The Function(s) of the Imperfect Tense in Mark's Gospel

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Introduction

As an entrée to discuss the function of the imperfect tense in Mark's gospel, I begin with one specific instance related to that tense. It is commonplace in grammatical discussions (whether in grammars, commentaries, or monographs) to categorize each of the tenses as being of various "kinds." Thus we have labels for the various tenses such as constative, ingressive, consummative, gnomic, epistolary, proleptic, dramatic progressive, inceptive, iterative, customary, tendential, etc. These labels are traditionally applied to the tense itself, e.g., "inceptive imperfect."

Inceptive Imperfects in Mark's Gospel

The table below shows 34 proposed inceptive imperfects in Mark based on ten common translations.[1] The number of inceptive imperfects reflected range from one (ESV) to fifteen (ISV), with NLT, NASB, and HCSB clustered at the high end close behind the ISV. That the list of translations with a high frequency of inceptive translations ranges from the very functional NLT to the very formal NASB suggests that this is not an issue of translation philosophy, at least in terms of the formal/functional spectrum.

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[1] The table was compiled by searching for instances of the English phrase "began to …" (and variations) and comparing it to the Greek text translated. If the text contained an imperfect verb form, but not an instance of ἄρχω (on which see later in the paper), it was assumed that the translators understood the imperfect as an inceptive imperfect. The selection of these 10 translations is purely pragmatic: they are the English translations that I have available in BibleWorks (which I used rather than my primary tool, Accordance, simply because I do not install a lot of extraneous English texts there). Though not exhaustive, it reflects a fair sample of the translations in more common use. I did not include minor historic translations of mostly antiquarian interest despite their availability in all the Bible software (since they are in the public domain). I have also not included KJV since it never uses inceptive translations for contexts with imperfect verb forms (at least in Mark).

Ref	Imperfect Verb	NASB	ESV	NRSV	HCSB	NET	NIV	ISV	NLT	NAB	NJB
1:13	διηκόνουν				×						
1:21	ἐδίδασκεν	×			×	×	×	×	×		×
1:31	διηκόνει		×	×	×	×	×				×
2:13	ἐδίδασκεν						×				
3:6	ἐδίδουν						×	×			×
3:23	ἔλεγεν							×		×	
4:2	ἐδίδασκεν			×							
4:10	ἠρώτων							×			
5:10	παρεκάλει	×									
5:42	περιεπάτει	×		×	×	×					×
6:41	ἐδίδου										×
7:35	ἐλάλει				×		×	×			
8:6	ἐδίδου										×
8:16	διελογίζοντο	×				×			×		
8:29	ἐπηρώτα							×			
9:4	ἦσαν συλλαλοῦντες								×		
9:11	ἐπηρώτων				×						
9:20	ἐκυλίετο									×	
9:30	παρεπορεύοντο	×								×	
9:33	ἐπηρώτα	×								×	
10:1	ἐδίδασκεν	×						×			
10:2	ἐπηρώτων	×									
10:52	ἠκολούθει				×			×			
11:17	ἐδίδασκεν	×			×	×		×			
11:18	ἐζήτουν							×	×		
11:31	διελογίζοντο				×						
12:35	ἔλεγεν	×									
14:5	ἐνεβριμῶντο				×						
14:11	ἐζήτει			×				×	×		×
14:35	προσηύχετο	×			×						
14:57	ἐψευδομαρτύρουν	×									
14:70	ἔλεγον							×			
14:72	ἔκλαιεν	×			×						
15:3	κατηγόρουν				×	×					
34	**< totals >**	**13**	**1**	**5**	**14**	**6**	**5**	**15**	**11**	**4**	**8**
		NASB	ESV	NRSV	HCSB	NET	NIV	ISV	NLT	NAB	NJB

What is interesting about these data is that very few of the ten translations agree on *which* verb forms are to be understood as inceptive in nature. Not one reference is taken to be inceptive in all the sample translations. There are only three instances in which half or more of the translations agree. These include

the following: 7 agreements on 1:21, ἐδίδασκεν; 6 agreements on 1:31, διηκόνει; and 5 agreements on 5:42, περιεπάτει. This surely suggests that something is rotten, not in Denmark, but in grammar! Or more accurately, in the grammars (and the commentaries and the translations).

It was this observation that initially stimulated my interest in the question of the function of the imperfect tense-form.[2] If there was this much disagreement on what seems to be a relatively simple matter, perhaps there was a more fundamental issue involved that has not been adequately considered.

Function of Imperfect Verb Forms in Mark's Gospel

Are there other ways in which various tense-forms might be understood in narrative? Is the category of *Aktionsart* the only way to treat such questions? Is it possible to discuss the use of various tense-forms apart from a compulsion to label each one with a particular *Aktionsart* value? Although I believe that *Aktionsart* questions are legitimate in that they raise valid exegetical questions regarding the nature of the *statements* made in various contexts, I would propose that such questions are not the most appropriate as the first or primary questions to be asked. In the remainder of the paper, I would like to consider an alternate means of assessment.

Theoretical issues

Discussions of relatively recent vintage have raised a variety of issues related to what we understand to be the meaning of the Greek tenses. Several of these need to be explored briefly before turning in more detail to the text of Mark.

The most significant of the recent discussions has been the debate regarding verbal aspect. Although long brewing among the grammarians of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the impetus for much of the current work is probably to be traced to the work of K. L. McKay whose published works began to appear in the 1960s.[3] The two most significant works are the published dissertations of

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[2] The initial draft of this paper included an additional 10 pages discussing the category of inceptive imperfect, but that material has been removed to form the basis for another paper since it diluted the focus intended on the function of the imperfect in Mark. As with too many sermons, a "good" introduction nearly ran away with the paper!

