

# The Syntax and Semantics of the Perfect Active in Literary Koine Greek

Robert Samuel David Crellin

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Perfect Active in Literary  
Koine Greek**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 *Problem of the Greek perfect active*

What may be said to be the underlying semantics of the Ancient Greek perfect and pluperfect active? Indeed, may these morphological categories (or category) be said to have any unifying semantics at all? The presenting difficulty may be simply stated: these forms, though bearing the label (plu)perfect active, cannot be relied on to correlate with a meaning which is regularly perfect, i.e. having reference to some completed past event, or active. Specifically, in all periods up to at least the second century AD, the perfect and pluperfect active appear able to denote either a state concurrent with the reference time of the clause, with little or no reference to any past event *or* the present consequences of a past event. On some occasions, indeed, it is hard to tell between these two interpretations. At the same time, the perfect and pluperfect may have either active and transitive, or intransitive and passive-like sense.

Let us consider first the ‘temporal’ problem of the Greek perfect. To illustrate the problem, compare the following examples:<sup>1</sup>

- (1) 

déndra	peri	autôi	péphuke
<i>tree.N-NOM-PL</i>	<i>around</i>	<i>it.N-DAT-SG</i>	<b>grow.PERF-IND-ACT-3-SG</b>
kaì	stêlai	kúklōi	lithou
<i>and</i>	<i>slab.F-NOM-PL</i>	<i>circle.M-DAT-SG</i>	<i>stone.M-GEN-SG</i>
leukoû	pepégasin...		
<i>white.M-GEN-SG</i>	<b>fix.PERF-IND-ACT-3-PL</b>		

‘Trees **grow** around [the temple to Artemis], and slabs of white stone **are fixed** in a circle...’ (Plu. *Them.* 8.2)<sup>2</sup>

- (2) 

hên	gâr	ho	tês
<i>REL-PRON.F-ACC-SG</i>	<i>PTCL</i>	<i>ART.M-NOM-SG</i>	<i>ART.F-GEN-SG</i>
Thêseĩdos	poiêtês	Amazónōn	
<i>Theseid.F-GEN-SG</i>	<i>author.M-NOM-SG</i>	<i>Amazon.F-GEN-PL</i>	
epanástasin	gégraphe		
<i>uprising.F-ACC-SG</i>	<b>write.PERF-IND-ACT-3-SG</b>		

‘For the author of the “Theseid” **has written / wrote** “The insurrection of the Amazons”.’ (Plu. *Thes.* 28.1)

<sup>1</sup> Texts were provided electronically by the Perseus Project (<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper>), by the Loeb online library (<http://www.loebclassics.com/>), or by the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (TLG, <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/>). Sources are given under ‘Textual Sources’ at the end of the monograph. For *Liddell Scott Jones* (LSJ), provided by TLG, see <http://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu>.

<sup>2</sup> The translations given throughout are as far as possible my own, unless otherwise stated. Some key translations consulted are given under ‘Textual Sources’ at the end of the monograph.

The perfects *pépukhe* and *pepégasin* in the first example are concerned only with the narrative present: there is apparently no interest in any prior situation leading to the state being described, even if such a situation must have pertained at some point. By contrast, in the second example, the perfect *gégraphie*, ‘he has written / wrote’, clearly refers to a past event. The problem may be expressed diagrammatically using a Reichenbachian framework according to Figure 1.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1: The temporal problem of the perfect indicative

Let S and E be points in time. S is the narrative present (or speaker time). E represents the point in time at which some event takes place, or event time. The problem of the Greek perfect, in these terms, is that sometimes it appears to imply reference to some event taking place prior to S, and at others there is no hint of this, and S is the only consideration. Thus in example (2) both E, the occasion of writing, and the narrative present S (at least insofar as ‘The Insurrection of the Amazons’ exists at S) are in view. By contrast in (1) only S is in view.

