The Ancient Greek tragic aorist revisited[*]

Corien Bary, Nijmegen

1. Introduction

The so-called tragic or dramatic aorist observed in Ancient Greek is the use of a form for past tense and aoristic aspect to refer to present events found with a restricted class of verbs (verbs of judgement, emotion, saying, ordering, advising) and in the first person only. Examples are (1) and (2):

(1)　{Ορ.} ἆρ' ἂν τύραννον διολέσαι δυναίμεθ' ἄν;
　　　{Ιφ.} δεινὸν τόδ' εἶπας, ξενοφονεῖν ἐπήλυδας.
　　　{Ορ.} ἀλλ' εἴ σε σώσει κἀμέ, κινδυνευτέον.
　　　{Ιφ.} οὐκ ἂν δυναίμην· τὸ δὲ πρόθυμον **ἤινεσα**.　　　　E. *I.T.* 1020-3[1]
　　　Or. "Could we murder the king?"
　　　Iph. "A fearful suggestion, for foreigners to kill their host!"
　　　Or. "But we must dare it, if it brings our safety."
　　　Iph. "I could not; yet I **approve** your eagerness."

(2)　{Ορ.} ὄμοσον (εἰ δὲ μή, κτενῶ σε) μὴ λέγειν ἐμὴν χάριν.
　　　{Φρ.} τὴν ἐμὴν ψυχὴν **κατώμοσ'**, ἣν ἂν εὐορκοῖμ' ἐγώ.　　　E. *Or.* 1516-7[2]
　　　Or. "Swear you are not saying this to humour me, or I will kill you."
　　　Phr. "I **swear** by my life, an oath I would keep!"

In both (1) and (2), a past tense form (ἤινεσα and κατώμοσα, respectively) is translated in English with a present tense (*approve*, *swear*). Most grammars of Ancient Greek dedicate a paragraph to this remarkable use of the aorist.[3] Nevertheless, so far this phenomenon has received no full explanation. The above characterisation of the tragic aorist points out the requirements of an adequate analysis. It should explain (i) that a past tense form is interpreted as describing a present event, (ii) that aoristic aspect is used, (iii) that it is restricted to the above-mentioned class of verbs, and (iv) that it is restricted to the first person. The goal of this article is to develop an analysis that meets these four requirements. In the next section I will show that none of the existing accounts achieves this. At the same time the discussion will point out the merits of the respective previous accounts, which will provide the starting point of the analysis to be developed in the remainder of this article.

[1] Potter's (Euripides 1938) translation.
[2] Coleridge's (Euripides 1938) translation.
[3] For example, Kühner and Gerth (1898:163), Goodwin (1966:18).

2. Previous approaches

Traditional approaches to the tragic use of the aorist can roughly be divided into two groups: one that takes the (past) tense feature of the verb form as the starting point, and the other that gives primacy to the (aoristic) aspect feature.

Kühner and Gerth are the most elaborate representatives of the first group. They claim that all occurrences of the tragic aorist have in common 'that a statement relating to the present is expressed as if it had already happened or begun'.[4] This could certainly be true for verbs of judgement and emotion. (1), for instance, could simply be an example of the ingressive interpretation of the aorist (the use of the aorist referring to the begin point of an event): the beginning of the approval is then situated in the past of Iphigeneia's utterance. With other verbs this analysis is problematic, however. In (2), for example, it is implausible that the swearing started in the past or is located in the past in its entirety.

For this reason, Moorhouse proposes to neglect the past tense feature of the verb form and to understand its use from its aoristic aspect feature, which makes him a representative of the second group.[5] He claims that the tragic aorist:

> may best be explained as arising from the punctual aspect, and as bringing to the fore the instantaneous nature of the occurrence: hence it is suitable for a sudden feeling, or act of comprehension, especially as expressed in quick repartee. The substitution of a present tense (with its durative emphasis) in such cases would be inappropriate aspectually. So far as the time of the occurrence is concerned, it should be taken as contemporary; an attempt to refer all examples to the past, even the most immediate, cannot succeed.[6]

Moorhouse seems to relate the phenomenon of the tragic aorist to the lack of a form for aoristic aspect and present tense in Ancient Greek. He seems to suggest that in some cases this very form would be the most appropriate form, but that in its absence Greek may choose the form that is appropriate aspectually, although not with respect to tense. In the account I propose in this paper I will elaborate on this suggestion.

The two traditional approaches, the temporal and the aspectual, share two problems: they fail to account for the facts that the tragic aorist occurs only with a restricted class of verbs and only with the first person (requirements (iii) and (iv) above).

---

[4] Kühner and Gerth (1898:163): 'dass ein auf die Gegenwart bezüglicher Ausspruch als ein bereits geschehener oder eingetretener ausgedrückt wird'.
[5] Moorhouse (1982).
[6] Moorhouse (1982:195).

Lloyd proposes an alternative account that does not suffer from these two problems.[7] He claims that sentences with a tragic aorist can invariably be analysed as performatives. The notion of performativity originates from Austin to distinguish sentences like (3) from sentences like (4):[8]

(3)   a. I name this ship the Queen Elisabeth.
        b. I apologize for my behaviour.
        c. I swear I am not guilty.