[3] K. L. McKay, "The Use of the Ancient Greek Perfect Down to the End of the Second Century," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 12 (1965): 1–21; "Syntax in Exegesis," *Tyndale Bulletin* 23 (1972): 39–57; "Further Remarks on the 'Historical' Present and Other Phenomena," *Foundations of Language* 11 (1974): 247–51; *Greek Grammar for Students: A Concise Grammar of Classical Attic with Special Reference to Aspect in the Verb* (Canberra: Australian National University, 1977); "On the Perfect and Other Aspects in Non-Literary Papyri," *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical*

Buist Fanning and Stanley Porter (the dissertations were both submitted in 1987 at the universities of Oxford and Sheffield, respectively).[4] The "Porter-Fanning Debate" at SBL 1992 served to accentuate the significance of their work.[5] Although there are some crucial disagreements between these two and they have somewhat different emphases, they are in essential agreement on most major matters of importance.[6] In light of these two works, verbal aspect may be defined as "the semantic category by which a speaker or writer grammaticalizes a view of the situation by the selection of a particular verb form in the verbal system." This is in contrast to *Aktionsart,* "a description of the actional features ascribed to the verbal referent as to the way in which it happens or exists."[7]

Functional Proposals Based on Verbal Aspect

Porter has suggested that verbal aspect not only grammaticalizes a particular view of the situation, but that aspect also functions at the discourse level.[8] In typical historical narrative, the aorist carries the narrative, the present and imperfect introduce significant characters or noteworthy descriptions, and the perfect is reserved for very well defined points of special interest.

Studies 27 (1980): 23–49; "On the Perfect and Other Aspects in New Testament Greek," *Novum Testamentum* 23 (1981): 289–329; "Repeated Action, the Potential and Reality in Ancient Greek," *Antichthon* 15 (1981): 36–46; "Aspect in Imperatival Constructions in New Testament Greek," *Novum Testamentum* 27 (1985): 201–26; "Aspects of the Imperative in Ancient Greek," *Antichthon* 20 (1986): 41–58; "Aspectual Usage in Timeless Contexts in Ancient Greek," in *In the Footsteps of Raphael Kühner,* ed. A. Rijksbaron, H. A. Mulder, and G. C. Wakker, 193–208 (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1988); "Time and Aspect in New Testament Greek," *Novum Testamentum* 34 (1992): 209–28; *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek,* Studies in Biblical Greek, vol. 5 (New York: Peter Lang, 1994).
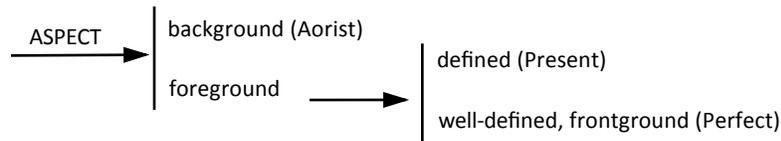
[4] Buist M. Fanning, *Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek,* Oxford Theological Monographs (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990) and Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood,* SBG 1, 2d ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993—the first edition was published in 1989).

[5] The written papers from the debate, one each by Fanning and Porter and responses from Moisés Silva and Daryl Schmidt along with an introduction by D. A. Carson, may be found in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research,* ed. Stanley E. Porter and D. A. Carson, JSNTSup 80 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

[6] For an assessment of one of the areas of disagreement, the grammaticalization of time in the indicative, see Rodney J. Decker, *Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect,* SBG 10 (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), hereafter cited as *TDM.*

[7] Both definitions from *TDM,* 26.

[8] Fanning also acknowledges this function, though he has not developed it extensively (*Verbal Aspect,* summary on p. 77).

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                            background (Aorist)
   ASPECT                                                 defined (Present)
                            foreground
                                                          well-defined, frontground (Perfect)
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The aorist which carries the narrative "backbone" (as Porter describes it elsewhere[9]) sketches the major events in a story. As this is worked out in Mark, within this narrative framework of events, the tenses used typically shift to the present for dialog. One of the means available to the narrator for indicating crucial events, statements, or facts is the use of the perfect form. How the imperfect fits into this model will be considered below.

Fanning also recognizes this function, though viewing it as a secondary function of aspect. In his words, "the primary aspectual values (e.g. perfective and imperfective) serve in a *secondary* way to reflect the prominence of events recorded in a narrative, with perfective verbs used of the foreground events and imperfective verbs used of the background ones."[10] Although the terms fore-/background[11] seem reversed from Porter's explanation, the meaning is the same.[12]

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[9] Stanley Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament,* 2d ed. (Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), 302–03; see also 22–23.

[10] Fanning, *Verbal Aspect,* 75. A later discussion of this "narrative-sequencing" includes the imperfect: "As a means of showing prominence, the aorist can be used to narrate the main or 'foreground' events, while the imperfect or present is used to record subsidiary or 'background' ones" (191).

[11] Fanning (and Campbell) follow Hopper's terminology; see Paul J. Hopper, "Aspect and Foregrounding in Discourse," in *Discourse and Syntax,* ed. Talmy Givón, 213–42, Syntax and Semantics, 12 (New York: Academic Press, 1979), 213.

[12] There is no standard for this terminology. Not only do Porter and Fanning differ, but Campbell supplements the Hopper/Fanning terms with two additional terms (see table below).

	Porter	Hopper/Fanning	Campbell
Aorist	Background	Foreground	Foreground/Mainline
Present	Foreground	Background	Background/Offline
Imperfect	Foreground	Background	Background/Offline

In narrative I tend to use more functional terms and refer to storyline (aorist), foreground (present), and offline (imperfect). (Technically the present is offline in the sense of "off the storyline," but since it tends to be used for more prominent statements, foreground is appropriate.) The crucial point is not the particular terms used, but the function and meaning. In this regard there is general consensus.