Outside of the perfect indicative the problem becomes more complex as a third time point comes into play. Consider the following participial example:

- (3) *hoi*                      *dè*    *peri*            *tòn*  
ART.M-NOM-PL      PTCL    around      ART.M-ACC-SG  
*Khárēta...*            *kaiper*                      ***katapeplēgótas***  
KhareS.M-ACC-SG    although                terrify.PERF-PTPL-ACT-M-ACC-PL  
*toùs*                      *hoplitas*                      *táttousin...*  
ART.M-ACC-PL        soldiers.M-ACC-PL      command.PRES-IND-ACT-3-PL  
 ‘But Chares’... band... commanded the soldiers, even though **they were terrified...**’ (Jos. BJ 4.18)

The three time points relevant here are: the narrative present, S, an event taking place, E, in this case the frightening of the soldiers, and R, or reference time, the commanding of the frightened soldiers. By implication E has taken place prior to R, according to the following schema:



Figure 2: The problem of the perfect outside of the indicative

However, it is not always the case that all three time points are in view. Compare the following pluperfect examples:

<sup>3</sup> Reichenbach (1947).

- (4) tēs dē tetártēs pleurās... eíkosi mēn  
*ART.F-GEN-SG PTCL fourth.F-GEN-SG side.F-GEN-SG twenty PTCL*  
 pēkheis aneōgesan katà pūlas...  
*cubit.M-NOM-PL open.PLPF-IND-ACT-3-PL for gate.F-ACC-PL*  
 ‘Of the fourth side [of the enclosure] twenty cubits **were open** for gates...’  
 (Jos. *AJ* 3.111)

- (5) tēlikōuton gār proenebeblēkei katelpismōn  
*so-much PTCL insert.PLPF-IND-ACT-3-SG confidence.M-ACC-SG*  
 toīs ókhlois hōste pleious eínai...  
*art.M-DAT-PL crowd.M-DAT-PL that more.M-ACC-PL be.INF*  
 toūs ektōs parepoménous...  
*art.M-ACC-PL outside follow.PRES-PTPL-MIDPAS-M-ACC-PL*  
 ‘For to such a degree **had he inspired** the crowd with confidence [lit. put confidence into the crowd] that those following outside were more numerous...’  
 (Plb. 3.82.8)

The first, involving the pluperfect *aneōgesan* provides information on the circumstances of the enclosure. This is to say that only reference time R and the narrative present S are in view, but no event E prior to R. This is notably more static than *proenebeblēkei* in the second example, which refers to a prior *action*, namely the inspiring of the men. This is to say that E, R and S are all in view.

Indeed, in a few instances no event can have taken place at all:

- (6) hē dē Teúta... polismátion...  
*art.F-NOM-SG PTCL Teuta.F-NOM-SG small-TOWN.N-NOM-SG*  
 anakekhōrēkōs mēn apò tēs  
*withdraw.PERF-PTPL-ACT-N-NOM-SG PTCL from art.F-GEN-SG*  
 thaláttēs...  
*sea.F-GEN-SG*  
 ‘Teuta... a small town... **withdrawn** from the sea...’ (Plb. 2.11.16)

It is clear that the subject, a small town, could have have undergone a withdrawing event.

Nor need E be entirely separate from S. Consider the following example, where the time period of E extends from the past up to and including S:

- (7) epī gār tēn proūpárkhousan  
*on PTCL ART.F-ACC-SG exist-before.PRES-PTPL-ACT-F-ACC-SG*  
 khíona kai diamemenēkuīan ek  
*snow.F-ACC-SG and remain.PERF-PTPL-ACT-F-ACC-SG from*  
 toū próteron kheimōnos árti  
*art.M-GEN-SG earlier winter.M-GEN-SG recently*  
 tēs ep’ étous peptōkuías...  
*art.F-GEN-SG present-year fall.PERF-PTPL-ACT-F-GEN-SG*

‘For on top of the snow which **had remained from the previous winter**, that from the present year had just fallen...’ (Plb. 3.55.1)

The first, temporal, problem of the perfect and pluperfect may therefore be formulated as follows: under what circumstances, in the perfect indicative, does the perfect imply the existence of a time point E prior to S, or, outside of the perfect indicative, prior to R? In other words the Greek perfect appears able to denote:

- 1) Anterior, i.e. ‘a past action with current relevance’.<sup>4</sup>
- 2) Resultant state<sup>5</sup>, i.e. a state resulting from an event prior to reference time.
- 3) State concurrent with the reference time of the clause with no reference to any prior event.