(4)   a. I am blond.
        b. He apologizes for his behaviour.
        c. I swore I was not guilty.

According to Austin, the peculiar thing about the sentences in (3) is that they are not used to *say* things (as are the sentences in (4)), but rather to actively *do* things: they do not describe the world, but change it. He calls such sentences *performative* sentences and the ones in (4) *constative*. The paradigm cases of performative sentences have the following properties: they contain a performative verb (for example, *name*, *apologize*, *swear*, *sentence*, *bet*, but not, for example, *be*), can collocate with *hereby* (*I hereby apologize*), and are in the first person indicative simple present tense. With respect to the last property, note that changing the person or tense, as in (4b) and (4c), immediately makes the sentences descriptive (constative) rather than performative.

Lloyd's proposal does not suffer from the problems of the more traditional approaches. On the contrary, an analysis of sentences with the tragic aorist as performatives elegantly accounts for the fact that we find this use of the aorist only in the first person and only with this restricted class of verbs.[9] The proposal has its own problem, however. It does not explain why the form for past tense and aoristic aspect is used in performatives. To clarify the problem, let us have a closer look at Lloyd's view.

If we analyse sentences with the tragic aorist as performatives, Greek has two ways to express performatives: with the (past tense) aorist and with the (imperfective) present tense. An example of the latter is given in (5):

---

[7] Lloyd (1999).

[8] Austin (1962)

[9] An interpretation of the tragic aorist in terms of performativity carries with it that the use of the past aoristic form of the second person with verbs of saying, that is placed under the same header by some grammars (e.g., Smyth 1984:432), is treated as a different phenomenon. Moorhouse (1982:196) and Lloyd (1999:44) agree that with these forms, in contrast to the first person forms, there is (immediate) past time reference.

(5)　{Αι.} **ὄμνυμι** Γαῖαν <ʽΗλίου θ᾽ ἁγνὸν σέβας>
　　　θεούς τε πάντας ἐμμενεῖν ἅ σου κλύω.　　　　　　　E. *Med.* 752-753.
　　　"I **swear** by Earth, by the holy worship of Helios, and by all the gods that I will
　　　do as I hear from you."

So, for the act of swearing, we find both the form for aoristic aspect and past tense as in (2) and the form for imperfective aspect and present tense as in (5). Lloyd argues that the function of the tragic aorist is 'to distance the speaker from the full force of the present tense performative'.[10] It is not clear, however, where this distancing effect of the tragic aorist comes from. Is it a contribution of the past tense or of the aoristic aspect feature? In the former scenario, it is left unexplained why we do not have a tragic (past) imperfective alongside a tragic aorist. But in the latter, it is not clear what element of the general meaning of aoristic aspect leads to a distancing effect in the case of performatives. *Prima facie* there is no link between aoristic aspect and distancing. What is more, as Lloyd notes himself, it is not clear why the aorist should not be employed as a distancing device with other types of verbs.[11]

In short, Lloyd's proposal falls short to explain why aoristic aspect is used in performatives, and hence, does not meet the second requirement for analyses of the tragic aorist posed above. He does not relate performativity to the meaning of aoristic aspect. In fact, he presents his analysis as opposed to analyses that try to explain the tragic aorist in terms of aspect. In the analysis of the tragic aorist that I propose below I will follow Lloyd's idea that the tragic aorist concerns the use of the aorist that we find in performatives, but I will fill the gap in his account by showing that the aorist is the aspect to be expected with performatives. In this way, my analysis also meets the second requirement.

Rijksbaron by and large follows Lloyd's account in the latest edition of his book, but, in contrast to Lloyd, he does relate this use to the basic value of completion that he assigns to the aorist.[12] I will show that in order to give a full-fledged account of the phenomenon, we need the semantics of tense and aspect to be proposed in section 3.

In what follows, I will present a revised view on the tragic aorist. The essential ingredient in this analysis is the lack of a form for aoristic aspect and present tense in Ancient Greek. I first argue that this lack is due to a tension between the semantic values of the two. Then, I show that this missing form would have been the optimal form for performatives. To illustrate the special aspectual behaviour of performatives I examine which verb forms are used in performatives across languages. Finally, I will present my actual proposal.

---

[10] Lloyd (1999:26).
[11] Lloyd (1999:26).
[12] Rijksbaron (2002).

3. The semantics of tense and aspect

It may be instructive to note that at some points my terminology deviates from that used in standard grammars. Most grammars use the word *tense* for what I call a *tense-aspect pair*.[13] As a consequence, they claim that Ancient Greek has seven tenses. I do not follow this use, but reserve the word tense for location in time with respect to the moment of utterance, following Comrie (1985). Thus, in my terminology, Ancient Greek has three tenses: a past, a present, and a future tense.