Campbell has more recently developed these proposals regarding the narrative function of aspect in two volumes.[13] Though differing on some key questions,[14] his treatment of the imperfect helps to flesh out the suggestions proffered by Porter and Fanning. The difference between the present and imperfect, according to Campbell, is that of proximity and remoteness.[15] These are not physical categories, but are a metaphorical means of describing the relative importance of events recounted by a narrator. Both tense-forms express imperfective aspect, but they function differently in narrative. The present is generally used for statements in *discourse* proper.[16] Conversely, the imperfect is often used primarily (though not exclusively) in *narrative* proper for information that is off the main story line, but which is helpful background information, explanation, or the like. Both of these forms are used within the over-arching mainline of narrative proper in which the aorist predominates. All of these functions are pragmatic, so there are exceptions and variations, but the general pattern seems fairly clear. As it relates specifically to the imperfect, Campbell explains its functions as follows.

> The opposition between perfective and imperfective aspects enables narratives to operate in a nuanced way. If, by creating a perfective context, an author is able to relate events in quick succession, s/he is able to provide related material with use of an imperfective context. This related material may be supplemental information that explains why certain events are taking place, what a particular character may be thinking or how they are motivated, or other types of information that provide the reader with a wider understanding than simply that these events took place.[17]

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[13] Constantine Campbell, *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative,* SBG 13 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), and idem., *Verbal Aspect and Non-Indicative Verbs,* SBG 14 (New York: Peter Lang, 2008). He has also published a simplified introduction to verbal aspect, *Basics of Verbal Aspect in Biblical Greek* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008).

[14] Campbell's major differences from Porter are two: first, he defines the future tense-form as carrying perfective aspect, and second, he rejects stative aspect, proposing instead that the perfect and pluperfect are imperfective in aspect (*Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative,* future, 127–60; perfect, 161–211; pluperfect, 213–37). Interestingly, however, despite the resulting four forms of imperfective aspect in his system (present, imperfect, perfect, and pluperfect), it still *functions* almost identically to Porter's three-aspect system at the narrative level; the explanations offered sound nearly identical. His view of the future tense-form may be viable, but I am skeptical of making the perfect and pluperfect into imperfective forms.

[15] Porter suggested nonremote and remote as the distinction; Campbell argues for two positive values.

[16] Campbell distinguishes between narrative proper (the "skeletal storyline and supplemental information") and discourse proper ("direct discourse, indirect discourse, and ... authorial discourse"). See his *Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative,* 3–4.

[17] Ibid., 91.

The primary purpose of Campbell's book is to demonstrate that each of the aspects has an identifiable function in narrative. Indeed, the various strands of discourse not only shape narrative texts, but provide the macro-structure in which verbal aspect functions."[18] As such his analysis of Luke's gospel, supplemented with six other written sources (mostly koine),[19] highlights these functions on a statistical basis, documenting a very high percentage of conformity of the "predictable patterns" that he proposes.[20]

If the suggestions noted above are valid, then we should be able to examine a specific corpus in some detail as regards a specific tense form and document its function(s). Campbell's work has sketched this sort of analysis in broad terms using selected examples from several corpora. What I propose is a more detailed study of a limited portion of text as a means of testing and possibly refining our description of the pragmatic function of the imperfect tense-form in narrative.

Catalog of Imperfect Functions in Mark 1–8

The following data summarize an inductive analysis of all the imperfect verb forms in Mark 1–8.[21] Examination of these verbs in their contexts suggests that they can be placed, on the basis of their function, into two major categories. A

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[18] Ibid., 240.

[19] The additional portions selected are the Gospel of John, Life of Aesop, "Story of Callirhoe" (book 1), selected narrative sections of the Oxyrhynchus papyri, Thucydides (Attic, 41 chapters from "Peloponnesian War"), and an Attic speech by Lysias ("Against Eratosthenes").

[20] His statistical results average 88% conformity to his predicted patterns (the range is 74–100%), which for pragmatic considerations, appears to be adequate to clearly establish the dominant patterns of usage.

[21] My analysis did not begin with a proposed list (such as the tentative listing in Campbell which was cited above), attempting to categorize each use. Rather an inductive approach through the first eight chapters of Mark proceeded statement-by-statement, with recursive revisions as similarities appeared in the data. The listings are not exclusive since some instances serve multiple functions. The limitation to the first half of Mark's gospel is very pragmatic (in the nontechnical sense). Since this is only an essay and not a thesis or dissertation, and since time is limited, a smaller corpus was necessary. It also happens to be the case that my work on the Mark volume for the Baylor Handbook on the Greek NT is only complete through Mark 8. I have not included forms of εἰμί in this discussion, primarily because there is not yet sufficient agreement on how this unique verb fits into the aspect system. There are at least three approaches. Porter judges εἰμί to be "aspectually vague" (*Verbal Aspect,* 441–47); Millhouse suggests that εἰμί indicates neither "the presence of absence of aspect" (i.e., aspectually vague), but that it does indicate remoteness ("Use of the Imperfect Verb Form in the NT" [MA thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1999], 9); or Campbell's position that εἰμί is fully aspectual (imperfective) and remote (*Verbal Aspect, the Indicative Mood, and Narrative, 27–28*).

large number of imperfects in this portion of Mark introduce direct discourse; the remainder convey offline material.[22]

Introduce Direct Discourse

There are 39 instances in Mark 1–8 in which an imperfect verb introduces direct discourse.[23] Verbs so used are διαστέλλω, 8:15; ἐπερωτάω, 8:23, 27, 29; ἐρωτάω, 5:9; 8:5; κηρύσσω, 1:7; κράζω, 3:11; and λέγω, 2:24, 27; 3:21, 22, 23, 30; 4:2b, 9, 11, 21, 24, 26, 30, 41; 5:8, 28, 30, 31; 6:4, 10, 14, 15, 16, 18, 35; 7:9, 14, 20, 27; 8:21, 24.