The second problem of the perfect concerns transitivity. In each of the examples (2) and (5) the perfect is transitive and takes a direct object complement. By contrast in (1) and (4) both the perfects are intransitive, and in (3) *katapeplēgōtas* has a distinctly ‘passive’ feel, despite the ‘active’ perfect morphology. This is particularly strange in view of the semantics of the present active, *pēgnumi*, *anoīgnumi* and *kataplēssō* and respectively, which all have transitive active meaning. Indeed, this transitivity alternation can be seen in a single stem:

- (8) *heistēkei*                      *dē*    *katá*    *ti*  
*set-up.PLPF-IND-ACT-3-SG*    *PTCL*    *in*            *INDEF-PRON.N-ACC-SG*  
*prosbatōn*                      *oligais*            *bathmīsi*            *khōrion*  
*accessible.N-ACC-SG*    *few.F-DAT-PL*    *step.F-DAT-PL*    *space.N-ACC-SG*  
**hupestalkōs**                      *tōi*                      *kat’*  
*hide.PERF-PTPL-ACT-N-ACC-SG*    *ART.DAT-M-SG*    *in*  
*autō*                      *skōtōi*.  
*it.N-SG-ACC*    *darkness.M-DAT-SG*  
 ‘[Claudius] had stood in a space, accessible by a few paces, **taking cover** in the darkness there.’ (Jos. *AJ* 19.216)

- (9) *ho*                                      *dē*    *Philippos...*            *hupō*  
*ART.M-NOM-SG PTCL*            *Philip.M-NOM-SG*            *under*  
*tina*                                      *lóphon*                      **hupestálkei**  
*INDEF-PRON.M-ACC-SG*            *hill.M-ACC-SG*                      *hide.PLPF-IND-ACT-3-SG*  
*toūs*                                      *Illyriōūs...*  
*ART.M-ACC-PL*            *Illyrians.M-ACC-PL*  
 ‘But Philip... **had sent** the Illyrians behind a hill...’ (Plb. 5.13.5)

Furthermore, the transitivity of a given perfect appears to be linked to its temporal denotation: where intransitive or passive senses are present, there is often little felt reference to any event taking place prior to reference time. Thus *pepégasin* in (1) and *aneōgesan* in (4) one wonders if any event of ‘fixing’ or ‘opening’ is being referred to. While *katapeplēgōtas* in (3) implies that the men in question were frightened

<sup>4</sup> Bybee et al. (1994: 61).

<sup>5</sup> Here a narrow definition of the term state is adopted, equivalent to Parsons’ Target state (see Parsons 1990).

prior to reference time, the focus is very much on the state of fear at reference time describes the state of the men when they were ordered. In contrast, both *gégraphe* in (2) and *proenebeblékei* in (5) have expressed direct objects, and either explicitly, by means of the adverb *pálai*, or implicitly, describe prior events which are in some way of relevance to the narrative present situation.<sup>6</sup>

From the foregoing analysis it is easy to see why it has been so hard to come up with a one-size-fits-all ‘meaning’ for the category ‘perfect’. The problem in Greek is made harder still not only by the purely written nature of the corpus, but, setting it apart from other corpus languages, by the fact that the relevant forms occur relatively infrequently, and certainly much less so than their ‘counterpart’ forms in Latin. It is therefore not surprising that a wide variety of views have arisen.

Whatever the underlying ‘meaning’ of the perfect and pluperfect active, it must ideally be able regularly and predictably to produce a reference-time only reading in certain circumstances, and produce the implication of an event taking place prior to reference time in others. Furthermore, it should ideally be able to explain why some perfects function as transitive actives, and others as intransitive passives. Accordingly the investigation aims to consider:

1. The temporal problem: To establish under what circumstances the perfect and pluperfect imply the occurrence of an event prior to reference time, rather than focusing purely on the situation at reference time.
2. The transitivity problem: To establish under what circumstances perfect and pluperfect forms behave more like transitive actives, and which more like intransitive passives with respect to the semantics of the present active.
3. The underlying semantics that could regularly produce such outcomes.