In addition, it has three aspects: aoristic, imperfective, and perfect aspect. *Imperfective*, as I use it, is a purely aspectual notion, and is different from what the grammars call *imperfect*, which they use for (what I call) the combination of past tense and imperfective aspect. To avoid confusion, I do not use the term *imperfect*. Table 1 shows the traditional names for the tense-aspect pairs. I put these names in quotation marks to indicate that they deviate from my usage of the terms.

	present	past
imperfective	'present'	'imperfect'
aoristic	-	'aorist'

Table 1: The traditional names for the tense-aspect pairs

Imperfective aspect, in my terminology, corresponds to what some grammars call *the aspect expressed by the present stem.* They refer to the aspectual distinction imperfective versus aoristic as present versus aoristic.[14] I don't follow this terminology because it has the danger of leading to confusion about the contributions of tense and aspect.

After these terminological remarks, let us turn to the meaning of tense and aspect. The semantics that I present in the following is that of Bary (2009), which is based on ideas from Klein (1994), among others.

As I said, tense has to do with location with respect to the moment of utterance. But what exactly is it that tense locates with respect to this moment? At first sight, one may think that it is the event described by the verb. Klein argues, however, that this cannot be. To show this, he uses the following example:[15]

(6)   a. What did you notice when you looked into the room?
        b. There was a book on the table. It was in Russian.

Suppose that (6a) is a question of a judge in a court room and (6b) the answer of a witness.

---

[13] See e.g. Smyth (1984:412–413), Goodwin (1966:7).

[14] See, for example, Rijksbaron (2002:1-5), Rijksbaron et al. (2000:66).

[15] Klein (1994).

The crucial element for Klein's argumentation is the past tense in the second sentence of (6b). Given the nature of languages of books, if the book was in Russian at some time in the past, it is still in Russian at the moment of utterance. This means that if tense concerned the relation between the time of the event and the moment of utterance, we would expect to find a present tense in the second part of the answer (*it is in Russian*), since the time of the event of the book being in Russian overlaps with the moment of utterance. The past tense thus shows that it is not the time of the event that is located with respect to the moment of utterance.[16] What then is located with respect to the moment of utterance? Here Klein introduces a new notion, that of the *topic time*. The topic time is the time about which the speaker makes his utterance. In (6b) it is fixed by the question of the judge as the moment the witness looked into the room. The witness is asked to speak about this very moment. For every utterance there is such a time about which the speaker speaks. It can be fixed by the previous discourse, as in (6b), or by temporal adverbials. To understand tense and aspect, it is very important to distinguish this time from the time of the event described by the verb. Tense indicates the location of this time, the topic time, and not the event time, with respect to the moment of utterance. Thus, the past tense in (6b) indicates that the topic time is located in the past of the moment of utterance. Similarly, a present tense would indicate that the topic time is the moment of utterance, and a future tense that the topic time lies in the future of the moment of utterance. A graphical representation of the semantic contribution of the tenses is given in Figure 1.

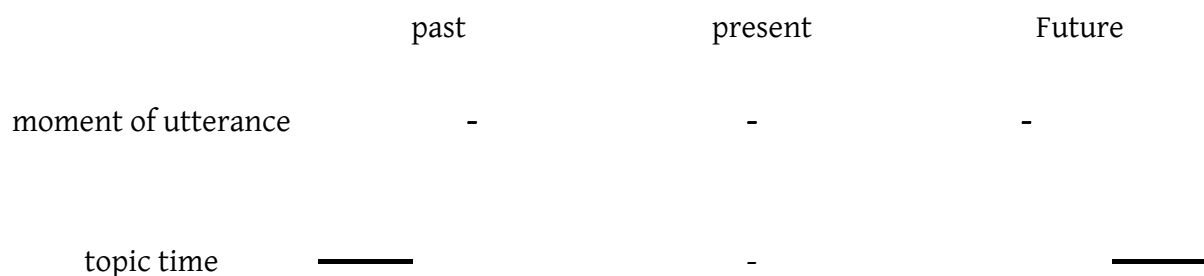|	past	present	Future
moment of utterance	-	-	-
topic time	——	-	——

Figure 1: The semantics of tense

The notion of topic time is also crucial in the semantics of aspect. According to Klein, aspect concerns the relation between the topic time and the time of the event described by the verb. More specifically, aoristic aspect indicates that the topic time includes the event time or coincides with it: The event takes place within the time about which the speaker makes the utterance. Imperfective aspect, by contrast, indicates the opposite: the time of the event includes the topic time, that is, the event is going on at the time about which is

---

[16] The same holds for tense in Ancient Greek. See the examples quoted by Kühner and Gerth (1898:145-146) and Smyth (1984:426, section 1901).