This function is not the exclusive (or even primary) domain of the imperfect since both aorist and present forms may be used for the same purpose.[24] As to *why* the imperfect is so used, that is a more difficult question. There appears to be a general pattern when λέγω is involved, though with some exceptions. In most of the instances in the present passage in which direct discourse is introduced with an imperfect of λέγω, the content of the statement cited is of a general nature. It is rarely a specific statement by a single individual. In this situation it is most commonly the case that the imperfect verb is plural, referencing the "statement" of the group.[25] Since groups rarely recite in unison,

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[22] The listing given here leaves only a few forms unexplained. Three instances occur *within* direct discourse: 4:5 (εἶχεν), 8 *bis* (ἐδίδου, ἔφερεν). This appears to be a rare use of the imperfect. The two imperfect forms in 4:8 (ἐδίδου καρπὸν ἀναβαίνοντα καὶ αὐξανόμενα καὶ ἔφερεν) are unusual for several reasons. First, they occur in parallel with two previous aorist forms. Second, two adverbial present participles followed by an imperfect indicative is unusual. Such a pattern occurs nowhere else in the NT, but the same construction is found in Ps 34:14 and 4 Mac 11:18. In Ps 34 all three verbal forms refer to the same time and event, but in 4 Mac 11 the temporal pattern is the same as found in Mark: two participles describing sequential events preceding the imperfect.

[23] In 10 instances in Mark 1–8 an imperfect verb form is used in a reference to someone saying something, but the content of the statement is not given: διδάσκω, 1:21; 2:13b; ἐρωτάω, 4:10; 7:26; ἐπερωτάω, 3:12; 7:17; λαλέω, 2:2; παρακαλέω, 5:10, 18; προσεύχομαι, 1:35. All of these fit in one of the other functional categories, usually as an explanation or a "scene setting" statement. There are also at least 14 instances of indirect discourse in Mark 1–8: 2:1; 3:9; 5:29, 30, 43; 6:8, 27, 45, 49, 55, 56; 8:7, 16, 22. These are normally introduced with aorist forms (8 of 14). There are only 3 imperfects, two of which are in a summary section (6:55, 56; see elsewhere in this paper). The instance in 8:16 is probably best understood as an explanation.

[24] For comparative purposes, in Mark 1, direct discourse is introduced with a finite aorist form 4 times, a finite present 4 times, a present participle 3 times, but only once with an imperfect (1:7). Aorist: vv. 11, 17, 23, 25; present: vv. 37, 38, 41, 44; present participle: vv. 15, 27, 40.

[25] Imperfect verbs reflecting a general summary by a group (all ἔλεγον): 2:24; 3:21, 22, 30; 4:41; 5:31; 6:14, 35.

such statements are typically general summaries of the gist of what the group was saying rather than a specific, exact quotation of what one individual said.

3:22, Καὶ οἱ γραμματεῖς οἱ ἀπὸ Ἱεροσολύμων καταβάντες **ἔλεγον** ὅτι Βεελζεβοὺλ ἔχει καὶ ὅτι ἐν τῷ ἄρχοντι τῶν δαιμονίων ἐκβάλλει τὰ δαιμόνια.	And the scribes who came down from Jerusalem *said,* "He has Beelzebul," and "By the ruler of the demons he casts out demons."

The comments of οἱ γραμματεῖς (plural subject), are given in two summary statements introduced with the imperfect ἔλεγον. They represent the gist of the scribes' opinions.

Another common situation is the use of the imperfect in explanatory statements, direct discourse that is typically introduced with γάρ (or sometimes ὅτι) plus λέγω.[26] These statements are offline, not part of the events that form the narrative storyline.

5:8, **ἔλεγεν** γὰρ αὐτῷ· ἔξελθε τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἀκάθαρτον ἐκ τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.	For he had said to him, "Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!"

This explanatory statement comes following the demoniac falling at Jesus' feet and crying out in a loud voice. Mark's γάρ clause with the imperfect ἔλεγεν introduces the direct discourse statement which explains the reason for the man's actions: Jesus had previously commanded the demon to leave.

Some such imperfects may reflect the nature of the statement or the generalized context of the statement. This could include reference to parabolic teaching, either a single parable (e.g., 3:21, ἐν παραβολαῖς **ἔλεγεν** αὐτοῖς) or an entire series as in chapter 4 (all 4 parables are introduced with an imperfect,[27] 4:2, 21, 26, 30). The imperfect verb may also refer to a general teaching session to a large group in which a general summary of Jesus' teaching is recorded (e.g., 7:14, προσκαλεσάμενος πάλιν τὸν ὄχλον **ἔλεγεν** αὐτοῖς).

These suggestions leave some instances unexplained. In 7:20 **ἔλεγεν** δὲ ὅτι resumes a statement that had been interrupted by an editorial comment at the end of v. 19[28] which had previously been introduced with a present (λέγει, v. 18).

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[26] Imperfect verbs in explanatory statements: 3:21; 5:8, 28; 6:18 (all γάρ); 3:30 (ὅτι). This category can overlap with the preceding.

[27] An interesting contrast is the *explanation* of the first parable which is introduced with a present.

[28] The phrase καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα ("cleansing all foods") describes λέγει (v. 18), not εἰς τὸν ἀφεδρῶνα ἐκπορεύεται ("goes into the latrine"), the immediately preceding phrase in the text. For the participle (καθαρίζων) to modify "going out" (ἐκπορεύεται), it would have to be

A "resumptive" function may be a valid explanation, but since this is the only such instance in Mark 1–8, a resumptive category cannot be based on a single example.[29] Other imperfects of λέγω that introduce specific statements rather than general ones that remain unexplained include 2:27; 5:30; 6:4, 10; 7:9, 27; 8:21, 24. Also not listed here are imperfects of verbs other than λέγω which introduce direct discourse. Some of these may be used in the imperfect due to lexical nuances or conventional usage.[30] Others may be used due to overlap with some of the functions listed below.[31] No further explanations are offered here, though this deserves additional study.