Before embarking on this project, it will be helpful to survey the scholarship on the perfect and pluperfect.

## 1.2 Existing frameworks for understanding the perfect

Across languages, the perfect is associated with the following meanings:<sup>7</sup>

1. UNIVERSAL PERFECT, or perfect of ‘persistent situation’, denoting a state holding throughout an interval.
- (10) Matilda has lived in Sydney for two years (and she still lives there).
2. EXISTENTIAL OR EXPERIENTIAL PERFECT, denoting an event occurring at least once in an interval starting in the past and continuing up to the present.

<sup>6</sup> It is true that in the Koine period so-called ‘aoristic’ uses of the perfect occur, as may be seen especially in the New Testament e.g. with *pépraken* (sell.PERF-IND-ACT) at *Matthew* 13.46 and *eilēphen* (take.PERF-IND-ACT) at *Revelation* 8.5. However, I could only find one clear example of this use within the corpus of literary Koine under investigation, namely *ellēphen* at *Jos. AJ* 16.254. Given the very marginal nature of this usage within literary Koine, I will not seek to account for this use of the perfect synchronically.

<sup>7</sup> For these categories see Ritz (2012: 883) and Comrie (1976: 56–61). Cf. also Bentein (2012: 175–181) who identifies each of these meanings in the Classical Greek perfect. Examples given above taken from Ritz (2012).

(11) Dean has been to Adelaide.

3. PERFECT OF RESULT OR STATIVE PERFECT, denoting the result or consequences of a past event at speech time:

(12) Dean has arrived (and is here now).

4. PERFECT OF RECENT PAST or “hot news” perfect.

(13) The Reserve Bank has just announced an increase in interest rates.

The perfect is, however, precluded from occurring in certain contexts. I will illustrate the two most important. The first is where the subject participant no longer exists, as in the following example:<sup>8</sup>

(14) \*Einstein has visited Princeton.

The second is the perfect’s compatibility with definite past time adverbials:<sup>9</sup>

(15) #John has arrived yesterday.

As a result of the wide range of meaning with which the perfect is associated, and the circumstances where it cannot be used, it has proven notoriously difficult to provide a convincing unified definition of the category perfect in semantic terms. Attempts to do so suffer from vagueness, and apparent conflating of the categories of semantics and pragmatics. This is particularly true of the definition of the perfect as denoting CURRENT RELEVANCE,<sup>10</sup> which Klein (1992: 531) describes as follows:

There is a strong feeling that the present perfect, in contrast to the simple past, in a way participates both in the past and in the present. One way to capture this intuition is the notion of ‘current relevance’: The event, process or state, although as such situated in the past, has some ongoing relevance that prolongs it somehow in the present.

However, one is simultaneously left with an inability to define what this current relevance amounts to. Klein continues:

... it is not clear how to determine the ‘relevance’. If no criterion is given, a current relevance analysis can hardly be falsified; it is always possible to find a reason why the event is still of some particular relevance to the present.

In consequence of this vagueness, Dahl & Hedin (2000: 391) reframe the notion of current relevance and suggest that the semantics of the perfect be seen in terms of ‘continuance of result’. However, since this only properly accounts for situations with a result, that is to say change of state or telic events, e.g. ‘the water froze’, one

<sup>8</sup> From Chomsky (1970) quoted from Portner (2003: 464). For a more extensive list see Portner (2003: 461–6).

<sup>9</sup> Quoted from Portner (2003: 465).

<sup>10</sup> This is the name of a semantic definition of the perfect is given by McCoard’s (1978), although he does not argue for it.

has to reckon with a 'relaxation of the requirements' that continuance of result might imply, a relaxation in turn connected with diachronic factors.