spoken. This semantics directly yields what many Ancient Greek grammars consider the basic opposition between aoristic and imperfective aspect: *completed* versus *going on*.[17] Figure 2 represents the semantic contribution of aspect graphically.
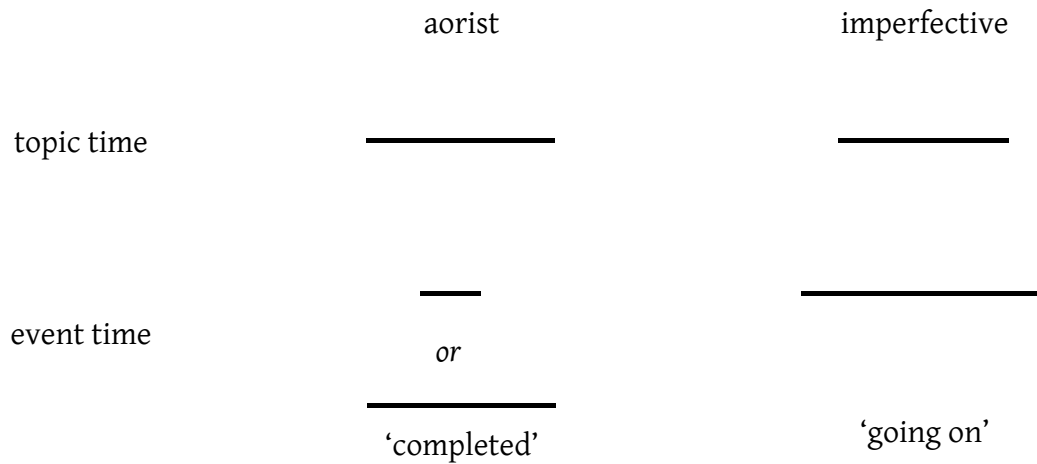

Figure 2: The semantics of aoristic and imperfective aspect

Note that the temporal relation between the moment of utterance and the time of the event is now mediated via the topic time: tense concerns the relation between the moment of utterance and the topic time, and aspect that between the topic time and the event time.

The following examples illustrate how this works.[18] First an example with the verb in the past aorist.

(7)   τό μευ νάκος ἐχθὲς ἔκλεψεν.   Theoc. *Id.* 5.2
       "He (= Lacon) stole my skin-coat yesterday."

In (7), the topic time is denoted by the adverbial ἐχθές 'yesterday'. The past tense indicates that this topic time lies before the moment of utterance and the aoristic aspect indicates that the event expressed by the verb, the stealing, is included in the topic time. Figure 3 gives a graphical representation.

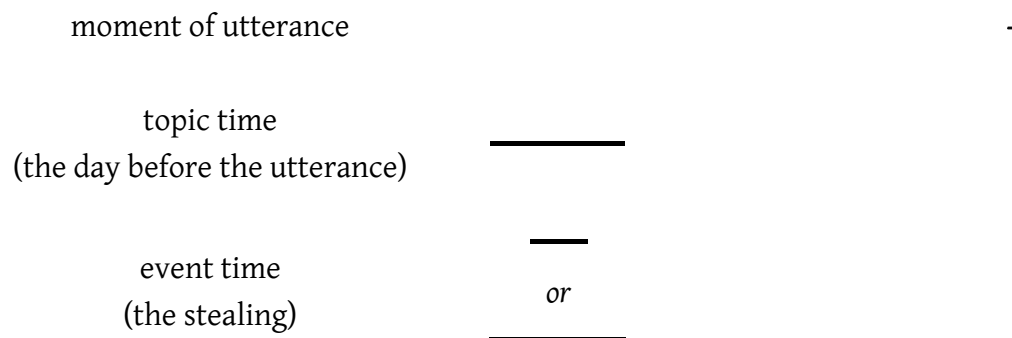|	
moment of utterance	-
topic time (the day before the utterance)	————
event time (the stealing)	—— *or* ————

Figure 3: Graphical representation of (7)

Let's now turn to an example with a past tense and imperfective aspect. Consider the second clause in (8):

(8)   Κῦρος δὲ οὔπω ἦκεν, ἀλλ' ἔτι προσήλαυνε·   X. *An.* 1.5.12
         "Cyrus was not yet present, but he was still marching on."

The past tense of προσήλαυνε 'march to' indicates that the topic time lies in the past of the moment of utterance. It is fixed by the context as the time when Clearchus is riding through Menon's army. The imperfective aspect indicates that the event described by the verb, i.e. the event of Cyrus marching, temporally includes the topic time (the time when Clearchus is riding through the army). This yields the interpretation that at the end of the topic time the event of Cyrus marching is still continuing, which gives the effect of 'going on'. A graphical representation is given in Figure 4.

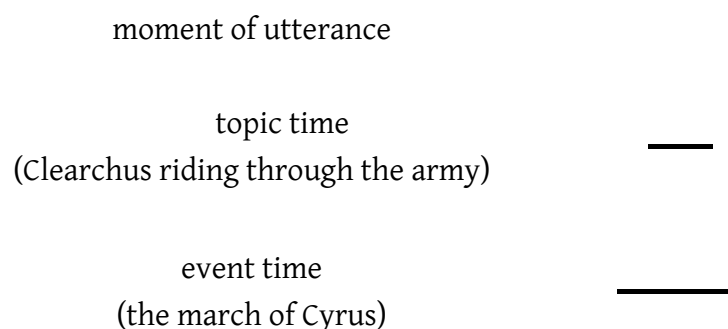|	
moment of utterance	-
topic time (Clearchus riding through the army)	——
event time (the march of Cyrus)	————

Figure 4: Graphical representation of (8)

In the remainder of this article I will show how this semantics of tense and aspect also explains the tragic use of the aorist, starting with an explanation why Ancient Greek lacks a

form for aoristic aspect and present tense.

