

Discourse Analysis of Mark 6:45-52

Introduction

Discourse analysis is not easy to define, but may be described as a linguistic study of a text on a holistic basis, observing features which structure and direct the flow of units larger than sentences or clauses which are called “discourses.” However, the criticism of Moisés Silva is appropriate: “My anxiety, however, was only aggravated to realize in a fresh way that discourse analysis is about...*everything!* It is grammar and syntax, pragmatics and lexicology, exegesis and literary criticism. In short, fertile ground for undisciplined minds.”¹ Silva goes on to characterize the discipline as:

- (a) restating the obvious using unnecessarily forbidding terminology;
- (b) giving expression to exceedingly general and vague ideas, the significance of which escapes at least this reader; and
- (c) attempting to support particular interpretations with arguments that have no probative value.²

Discourse analysis is, perhaps because of its immaturity as an interpretative method, fragmented as to methodology, and not all of the approaches appear useful to the exegete of the New Testament. The verbal aspectual approach of Stanley Porter, however, holds promise.

Porter’s Verbal Aspect Theory

Porter’s aspectual approach to discourse analysis is built upon his view of verbal aspect.

While the scope of this study prohibits a proper analysis of Porter’s theory of verbal aspect, a

¹ Moisés Silva, “Discourse Analysis and Philippians” in *Discourse Analysis and Other Topics in Biblical Greek*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D.A. Carson, JSOT Supplement Series 113 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), 102. It was of great comfort after reading the volume on discourse analysis edited by Black [*Linguistics and New Testament Interpretation: Essays on Discourse Analysis*, ed. D. A. Black (Nashville: Broadman, 1992)] to find that a scholar as capable as Silva expressed confusion over what constitutes discourse analysis and how it is practiced from that volume. This student can also identify with Silva’s claim that “I welcome every available opportunity to pontificate on subjects that I know nothing about....” (102).

brief exposition is in order. Verbal aspect is “a semantic (meaning) category by which a speaker or writer grammaticalizes (i.e. represents a meaning by choice of a word-form) a perspective on an action by the selection of a particular tense-form in the verbal system.”³ This is based upon the systemic linguistic idea that choice indicates meaning (i.e. to choose one form is to reject another, and hence to choose—perhaps unconsciously—a perspective on the referent).⁴ In Greek, there are three verbal aspects which are directly tied to morphologic forms. The perfective aspect portrays the action as an undifferentiated whole, and is the semantic identity of the aorist “tense.” The imperfective aspect (including the present and imperfect “tenses”) views the action as a process in progress. The stative aspect (perfect and pluperfect tenses) reflects a given state of affairs irrespective of the antecedent action (if any) that brought about this state.⁵

The most important feature to Porter’s theory is that the Greek tense forms do not grammaticalize time, only aspect (a perspective on the action—not the objective time it occurs). This is the departure point for many grammarians, such as Fanning and Silva.⁶ Porter has demonstrated his point convincingly by use of the principle of contrastive substitution, whereby he shows that the same verb form can be used in different temporal contexts without changing the

² Ibid, 103.

³ Stanley E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), 21.

⁴ This is outlined in the introduction to Porter’s seminal work. Stanley E. Porter, *Verbal Aspect in the Greek of the New Testament, with Reference to Tense and Mood*. Studies in Biblical Greek, vol. 1, 2d ed. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993).

⁵ Porter, *Idioms*, 21-22.

⁶ See Buist M. Fanning, “Approaches to Verbal Aspect in New Testament Greek: Issues in Definition and Method” in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D.A. Carson, JSOT Supplemental Series 80 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993); Moisés Silva, “A Response to Fanning and Porter on Verbal Aspect” in *Biblical Greek Language and Linguistics: Open Questions in Current Research*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D.A. Carson, JSOT Supplemental Series 80 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993).

temporal reference of the statement.⁷ This system has the advantage that it needs to make no exceptions for verbs that defy the absolute time ascribed to them (e.g. the historical present, etc.).⁸

The Discourse Function of Verbal Aspect

Porter contends that “the planes of discourse as indicated by verbal aspect are a means by which the points of emphasis or peaks of a discourse may be indicated....”⁹ Modern linguistics has identified three planes of discourse (background, foreground, and frontground), which in Porter’s system are related to the three Greek verbal aspects.

The aorist is the background tense, which forms the basis for the discourse; the present is the foreground tense, which introduces significant characters or makes appropriate climatic references to concrete situations; and the perfect is the frontground, which introduces elements in an even more discrete, defined, contoured and complex way.¹⁰

The “default” aorist tense is used to lay the plot of the narrative¹¹ while the more heavily “marked” present and perfect tense signal prominent features. Hence, “grammatical features in a discourse may be selected for grammatical as well as conceptual emphasis.”¹²

Moisés Silva voices the critical concern with the use of verbal aspect in discourse analysis: “Undoubtedly, one of the functions of verbal aspect is to reflect discourse shifts, but I doubt

⁷ See Rodney Decker, “Temporal Deixis of the Greek Verb in the Gospel of Mark with Reference to Verbal Aspect,” Ph.D. dissertation (Milwaukee: Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 1998), 77ff. for a helpful digest.