A similar approach is to identify a weaker kind of result that may obtain after all events, regardless of whether or not there is a designated target state. This is the approach adopted by Parsons (1990) who identifies such a state as the R-STATE, and contrasts it with the Target or T-STATE that eventuates after a change of state event. However, insofar as the perfect is able to denote two kinds of state, which must subsequently be disambiguated, this does not completely solve the problem of an underlying semantic for the perfect, if such exists. A variant on this approach might be consider that of Smith (1991, 1997). She (1991: 148) defines the semantics of perfect sentences as 'ascrib[ing] to their subjects a property that results from their participation in a prior situation. If at some time Henry has laughed, danced, built a sandcastle, the property of having done these things is asserted of Henry.'

Rather than conceptualise the perfect as denoting a kind of result, others take a strictly tense-based approach to the meaning of the perfect, whereby the perfect locates an event at some point prior to reference time. This is the essence of the so-called 'extended now' meaning of the perfect, first proposed by McCoard (1978), which Dowty (1979: 341) formulates as 'the view that the perfect serves to locate an event within a period of time that began in the past and extends up to the present moment.'<sup>11</sup> The difficulty here is distinguishing the perfect from the simple tenses, since all past tenses necessarily presuppose some time period beginning in the past and continuing to the present moment.<sup>12</sup>

Reichenbach's (1947) framework, given in Table 1 and already used in the previous section to elucidate the problem of the Greek perfect, provides a solution to this problem, however, by proposing that perfect tenses posit a reference time distinct from the present moment relative to which the occurrence of an event can be temporally located. Thus simple past and perfect are distinguished by means of the positing of this reference point: the simple past simply views an event as taking place prior to speaker time, while the perfect views the event as taking place with respect to its temporal location relative to a reference point.

Table 1. Reichenbachian framework (see Portner 2003: 478)

Present: $e, r, s$	Past: $e, r < s$
Present Perfect: $e < r, s$	Past perfect: $e < r < s$

Reichenbach's conception of the perfect as essentially denoting anteriority has been adopted by some as criterial of the perfect cross-linguistically. Thus Bybee et al. (1994: 55) in their cross-linguistic analysis use anteriority as the core notion defining the perfect.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted by Klein (1992: 532). For an analysis of the Ancient Greek perfect according to this model see Gerö & von Stechow (2003).

<sup>12</sup> For this criticism see Klein (1992: 532).

There is still a problem, however, with Reichenbach's framework for distinguishing between the perfect and the simple past. Positing a reference point is very helpful for explaining the distinctive temporal semantics of the past perfect in a sentence like, 'Someone had already done the washing up when I got home.' However, since in the present perfect R and S fall together, and in the simple past E and R fall together, both are still characterised by two time points, one being speaker time, and the other the event time. In order to understand the difference between the present perfect and the simple past under Reichenbach's analysis, we need to understand the distinctive contribution of the reference time, R.<sup>13</sup> There is, furthermore, a second problem with a Reichenbachian approach, namely that it cannot easily account for continuative readings of the perfect whereby the situation described continues to hold at reference time:<sup>14</sup>

(16) Mary has lived in London for five years (and continues to live there).

Klein (1992) provides a solution to the first problem by presenting a more formalised variation of Reichenbach's original scheme, comprising *UTTERANCE TIME* (TU), denoting the time at which the utterance is made, *SITUATION TIME* (TSit), the time at which the event or situation takes place, and *TOPIC TIME* (TT), occupying a position in the system equivalent to Reichenbach's 'reference time'. This latter Klein defines as 'the time span to which the claim made on a given occasion is constrained'.<sup>15</sup> In other words, topic time is 'the time we are talking about'.<sup>16</sup> By defining Reichenbach's reference time in this way, Klein is able to distinguish between the simple past and the present perfect. The simple past asserts that topic time is prior to utterance time, with topic time either including the end of situation time and the beginning of the time after situation time,<sup>17</sup> or including all of situation time<sup>18</sup>. By contrast, the present perfect asserts that topic time is included in utterance time, but that situation time is prior to topic time.<sup>19</sup>