4. A semantic tension between aoristic aspect and present tense

Why does Ancient Greek not have a form for aoristic aspect and present tense? The answer to this question will be an important ingredient of my explanation and interpretation of the tragic aorist. The short answer is that the possibilities of using a form for the combination of aoristic aspect and present tense are very restricted for semantic reasons. Recall that aoristic aspect indicates that the event time is (improperly) included in the topic time, and present tense that the topic time is the moment of utterance. From this it follows that with the combination aoristic aspect and present tense, the event time is (improperly) included in the moment of utterance. In other words, a clause with an aoristic present tense verb were only true if the whole event described would occur within the moment of utterance (including the option that the time of the event coincides with the moment of utterance). This, however, is rarely the case. The exceptionality becomes even clearer if the moment of utterance is conceived of as punctual, as is often assumed.[19] Then proper inclusion in the moment of utterance is impossible, the only option left being coincidence of event time and moment of utterance, and for this the event time must be (conceived of as) punctual itself, too. Such events are rare, however. So the reason that Ancient Greek does not have a form for aoristic aspect and present tense is that there is little use for it.

Support for this view may be found in the development of the Ancient Greek tense and aspect system. It has been argued that Ancient Greek originally had a binary tense system with distinct forms for past and non-past tense, the latter covering the meaning of the present and future tense in a ternary tense system.[20] On this view, the form for aoristic aspect and non-past tense is what later became the form for a genuine future tense. A clear advantage of this hypothesis is that it explains the morphological similarity between the (sigmatic) aorist and (sigmatic) future. But how did this form for aoristic aspect and non-past tense develop into a future tense? This development is explained neatly if we assume the tension between aoristic aspect and present tense argued for above: in principle, the form for aoristic aspect and non-past tense could be used to refer to the present time as well as to the future. But, as I have shown, the possibilities for using aoristic aspect to refer to the present time are very restricted for semantic reasons. For this reason, the form for non-past tense and aoristic aspect was in fact almost exclusively used for future time reference and began to be felt as a future tense. From there it developed into a genuine future tense.[21]

---

[19] See, for example, Paslawska and von Stechow (2003:322) and Kamp and Reyle (1993:539, 514).

[20] E.g. Hewson and Bubenik (1997).

[21] As Eystein Dahl (p.c.) has pointed out to me, Hewson and Bubenik's (1997) hypothesis of the relationship between the (sigmatic) aorist and (sigmatic) future in Ancient Greek is somewhat controversial within the Indo-European research community, despite its advantages. Tichy (2006:307–308, 311–318), for example,

In sum, there is no form for the combination present tense and aoristic aspect because of a tension between their respective semantic contributions: there are very few situations that hold exactly at the moment of speaking. But although there is little use for this combination, from a semantic perspective the combination is not completely impossible. In the next section I will show that performatives represent one of the few cases where we would expect the form for aoristic aspect and present tense, the form that is missing in Ancient Greek.[22]

5. The semantics of performatives

In the previous section I have shown that the form for aoristic aspect and present tense is the expected form when the time of the event and the moment of utterance coincide. This coincidence is rare, but it occurs. One context is that of performatives. Let us have a look again at the examples of performatives that I presented above:

(9)   a. I name this ship the Queen Elisabeth.
       b. I apologize for my behaviour.
       c. I swear I am not guilty.

It is clear that in (9) the event time and moment of utterance coincide, since the events of naming, apologizing, and swearing referred to *are* exactly the utterances of the sentences

---

assumes that the Ancient Greek sigmatic future derives from an independent sigmatic voluntative. This, however, does not affect the above given explanation for the lack of the form for aoristic aspect and present tense in terms of a semantic tension.

[22] In this section I have assumed that the only present tense form that exists in Ancient Greek (apart from the perfect) has imperfective aspect. Morphologically this is indisputable. The question has been raised in the literature, however, whether it also has imperfective aspect semantically. An alternative that has been suggested is that it is aspectually neutral from a semantic point of view (e.g. Rijksbaron et al. 2000:66). The main motivation for this is the phenomenon of the historical present (*idem*). For the majority of instances of historical presents it holds that had they been in the past rather than present tense we would have expected aoristic rather than imperfective aspect. Despite this phenomenon, I hold on to the view that the present tense form is semantically imperfective. The motivation for this is two-fold: First, I think that one should want to explain the fact that morphologically the form has imperfective aspect. This is of course easily done if one assumes that it has imperfective aspect semantically as well. If it were semantically neutral, on the other hand, this would be an accident, since it could just as well have had the form of aoristic aspect. Second, I think that the assumption that the present tense form in principle has imperfective aspect leads to a more coherent cross-linguistic picture. In some Slavic languages we do find a form for non-past tense and aoristic aspect and this form is used to refer to the future time in the majority of cases, but to the present time in a limited class of cases. These are exactly the cases in which Ancient Greek may choose for the form for aoristic aspect and past tense, as we will see in sections 6 and 7. Consequently, in my account Ancient Greek behaves like these Slavic languages apart from the fact that in Ancient Greek the situation is more extreme: the form of present or non-past tense and aoristic aspect does not exist (anymore?).