Offline Information

The second major functional category of imperfect verbs is to provide offline information. Although all the instances in the following categories are similar in that regard, there are some logical groupings within the larger category.

Explain Events

About 30 imperfect verbs are used in Mark 1–8 in explanations of various events: 1:22; 3:4, 6, 21, 30; 4:10, 37; 5:8, (10?), 13, 20, 28, 40; 6:2, 3, 7, 18, 18 (3x), 20 a, b, 31, 51; 7:17, (26?), 37; 8:16. These statements do not tell the reader what happens next; they do not advance the storyline in the narrative. They serve rather to explain what has just been recorded. Some, but not all, of these are explicitly introduced with γάρ or ὅτι, but most are linked only with καί.[32] The following are samples of the sort of explanation provided.

> 1:22, καὶ *ἐξεπλήσσοντο* ἐπὶ τῇ διδαχῇ αὐτοῦ (the reaction to Jesus' teaching)

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neuter. The subject of ἐκπορεύεται is the default, built-in pronoun, "it"—the antecedent of which is πᾶν τὸ ἔξωθεν [neuter] in v. 18c. Since the participle καθαρίζων is masculine, it can only agree with the subject of λέγει (18a), the default "he"—the antecedent of which is Jesus. It is the recognition of these grammatical considerations that justifies classing the phrase καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα as an editorial comment rather than as part of Jesus' statement.

[29] It would be useful to examine a larger swath of narrative texts to determine if imperfect verbs are used elsewhere in similar situations.

[30] E.g., ἐρωτάω is always imperfect in Mark (that is not the case elsewhere in the NT), though it occurs only three times; ἐπερωτάω is *usually* (15 of 25) imperfect in Mark.

[31] E.g., κράζω in 3:11 not only introduces direct discourse, but also occurs in a summary section with three other imperfect forms.

[32] This may be related to Mark's paratactic style which uses fewer subordinating conjunctions than might normally be expected. See my discussion of this in "Markan Idiolect in the Study of the Greek of the New Testament," paper presented at the New Testament Greek Language and Exegesis Consultation, annual ETS meeting, Nov. 2009, New Orleans.

3:21, *ἔλεγον* γὰρ ὅτι ἐξέστη (why Jesus' family wanted to seize him)

3:30, ὅτι *ἔλεγον·* πνεῦμα ἀκάθαρτον ἔχει (why Jesus spoke of blasphemy)

5:20, καὶ πάντες *ἐθαύμαζον* (the result of the previous action)

6:18, *ἔλεγεν* γὰρ ὁ Ἰωάννης τῷ Ἡρῴδῃ ὅτι… (the cause for John's arrest)

6:31, γάρ … καὶ οὐδὲ φαγεῖν *εὐκαίρουν* (the basis for preceding command)

Setting the Scene

Other imperfects serve to set the scene for events which follow: 1:21, 22, 35; 2:2, 13, 15 *bis,* 16; 3:2, 22, 32; 4:10; 5:3 *bis,* 4, 24 *bis;* 7:24. These descriptions are analogous to a host preparing for a party: the punch is on the table, hors d'oeuvres are warming in the oven, the playlist is selected on the iPod, etc., *and then* the party begins. Notice how the three *imperfects* function in the opening verses of Mark 5. These statements are not the point of the pericope, but they are helpful in understanding the context in which the events take place.

5:1–6, Καὶ ἦλθον εἰς τὸ πέραν τῆς θαλάσσης εἰς τὴν χώραν τῶν Γερασηνῶν. ²καὶ ἐξελθόντος αὐτοῦ ἐκ τοῦ πλοίου εὐθὺς ὑπήντησεν αὐτῷ ἐκ τῶν μνημείων ἄνθρωπος ἐν πνεύματι ἀκαθάρτῳ, ³ὃς τὴν κατοίκησιν *εἶχεν* ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν, καὶ οὐδὲ ἁλύσει οὐκέτι οὐδεὶς *ἐδύνατο* αὐτὸν δῆσαι ⁴διὰ τὸ αὐτὸν πολλάκις πέδαις καὶ ἁλύσεσιν δεδέσθαι καὶ διεσπάσθαι ὑπ' αὐτοῦ τὰς ἁλύσεις καὶ τὰς πέδας συντετρῖφθαι, καὶ οὐδεὶς *ἴσχυεν* αὐτὸν δαμάσαι· ⁵καὶ διὰ παντὸς νυκτὸς καὶ ἡμέρας ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν καὶ ἐν τοῖς ὄρεσιν ἦν κράζων καὶ κατακόπτων ἑαυτὸν λίθοις. ⁶καὶ ἰδὼν τὸν Ἰησοῦν ἀπὸ μακρόθεν ἔδραμεν καὶ προσεκύνησεν αὐτῷ.	They came[A] to the other side of the lake, to the country of the Gerasenes. ²And when he got out of the boat, immediately there met[A] him a man out of the tombs with an unclean spirit ³who *had* his dwelling in the tombs; and no one *was able* to restrain him any more, not even with a chain; ⁴for he had often been restrained with shackles and chains, but the chains he wrenched apart, and the shackles he broke in pieces; and no one *was able* to subdue him. ⁵Night and day among the tombs and on the hills he was always crying out and cutting himself with stones. ⁶When he saw Jesus from a distance, he ran[A] and fell down[A] before him.

