *M.T.* § 60, *χαρήσομαι*, Phil. i. 18, *will [continue to] rejoice*, *ζήσομεν*, Rom. vi. 2. His other examples, Phil. i. 6, Rev. ix. 6, seem less convincing. Similarly (as above) the stem represented by *ἔχω* (*possess*, ‘linear’, not *acquire*, ‘punctiliar’) seems to be necessarily ‘linear’, and the future *ἔξω* will be ‘linear’—*I shall be possessing*. *σχήσω* would be the truly ‘punctiliar’ future of *to have*—*viz. I shall acquire*; but this is obsolete in *κοινή*.

**4. The Aorist Indicative.** It has already been said that the chief function of the Aorist tense is to indicate an action viewed as instantaneous (a ‘punctiliar’ *Aktionsart*), no matter whether present, future, or past.

The Aorist *Indicative*, however, with its prefixed augment, further defines the instantaneous or ‘punctiliar’ action as having taken place in the *past*. It is therefore roughly equivalent to the English simple past tense: *ἐπάταξα αὐτόν*, *I struck him*. Contrast the Imperfect, *ἐπάτασσον αὐτόν*, *I was or kept on striking or began to strike him*.

Moulton conveniently distinguishes certain meanings within the general scope of the Aorist. Particularly notable are what he terms (*Proleg.* 109) the *Ingressive* and (following German terminology) the *Constative* respectively. The Ingressive (Burton, *Inceptive*, see esp. *M.T.* §§ 54, 55) Aorist represents, as he says, ‘the point of entrance’.<sup>1</sup> The following may be adduced as illustrations: Luke xv. 32 *νεκρὸς ἦν καὶ ἐξησεν*, perhaps *came to life* (cf. Rom. xiv. 9, Rev. ii. 8 *ἐγένετο νεκρὸς καὶ ἐξησεν*, and Rev. i. 18 *ἐγενόμενον νεκρὸς καὶ ἰδοὺ ζῶν εἰμι*), John iv. 52 *κομψότερον ἔσχεν*, *took a turn for the better*, Acts vii. 60

<sup>1</sup> Burton, *M.T.* § 41, points out that it is used with verbs ‘whose Present denotes a state or condition’.