themselves. The peculiar status of such sentences had already been observed by Koschmieder long before Austin,[23] as witnessed by the following citation:

> Ich war bei der Untersuchung der Funktion der sog. "Tempora" in Hebraïschen durch den Fall *bērachtī'ōpō* = "ich segne ihn hiermit" darauf aufmerksam geworden, daß es sich hierbei um einen Sonderfall handelt, in dem nämlich das Aussprechen des Satzes nicht nur von der Handlung spricht, sondern auch eben die betr. Handlung ist.[24]

Koschmieder coins the phenomenon *Koinzidenzfall.* In line with this, Lemmon (1962) states that performative sentences are self-verifiable: by uttering a performative sentence, the speaker automatically makes it true (in this respect, Lemmon deviates from Austin who claims that performatives do not have a truth value (that is, they are neither true, nor false), as they do something rather than describe something).

I have shown that the optimal form for performatives is the combination of present tense and aoristic aspect, since event time and moment of utterance coincide. But this combination does not exist in Ancient Greek. How does Greek get around this problem? Before I answer this question, I will first discuss the form of performatives in some other languages: English, Hebrew, Slovenian, Polish, and Russian. The aim of this discussion is to show that from an aspectual point of view performatives have a special status.

6. Performatives across languages

Let's see which tense-aspect combination is chosen for performatives cross-linguistically, starting with English. Although this language does not have a distinction between perfective (=aoristic) and imperfective aspect, we still observe that performatives are special aspectually. To see this, first note that non-stative predicates in the simple (=non-progressive) present tense do not receive a literal interpretation, but are interpreted habitually.[25] (10), for example, is interpreted as describing a habit rather than a single soccer event.

(10)   Max plays soccer.

There are a few exceptions to this generalization, however. Performatives are one of them. The sentences in (9) have non-stative predicates in the simple present tense, but are nevertheless naturally interpreted as referring to a single event. I do not aim to explain this

---

[23] Koschmieder (1929, 1930, 1945).
[24] Koschmieder (1945:22).
[25] See, for example, Kenny (1963), Dowty (1979:55).

here. I only want to point at the exceptional status of performatives in English. Let's now look at performatives in languages that do have a distinction between perfective and imperfective aspect.

Biblical Hebrew is an interesting language with regard to the relation between aspect and performatives, since aspect is grammaticalised (the language has a distinction between perfective and imperfective aspect, traditionally called perfect and imperfect, respectively), but tense is not.[26] The absence of tense in Hebrew makes it possible to investigate which aspect a language uses for performatives if there is no tense interference. And indeed, as we might expect, Hebrew uses perfective aspect:[27]

(11) *bērak̄tî*   *'ōtô*   *Biblical Hebrew*
      bless.PFV.1SG   he.ACC
       "I (hereby) bless him"[28]

Slovene is a language with grammatical tense and aspect. It has a binary tense system: a form for past and a form for non-past tense. The combination of non-past tense and perfective aspect usually receives a future interpretation, but it is also the form most often used in performatives. See (12):[29]

(12) prisežem   *Slovene*
      swear.NPST.PFV.1SG
      "I swear"

The situation in Polish and Russian is somewhat more complicated. Like Slovene, both languages have a binary tense system (past versus non-past) and a perfective-imperfective distinction. The use of perfective aspect in performatives, however, is restricted (in Russian even more so than in Polish). Perfective aspect is found in some performatives (as in (13) and (14)), but as a rule, imperfective aspect is used (as in (15) and (16)).[30]

(13) *poproszę*   *ọ*   *to*   *szklankę.*   *Polish*
      ask.NPST.PFV.1SG for   this   glass
      "I ask for this glass."

---

[26] See, for example, Koschmieder (1929:58-71). But see Joosten (2002), for example, for a different view on the verb forms in Biblical Hebrew.

[27] Koschmieder (1930:354), Koschmieder (1945:22).

[28] The transliteration is Rogland's (2001:244).

[29] From Greenberg (2006).

[30] I would like to thank Andrej Malchukov for the Russian data and Dorota Klimek-Jankowska for the Polish data.

(14) *poproshu*   *vstatj*   *Russian*
ask.NPST.PFV.1SG stand-up.INF
"I ask to stand up"

(15) *dziękuje*   *Polish*
thank.NPST.IPFV.1SG
"I thank"

(16) *Ja*   *blagodaru*   *Russian*
I.NOM thank.NPST.IPFV.1SG
"I thank"

How should we explain the fact that imperfective aspect is used in the majority of cases, although perfective aspect would be more appropriate? The explanation probably runs along the following lines. In the majority of cases where reference is made to the present time, imperfective aspect (and non-past tense) is used. For this reason, imperfective aspect (and non-past tense) is felt as the form for present-time reference and is also used where it is aspectually inappropriate. Moreover, in the majority of cases where the form for perfective aspect and non-past tense is used, reference is made to the future time. For this reason, the form for perfective aspect and non-past tense is felt as a future tense and is not easily used for present-time reference.[31]

After having seen that performatives cross-linguistically exhibit remarkable behaviour as far as tense and aspect are concerned, let us now return to Ancient Greek.