The main storyline verbs are aorist: ἦλθον, ὑπήντησεν, ἔδραμεν καὶ προσεκύνησεν (they came, he met him, he ran and fell down). The imperfects function to describe the desperate condition of the man who met Jesus: ὃς τὴν κατοίκησιν εἶχεν ἐν τοῖς μνήμασιν … οὐδεὶς ἐδύνατο αὐτὸν δῆσαι … οὐδεὶς ἴσχυεν

αὐτὸν δαμάσαι (who *had* his dwelling in the tombs ... no one *was able* to restrain him ... no one *was able* to subdue him). Understanding these background details set the stage so that the reader can properly assess the events which follow.[33]

Background Details

Another grouping includes uses which provide miscellaneous background details. This is similar to the preceding group except that these do not function to set the scene at the beginning of a pericope, but may occur anywhere within it.[34] Such details are found in about a dozen verses: 1:30 *bis;* 2:4, 13 *bis;* 5:32, 42; 6:20c, d, 41, 48; 7:35; 8:6, 7, 14, 25. (Perhaps 4:2a and 8:32 belong here also.) Three examples illustrate this function well.

5:42, καὶ εὐθὺς ἀνέστη τὸ κοράσιον καὶ **περιεπάτει.**	Immediately the little girl got up and *walked.*
7:35, ἠνοίγησαν αὐτοῦ αἱ ἀκοαί, καὶ ἐλύθη ὁ δεσμὸς τῆς γλώσσης αὐτοῦ καὶ **ἐλάλει** ὀρθῶς.	His ears were opened and the bond of his tongue was loosed and *he spoke* clearly.
8:25, ἐπέθηκεν τὰς χεῖρας ἐπὶ τοὺς ὀφθαλμοὺς αὐτοῦ, καὶ διέβλεψεν καὶ ἀπεκατέστη καὶ **ἐνέβλεπεν** τηλαυγῶς ἅπαντα.	He placed his hands on his eyes and he opened his eyes and he was healed and *saw* everything clearly.

In all three instances the action described by the imperfect is "unnecessary." The point of the previous statements is clear without this added detail. The reader assumes that (1) if a little girl who had been pronounced dead got up, that she would be able to walk, (2) if a mute is healed, that he can speak intelligibly, and (3) if a blind man's sight is miraculously restored, that he can indeed see clearly. Although structurally parallel with the preceding verbs in

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[33] The larger pericope of Mark 5:1–20, containing nine imperfect verbs, is interesting to compare with the Synoptic parallels. Luke 8:26–39 has six imperfect forms, of which three are exact parallels to Mark's usage, one summarizes two imperfects in Mark, two of Mark's imperfects are aorists in Luke, two imperfect statements are omitted altogether, and one aorist in Mark is an imperfect in Luke. By contrast, Matthew 8:28–34 has only one imperfect form. Fanning suggests that Luke's use of the imperfect has "the same effect" as Mark, whereas Matthew has only "the bare story" (*Verbal Aspect,* 191).

[34] Some references in both groups might also be explainable in the other grouping. The difference is not particularly significant since the function is similar. Some which occur near the beginning of a pericope are placed in this group since they seem more transitional and do not set the scene for the major events to follow (e.g., 2:13).

each case (all of which are aorist, storyline verbs), the imperfect appears to be selected due to the supplemental nature of the description.[35]

Summary Sections

Other imperfects serve as summary[36] statements and are often found in summary sections which include a string of imperfect verb forms:[37] 1:5 (2×), 1:32, 34, 45; 3:11 (4×), 12; 4:33–34 (4×); 6:5, 6, 13 (3×), 19–20 (7×), 55, 56 (4×). Note the following examples. In the first example the use of ὅταν is another pointer to a summary section.[38]

3:11–12, καὶ τὰ πνεύματα τὰ ἀκάθαρτα, ὅταν αὐτὸν *ἐθεώρουν*, *προσέπιπτον* αὐτῷ καὶ *ἔκραζον* λέγοντες ὅτι σὺ εἶ ὁ υἱὸς τοῦ θεοῦ. ¹²καὶ πολλὰ *ἐπετίμα* αὐτοῖς ἵνα μὴ αὐτὸν φανερὸν ποιήσωσιν.	The unclean spirits, whenever *they saw* him, *fell before* him and *cried out,* "You are the son of God." ¹²*He rebuked* them sternly that they should not make him known.
4:33–34, Καὶ τοιαύταις παραβολαῖς πολλαῖς *ἐλάλει* αὐτοῖς τὸν λόγον καθὼς *ἠδύναντο* ἀκούειν· ³⁴χωρὶς δὲ παραβολῆς οὐκ *ἐλάλει* αὐτοῖς, κατ᾽ ἰδίαν δὲ τοῖς ἰδίοις μαθηταῖς *ἐπέλυεν* πάντα.	With many such parables *he was speaking* the message to them as *they were able* to understand, ³⁴but *he did not speak* to them without parables, but *he explained* everything privately to his own disciples.

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[35] Fanning briefly notes this function, observing that "here the imperfect usually occurs singly in a series of aorists, and it relates parenthetical or explanatory information supplementing the main narrative given by the aorists" (*Verbal Aspect,* 248).

[36] "Summary" in this context does not refer to a summary of a preceding narrative, but rather to a synopsis of a series of events which are not described in detail.

[37] A string of imperfects (3 or more), at least in this portion, is always an indication of a summary section.

[38] This is the only instance of ὅταν with an imperfect in the NT, but see LXX: Gen 38:9; Num 21:9; 1 Sam 17:34; Ps 119:7; AF: Hermas 83:4. With an imperfective verb, ὅταν is "whenever" (otherwise always with present tense verbs). More frequently ὅταν is used with an aorist subjunctive and is simply "when."