Cutrer's (1994: 204f.) framework, exploiting the framework of *MENTAL SPACES THEORY*, or *MST* (see Fauconnier 1985, 1997), provides another answer to the difference between the simple past and the perfect. This approach posits four 'discourse primitives': *BASE*, *FOCUS*, *V-POINT*, and *EVENT*, and the difference between different tense-aspect forms consists in different relations between these primitives.<sup>20</sup> Of particular relevance in understanding the difference between the perfect and the simple past space. Thus while for the simple past focus and event occupy the same mental space, with v-point occupying a different mental space, for the perfect v-point and focus occupy the same mental space, with event occupying a different mental

<sup>13</sup> For this point see Klein (1992: 534).

<sup>14</sup> For this point see Portner (2003: 467f.). Example from Portner (2003: 467).

<sup>15</sup> Klein (1992: 535).

<sup>16</sup> For which expression, see Harder (1996: 420).

<sup>17</sup> According to Klein (1992: 537).

<sup>18</sup> According to Klein (1994: 118).

<sup>19</sup> Klein's framework is important for the present study, and is discussed further at 2.1.5 below.

<sup>20</sup> Bentein (2012: 173).



space.<sup>21</sup> Note that anteriority is still criterial for the semantics of the perfect: '[t]he PERFECT specifies a temporal relationship between V-POINT and an EVENT space; that relationship is a "prior" one.'<sup>22</sup>

The second problem with Reichenbach's analysis, the continuity problem, is more difficult to solve. Klein attempts to do so by accounting for the continuative reading with reference to the delimiting adverbial expression 'for five years'.<sup>23</sup> However, as Portner (2003: 467) points out, this still does not account for cases where there is no such adverbial modification, as in the following:

(17) Mary has lived in London since 1966.

Cutrer's approach is more flexible in this regard, in that it is able to 'encode a past event, a series of past events, a habitual property, or an event or situation which belongs to both past and present temporal domains'.<sup>24</sup> However, there is still a problem in terms of identifying the precise circumstances under which continuity with reference time is maintained.

Portner (2003) overcomes the continuity problem in a different way. He accounts for the difference between continuative and non-continuative readings with reference to lexical aspectual class, thus removing the question from the domain of the semantics of the perfect. Specifically, 'continuative perfects may arise when the clause embedded by the perfect is stative' although he admits that '[t]he question of more precisely when they arise and when they don't is complex, and depends in part on the details of how the adverbials in the sentence are interpreted'.<sup>25</sup>

As can be seen from the preceding summary, much theoretical work on the perfect has been concentrated on the English perfect. However, the problems raised by the perfect in literary Koine Greek are similar but not entirely overlapping with those of the English perfect. The Greek perfect in the Koine period does share at least two problematic phenomena with the English perfect. First, the present perfect appears to resist definite time adverbial modification. It is therefore relatively easy to find definite time adverbials modifying the pluperfect and the participle, but much harder for the perfect indicative. The following gives an example of the perfect participle:<sup>26</sup>

(18)	Sēmās	kai	Iaphthās	kai	Khamās	étesin
	<i>Shem</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>Japheth</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>Ham</i>	<i>year.N-DAT-PL</i>
	hékatōn		émprosthen		tēs	epombrias
	<i>one-hundred</i>		<i>before</i>		<i>ART.F-GEN-SG</i>	<i>flood.F-GEN-SG</i>

<sup>21</sup> Cutrer (1994: 180, 204).

<sup>22</sup> Cutrer (1994: 204).

<sup>23</sup> Portner (2003: 467).

<sup>24</sup> Cutrer (1994: 207).

<sup>25</sup> Portner (2003: 493).

<sup>26</sup> This restriction is not necessarily observed outside of the literary language. Thus we find a present perfect modified by a definite time adverbial in the New Testament at *1 Corinthians* 15.4: *egégertai* (RAISE.PERF-IND-MIDPAS-3-SG) *tēi* (ART.F-DAT-SG) *hēmērāi* (DAY.F-DAT-SG) *tēi* (ART.F-DAT-SG) *trítēi* (third.F-DAT-SG) 'he was raised on the third day'.