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Time and tense in Thucydides

The system of the Greek verb as presented in our grammars is based on a combination of philological routine, linguistic preconception, and didactic necessity. Time-honored concepts such as “durative,” “punctual,” “ingressive,” or “conative,” not to mention “past” and “present,” are applied with a rigor that seems due to a large extent to the need of ready-made “labels” to facilitate the laborious process of learning Greek. In addition, the tendency to see the meaning of Greek verbs in terms of the properties of the action or event denoted is motivated by the predominantly referential and text-based conception of language of the philologist, on which our grammars clearly draw. The purpose of this paper is not to take direct issue with the account of Greek tenses we find in our handbooks, but to present a way of teaching Greek tenses that highlights an aspect that is absent from the course books in Ancient Greek and from the grammars on which they are based. Language is not only and certainly not primarily concerned with saying things “about” the world; language is a matter of “hereness:” the deictic center of the speaker, or of the text (i.e., a *fictional* speaker) – *even when* the speech/text refers to events that are absent (past). I have found it useful to explain this insight by means of texts that express their physical hereness in a particularly instructive way: inscriptions. Two types will be discussed: (i) private dedicatory or funeral inscriptions of the type *X m' anétheken / X tóde sêma mnêma anétheken / éstesen*; (ii) decrees of the Athenian state:

(i) *Khairedemou tóde sêma patèr éstese thanóntos/ Amphikháres agathòn paída olophurómenos./*

Phaíd55imos epoíei

(ii) *édoxen têi boulêi kai tôi démoi; X eprutáneue, Y egrammáteue, Z epestátei*

The hereness is expressed by the self-reference in *tóde sêma* in the first type (or phrases like *tóde psephisma* in the second), but also by the aorist: beyond referring to a “punctual” or “completed” act, the aorists (*éstese* and *édoxen*, resp.) place the act’s physical consequences in the reader’s present. The past opens up into the present and the aorist bridges the gap. By contrast, the imperfects specify past attendant circumstances that are not directly essential to the monument’s present. Phaidimos’s sculpting the statue (expressed with the imperfect *epoíei*) is presented as an activity in the past, subservient to Amphichares erecting the monument as the reality that makes up the reader’s present. Likewise the city’s decree is present, whereas the attendant magistrates’ names are details from the past. The deictic difference between the two tenses, the one focusing on the past-turned-present, the other presenting the past as past, will be used as an interpretive tool for the study of narrative, in particular Thucydides. The historian can suggest the presence of the War (*hóde pólemos*) in much the same way as the inscriptions: the aorist signals both the reader’s present (*Thoukudídes xunégrapsen*, 1.1) and the writer’s present (*égrapsa*, 1.97.2). Both moments converge in the equation of Thucydides’ work with the War. In short, this paper aims at showing that an alternative way of teaching Greek tense has important consequences for the study of narrative as a mastering, and overcoming, of time.