6:19–20, ἡ δὲ Ἡρῳδιὰς *ἐνεῖχεν* αὐτῷ καὶ *ἤθελεν* αὐτὸν ἀποκτεῖναι, καὶ οὐκ *ἠδύνατο·* 20ὁ γὰρ Ἡρῴδης *ἐφοβεῖτο* τὸν Ἰωάννην, εἰδὼς αὐτὸν ἄνδρα δίκαιον καὶ ἅγιον, καὶ *συνετήρει* αὐτόν, καὶ ἀκούσας αὐτοῦ πολλὰ *ἠπόρει*, καὶ ἡδέως αὐτοῦ *ἤκουεν*.

19And so Herodias *had a grudge* against him and *wanted* to kill him, but *she was not able* [to kill him], 20for Herod *feared* John, because he knew that he was a righteous and holy man, so *he was protecting* him, and when he heard him, *he was greatly perplexed,* but gladly *listened to* him.

These summaries often occur at the end of sections and sketch the general situation at the time or the results of the previous events. Thus 4:33–34 serves as the summary of Jesus' ministry and occurs at the end of the lengthy series of parables in 4:1–32. Likewise 6:19–20 summarizes the reason why John was in prison and his relationship with both Herod and Herodias.[39] There are often other specific items in the context which reinforce this summary sense. For example, in Mark 6:55–56 there is not only a string of five imperfect forms, but there are also two ἄν constructions.

6:53–56, Καὶ διαπεράσαντες ἐπὶ τὴν γῆν ἦλθον εἰς Γεννησαρὲτ καὶ προσωρμίσθησαν. 54καὶ ἐξελθόντων αὐτῶν ἐκ τοῦ πλοίου εὐθὺς ἐπιγνόντες αὐτὸν 55περιέδραμον ὅλην τὴν χώραν ἐκείνην καὶ ἤρξαντο ἐπὶ τοῖς κραβάττοις τοὺς κακῶς ἔχοντας περιφέρειν ὅπου *ἤκουον* ὅτι ἐστίν. 56καὶ *ὅπου ἂν εἰσεπορεύετο* εἰς κώμας ἢ εἰς πόλεις ἢ εἰς ἀγρούς, ἐν ταῖς ἀγοραῖς *ἐτίθεσαν* τοὺς ἀσθενοῦντας καὶ *παρεκάλουν* αὐτὸν ἵνα κἂν τοῦ κρασπέδου τοῦ ἱματίου αὐτοῦ ἅψωνται· καὶ *ὅσοι ἂν ἥψαντο* αὐτοῦ *ἐσῴζοντο*.

53Having crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and tied up the boat. 54When Jesus and the disciples got out of the boat people recognized him at once 55and ran about all that area and began to carry the sick on pallets [to the place] where *they heard* that he was. 56*Wherever he went*—in villages or towns or hamlets—*they placed* the sick in the marketplaces and *entreated* him that they might touch the fringe of his garment, and whoever touched him *was healed.*

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[39] Fanning describes this function as a "customary imperfect" that "relate[s] generalized, usually multiple occurrences" which tend to be "less vivid than the aorist.... One gets the impression that a great deal takes place in the general time-frame which is narrated, but the narrative is less direct and immediate than with aorists" (247–48).

Fanning's summary at this point notes the "shift in 6:55 from specific narrative with mainly aorist verbs to generalized summary with 5 customary imperfects, and 2 occurrences of ἄν to supplement the generalized sense."[40]

Qualifying or Restricting General References

The imperfect also occurs in relative or correlative statements which qualify or otherwise restrict more general references or which are components of larger constructions. The 8 instances in Mark 1–8 are 3:8, 10, 13; 4:5; 6:55; 7:25, 36 *bis.* By their nature, relative or correlative statements are subordinate, explanatory ideas, so it is not surprising to find offline material in such a context. One example is adequate.[41]

3:10, πολλοὺς γὰρ ἐθεράπευσεν, ὥστε ἐπιπίπτειν αὐτῷ ἵνα αὐτοῦ ἅψωνται *ὅσοι εἶχον* μάστιγας.	for he had healed many so that *as many as had* sickness were pushing toward him in order to touch him.

In this instance the imperfect is not part of the kernel of the sentence, functioning rather as part of a substantival constituent, the entire correlative clause functioning as the subject of ἅψωνται.

Summary

If the overall thrust of this analysis is correct, then the imperfect appears to be used in two somewhat different (though occasionally overlapping) ways in Mark 1–8. On the one hand it introduces direct discourse, and on the other hand the imperfect records offline information.

These seem somewhat at odds since direct discourse would not normally be considered offline material. The most common uses in introducing direct discourse do seem to involve more general statements (e.g., summarized statements of groups), but there is a significant minority of instances that are not amenable to this sort of explanation. All of them use ἔλεγεν to introduce specific statements by Jesus.

Though a few of these might be explained as concluding, summary statements (e.g., 2:27; 8:21), most appear no different from statements introduced with an aorist or present (εἶπεν, λέγει). In 6:10 the only direct statement in the pericope, Jesus' instructions to his disciples, is introduced with an imperfect. This is surely not explanatory information in any sense; it appears

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[40] Fanning, *Verbal Aspect,* 248.

[41] No particular tense is necessary with either relatives or correlatives; usage in Mark is diverse in this regard.

to be the main point. Likewise 7:27–29 records Jesus' conversation with the Syrophonecian woman. The first statement (Jesus' stated objection) is introduced with an imperfect, the second (the woman's counter plea) follows an aorist/present ἀπεκρίθη καὶ λέγει, and the third (Jesus' concession) comes with an aorist. This seems to be an unusual pattern. To argue, as Levinsohn does, that unexpected forms such as this indicate "added implicatures" seems strained and results in emphases at odds with the context.[42] Nor is Runge's suggestion helpful here. He proposes that "imperfect forms of λέγω are characteristically used either to introduce an initial speech that is more of a monologue than a dialogue, or to record the responses of multiple groups to one thing."[43] This may be true in some instances, but it does not fit this example in Mark 7.