7. The tragic aorist revisited

We have seen in section 2 that Lloyd interprets the so-called tragic aorist, a remarkable use of the form for past tense and aoristic aspect, in terms of performativity, and that this

---

[31] The difference between Slovene on the one hand and Russian and Polish on the other hand may then be explained as follows (following a suggestion in Koschmieder 1930:354-355). Apart from a grammaticalised binary tense system, all three languages have a periphrastic future. Whereas Slovene has a periphrastic future for both perfective and imperfective aspect, Russian and Polish have such a verb form only for imperfective aspect (since the form for non-past tense and perfective aspect is already used with reference to future time for perfective aspect). (Compare the reference grammars on http://www.seelrc.org/projects/grammars.ptml.) Since Slovene has this periphrastic future as a second form that can be used for perfective future time reference, the second above-mentioned factor (the form perfective-present is used for future time reference in the majority of cases) is stronger in Polish and Russian than in Slovene: the existence of this form in Slovene makes that the ratio present reference : future reference for the form perfective aspect and non-past tense is not as skewed as it is in Polish or Russian.

interpretation has two advantages over the traditional analyses in terms of tense or aspect: it explains the restriction to the first person and to a certain class of verbs. We have, however, also seen that an important question remains unanswered on his analysis: why is the aorist used in performatives? It is this question that I answer here. All the preparations have been made in the previous sections. Let's simply put the ingredients together.

In section 5 I showed that aoristic aspect is the aspect to be expected in performatives. To put it more precise, in performatives we would expect the form for aoristic aspect and present tense, since the moment of utterance and the event time coincide. In section 4 I had already argued that Greek does not have this form since there is little use for it. Now the question is how does Greek express performatives, given that the optimal form does not exist? We know the answer already from section 2: Greek can choose both the form for imperfective aspect and present tense and the form for aoristic aspect and past tense. For the act of swearing, for example, we find both ὄμνυμι (5) and ὤμοσα (2). But now we also know why this is: In absence of the optimal form, Greek can choose between two suboptimal forms: If ὄμνυμι is chosen, the (present) tense feature is given primacy and the (imperfective) aspect feature is taken for granted, whereas if ὤμοσα is chosen, it is the other way around: the (aoristic) aspect feature gets primacy and the (past) tense is taken for granted. Notice that the latter choice is what is traditionally called the tragic aorist. Thus, the tragic aorist is the use of a form for aoristic aspect and past tense in performatives, where the optimal form would have been the non-existing combination aorist-present. The past tense feature is not interpreted: it is taken for granted in the absence of the optimal form. As should be clear by now, the tragic aorist is not a mysterious use at all. It is the very semantics of tense and aspect proposed in section 3 that accounts for it.

The present account establishes the link between aoristic aspect and performativity that is missing in Lloyd's account. As such, my account shows an improvement with respect to his. But it has a second advantage. Until now, I have been talking about performatives as if they are all explicit, that is, contain a performative verb that indicates their force (indicates whether the act performed by uttering the sentence is an oath, promise, warning, etc.). But it is just as possible to perform an act by uttering a sentence without such a performative verb, as Austin notices himself.[32] To use Austin's example, the act of warning can be performed by the use of the explicit performative *I warn you that this bull is dangerous*, but also by saying simply *This bull is dangerous.* Let's call the latter sort implicit performatives. Similarly, in Greek the act of swearing can be performed with a verb of swearing (as we have seen in (2) and (5)) or without such a verb, as in (17):[33]

(17)   μὰ τὴν ...

---

[32] Austin (1976:243ff).

[33] Another example is E. *I.T.* 746.

Νίκην Ἀθηνᾶν …,
οὐκ ἔστιν ὅστις σοι πατὴρ θνητῶν, τέκνον,
ἀλλ' ὅσπερ ἐξέθρεψε, Λοξίας ἄναξ.   E. *Ion* 1528-31
"By Athena Nike …, your father is not a mortal, but the one who brought you up,
lord Loxias."

That Creusa performs an oath in (17) is clear from the swearing particle μά. If Lloyd is right
and the function of the tragic aorist is 'to distance the speaker from the full force of the
present tense performative', we expect this distancing effect not to be restricted to explicit
performatives. The force of implicit performatives may be in need of being weakened, too.
But, contrary to what we expect on Lloyd's account, the aorist is not used as a distancing
device with such performatives. On my account, however, this is exactly what we expect: a
characteristic of explicit performatives is the coincidence of the time of the event described
by the finite verb and the moment of utterance, which demands aoristic aspect. Implicit
performatives don't have this feature. In (17), for example, the time of lord Loxias being
Ion's father does not coincide with the utterance time, but includes it. So there is no reason
to expect aoristic aspect there.

An objection to the account proposed here may be that it claims that the tragic aorist
should not be interpreted as referring to the past, even though morphologically it is a past
tense form. By way of an answer, I only point at the fact that the tragic aorist is not an
anomaly in this respect, that is, it is not the only use of the aorist indicative that is
morphologically, but not semantically a past tense. The same thing is observed with the so-
called gnomic or generic aorist, the use of the aorist indicative in general truths, proverbs,
and similes. An indication that this latter use of the aorist is not a past tense semantically,
comes from the mode of the subclauses: verbs in the subclauses modifying a main clause
with a gnomic aorist are in the subjunctive – as when the main clause is in the present tense
– rather than the optative – as in the case of the common (past) aorist indicative.[34]

8. Conclusion

I have shown that the tragic aorist is the use of the aorist that we find in performatives.
Furthermore, I have demonstrated on the basis of the semantics of tense and aspect that
the optimal form for performatives would be the combination of present tense and aoristic
aspect, since event time and moment of utterance coincide. This form, however, does not
exist in Ancient Greek. In the absence of the optimal form, two suboptimal forms are
equally good: the form for present tense and imperfective aspect and the form for past
tense and aoristic aspect. The latter is what is traditionally called the tragic aorist.

---

[34] Rijksbaron (2002:31).

This account of the tragic aorist adopts Moorhouse's idea that this use of the aorist should be understood from the absence of a form for aoristic aspect and present tense. It combines this with Lloyd's insight that the tragic aorist occurs in performatives. In contrast to these previous accounts, however, the resulting analysis satisfies all criteria formulated in section 1: it explains the past tense, the aoristic aspect, and the restriction to certain classes of verbs and to the first person. Once the tragic use had been unveiled as the use of the aorist in performatives, the semantics of tense and aspect did the rest.

Appendix: Glosses

I used the following abbreviations in the glosses (based on the Leipzig Glossing Rules, see http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php):

1	first person
acc	accusative
ipfv	imperfective
inf	infinitive
nom	nominative
npst	non-past
pfv	perfective
pst	past
sg	singular

References

Austin, J. L. (1962). *How To Do Things With Words*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Austin, J. L. (1976). Performative utterances. In J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (Eds.), *Austin, Philosophical Papers*, pp. 233–252. London: Oxford University Press.

Bary, C. (2009). *Aspect in Ancient Greek. A semantic analysis of the aorist and imperfective*. Ph. D. thesis, Radboud University Nijmegen.

Comrie, B. (1985). *Tense*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Dowty, D. R. (1979). *Word Meaning and Montague Grammar. The Semantics of Verbs and Times in Generative Semantics and in Montague's PTQ*. Dordrecht: Reidel.

Euripides (1938). *The Complete Greek Drama*. Edited by W. J. Oates and E. O'Neill Jr. *Iphigeneia in Tauris*, translated by W. R. M. Lamb; *Orestes*, translated by E. P. Coleridge. New York: Random House.

Goodwin, W. W. (1966). *Syntax of the Moods and Tenses of the Greek Verb*. Londen: MacMillan.

Greenberg, M. (2006). Short Slovene reference grammar. Reference grammar network. Duke University/University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: SEELRC. http://www.seelrc.org/projects/grammars.ptml.

Hewson, J. and V. Bubenik (1997). *Tense and Aspect in Indo-European Languages*. Amsterdam

and Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

Joosten, J. (2002). Do the finite verbal forms in Biblical Hebrew express aspect? *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society* 29, 49–70.

Kamp, H. and U. Reyle (1993). *From Discourse to Logic.* Dordrecht: Kluwer.

Kenny, A. (1963). *Action, Emotion and Will.* London: Routledge.

Klein, W. (1994). *Time in Language.* London and New York: Routledge.

Koschmieder, E. (1929). *Zeitbezug und Sprache. Ein Beitrag zur Aspekt- und Tempusfrage.* Leipzig: Teubner.

Koschmieder, E. (1930). Durchkreuzungen von Aspekt- und Tempussystem im Präsens. *Zeitschrift für Slavische Philologie* 7, 341–358.

Koschmieder, E. (1945). *Zur Bestimmung der Funktionen grammatischer Kategorien.* München: Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

Kühner, R. and B. Gerth (1898). *Ausfürliche Grammatick der Griechischen Sprache*, Volume 2.1. Hannover: Hahnsche Buchhandlung.

Lemmon, E. J. (1962). On sentences verifiable by their use. *Analysis* 22, 86– 89.

Lloyd, M. (1999). The tragic aorist. *The Classical Quarterly* 49(1), 24–45.

Moorhouse, A. C. (1982). *The Syntax of Sophocles.* Leiden: Brill.

Paslawska, A. and A. von Stechow (2003). Perfect readings in Russian. In A. Alexiadou, M. Rathert, and A. von Stechow (Eds.), *Perfect explorations*, pp. 307–362. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

Rijksbaron, A. (2002). *The Syntax and Semantics of the Verb in Classical Greek.* Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben.

Rijksbaron, A., S. R. Slings, P. Stork, and G. C. Wakker (2000). *Beknopte syntaxis van het klassiek Grieks.* Lunteren: Hermaion.

Rogland, M. (2001). Performative utterances in Classical Syriac. *Journal of Semitic Studies* 46, 243–250.

Smyth, H. W. (1984). *Greek Grammar.* Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.

Tichy, E. (2006). *Der Konjunktiv und seine Nachbarkategorien: Studien zum indogermanischen Verbum, ausgehend von der älteren vedischen Prosa.* Bremen: Hempen.