Though I would like to propose a simple solution for these sorts of data, at this point I am more inclined to describe the general pattern and acknowledge that I simply don't know why some examples don't fit the usual pattern.

As for the second category of usage, the evidence is much more consistent. Here all the uses cataloged do appear to relate to offline information of various sorts. These are not the sort of statements that deserve special attention. There is no emphasis here, no deliberate attempts by the writer to focus the reader's attention on some particularly important detail in his narrative.

Implications

I would suggest two possible implications of this study, one in regard to translation, the other with regard to how we use the tenses in exegesis.

Translation

We have traditionally taught our students to translate imperfect verbs as past progressives in English: "ἔλυον, I was loosing." I am not so sure that is helpful. Although there is a pedagogical advantage of simplicity, it may well start the student off on the wrong foot, assuming that this is what the imperfect *means.* What ought to be asked, however, is if the imperfect *functions* the same way in Greek as the past progressive does in English. Is the primary significance of a Greek imperfect tense-form past time with progressive *Aktionsart?* Although it may well be appropriate to use our default translation in some, perhaps even many instances, if the imperfect functions different from the English past progressive, we should be more sensitive to how the receptor language

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[42] Levinsohn illustrates his suggestion with a similar statement in John 8:31 (*Discourse Features in NT Greek,* 2d ed. [Dallas: SIL, 2000], 175).

[43] *Discourse Grammar,* 126.

expresses similar functions. In many cases a "simple" rather than progressive translation is more suitable. The use of the *–ing* forms may well suggest the wrong point to an English-only reader. If Mark, e.g., is using the imperfect because he is introducing a background explanation or to report a simple statement in the past, then "he said" may be preferable to "he was saying."[44]

One example will suffice to illustrate my point. In 5:8, ἔλεγεν would be more suitably represented in English as "he had said to him" (e.g., NRSV).[45] The more commonly used, "For he was saying to him, 'Come out of the man, you unclean spirit!'" (ESV, cf. NASB), suggests to some that Jesus has made this demand repeatedly, but thus far unsuccessfully, showing (at least to one commentator) "how difficult a case he is dealing with."[46] This need not be explained as the use of the imperfect for the pluperfect,[47] but simply a different function in two languages.

Exegesis

A second implication of this study relates more directly to exegesis. My introductory illustration related to the use of what has been called the inceptive imperfect. What I would suggest briefly is that although such *Aktionsart* statements are valid considerations (though of the statement rather than of the tense-form), these are at times over-emphasized. Rather than thinking first or primarily of such categories in exegesis, we ought to look at a broader picture.

Fanning has argued that the narrative structuring function of the aspects should be treated as secondary to the basic aspect values.[48] If by that we mean that semantic meaning is more fundamental than pragmatic function, I would

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[44] I have done this in many of the examples cited earlier in the paper.

[45] See also RSV, NIV, NET, HCSB, and William Lane, *The Gospel of Mark,* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 184. Wallace translates "for he had said to him" and explains that "the imperfect is referring back to a previous statement that is only implicit in the context" (*Greek Grammar* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996]*,* 549).

[46] Robert Gundry, *Mark* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993)*,* 250, see also 9. Gundry, of course, bases this on the Greek imperfect, not on the English translation, but in any case it over-reads the grammar to base such a conclusion on the tense-form.

[47] So Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark,* 2d ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1966; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981)*,* 281 ("he had been saying"); Robert Guelich, *Mark 1–8:26,* WBC 34A, (Dallas: Word, 1989), 272 n.*f;* C. E. B. Cranfield, *The Gospel According to St. Mark,* 2d ed. (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1977), 178. If an *English* pluperfect is intended, that is not objectionable, though apt to be misunderstood. (Robert Stein, *Mark,* BECNT [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 254, phrases it this way.)

[48] Fanning, *Verbal Aspect,* 72, 75, 77.

agree. But perhaps the more important consideration is at the functional, pragmatic level. What is more important there?

- The semantic values grammaticalized in individual words?
- The *Aktionsart* of specific words as used in particular statements (i.e., the pragmatic classification of various verbs)?
- The narrative function of the tense-forms in the pericope or the narrative as a whole?
- The meaning of the larger verbal context, including not only factors affecting a verb's *Aktionsart* value, but of the proposition as a whole?

If we follow a minimalist approach to interpretation—by which I mean attributing the least value to the smallest elements of language and a relatively larger value to contextual considerations[49]—then perhaps the list I have just suggested is ranked in an appropriate, ascending order. We start with the smallest pieces—the semantics of the tense-form (i.e., aspect and the other semantic values grammaticalized at that level such as person, number, etc.)—but then begin to build toward the larger frames of reference. In ascending order, that would then move to *Aktionsart,* which requires more than a single word to determine the pragmatic value. From there broader considerations of the pericope as a whole come into focus, including such factors as the narrative structuring function of aspect. Eventually we reach the broader level of the entire discourse, but I will not attempt to flesh out an entire exegetical process model in one essay!

Conclusion

The most significant consideration for our present purpose is where the *functions* of the tense-forms fit. I would suggest that they should carry greater weight and receive greater attention than we have given them in the past. What we need to develop more carefully is a description of how the various forms function. The suggestions in this paper regarding the narrative function of the imperfect are but one part of the entire picture, and one of the smaller parts at that. What we should not do is over-emphasize or over-exegete these smaller pieces.

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[49] Grammatical minimalism is to be contrasted to grammatical maximalism—the "golden nugget" approach. The differences here are relative. Minimalism does not argue that there is *no value* to the smaller elements, only that these are *less* significant than the larger, contextual elements. Without the small elements there would be no context!