⁸ This is denigrated (wrongly) by Fanning as “too simplistic.” He claims that Porter has built his system on exceptions (referring to Porter’s contrastive substitution method), and states that “he has missed the pattern evidenced by the vast body of usage in New Testament Greek in favor of a few anomalous instances.” Fanning, “Approaches,” 58-59. However, Fanning has to demonstrate that Porter’s examples *are* exceptions (he assumes it, based upon traditional designations).

⁹ Porter, *Idioms*, 302.

¹⁰ Porter, *Idioms*, 23.

¹¹ Or supporting illustrative material in the case of exposition.

¹² Porter, *Idioms*, 302.

whether it is its primary function—and I am sure it is not its only function.”¹³ He feels it is unwise to assume prominence (or lack of it) based upon aspectual choice. This is the crux of the issue—the demonstrability of the claim that verbal aspect indicates discourse prominence. Porter’s system is evaluated below by examining the discourse function of verbal aspect in Mark 6:45-52.

The Discourse Function of Verbal Aspect in Mark 6:45-52

The aspectual flow of the pericope (see Appendix) shows a predominance of aorist finite verbs, a fairly frequent use of the historical present, and rare use of the most heavily marked perfect tense.

Figure 1 – Finite Verbs by Form

Aorist	Present	Imperfect	Perfect	Pluperfect	Future
11 50%	7* 32%	4† 18%	0‡	0	0

*Of the 7 present forms, 3 of these are historical presents (6:45, 48, 50) equal to 14%; 1 is a form of the aspectually vague *eijmi* (6:50).

†Of the 4 imperfect forms, 3 are forms of the aspectually vague *eijmi* (6:47, 48, 52).

‡There is, however, a perfect participle in a periphrastic construction (6:52).

Background Plane of Discourse

Porter’s model predicts that the perfective verbal aspect (aorist tense) will form the background, detailing the events that form the plot of the narrative. This is the case in the pericope under scrutiny. Figure 2 demonstrates that the gist of the storyline may be understood from just the aorist finite verbs. (Historical presents are included because they too carry the storyline, although they are aspectually shaded differently; still, with the exception of

¹³ Silva, “Discourse Analysis,” 105. Note that those who practice verbal aspectual discourse analysis do not believe that discourse shift is the only function of verbal aspect. Reed, whom Silva is interacting with here, states that “in the event that the aspectual function conflicts with its value of prominence, verbal aspect takes precedence” Jeffrey T. Reed, “Identifying Theme in the New Testament: Insights from Discourse Analysis” in *Discourse Analysis and Other Topics in Biblical Greek*, ed. Stanley E. Porter and D.A. Carson, JSOT Supplement Series 113 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 85.

εἰς τὰς προ; αὐτῶν; [he came toward them], the story can be understood quite well with only the aorists.)

Figure 2 – Aorists and Historical Presents

ἤναγκασεν τοὺς μαθητὰς αὐτοῦ	he compelled his disciples
αὐτὸς ἀπολύει τὸν ὄχλον	he dismissed the crowd
ἀφ᾽ ἧς ὄρεος εἰς τὸ ὄρος	he went into a mountain
εἰς τὰς προ; αὐτῶν;	he came toward them
ἐδόξαν	they thought
αὐτὸν εἶδον	they saw him
ἐκτίναξαν	they cried out
εἰς αὐτοὺς ἐλάλησεν μετ᾽ αὐτούς	he spoke with them
εἰς αὐτοὺς	he said to them
ἀνέβη πρὸς αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ πλοῖον	he went up to them into the boat
ἐξίστατο ὁ ἀέμος	the wind ceased
οὐκ ἔγνωσαν ἐπὶ τοῖς ἄρτοις	they did not understand regarding the loaves

Note: The shaded phrases indicate historical presents (see below).

The aorist does appear to be the unmarked, or “default,” tense in Mark 6:45-52.

Despite the discourse function of the perfective aspect as the background plane of discourse, it still must be remembered that the semantic weight of the perfective is still in full force. Mark views these actions in their totality as a “complete and undifferentiated process.”¹⁴ For example, the fact that Mark states ἐξίστατο ὁ ἀέμος in the aorist tense should not be interpreted to mean that the wind stopped immediately (i.e. punctiliarly). While that idea may be included in the lexis of κοπᾶν, the perfective simply views the action as a whole with no comment on how it occurs/ed. Similarly, the disciples’ lack of understanding

¹⁴ Porter, *Idioms*, 21.

present,¹⁷ which is anomalous and cannot easily be catalogued.¹⁸ Porter does mention that the historical present may serve to introduce “dialogue considered specially pertinent to the discussion,”¹⁹ and *legei autois* in 6:50 introduces Jesus’ only recorded words in the passage—“Have courage; it is I: do not be afraid”—which are certainly “pertinent to the discussion.”

The four remaining presents occur in direct discourse (6:50 x 3) or in what might be considered a type of direct discourse—the thoughts of the disciples (6:49). Mark may be emphasizing the disciples’ thought that *fantasma estin* (it is a ghost), but it must be cautioned that verb here is *eimi*, which is aspectually vague because it does not offer a full range of tenses.²⁰ It is probable, however, that *Jesus’* words (6:50 - three presents) are weighted aspectually for significance, as is often the case in the Gospels. All three clauses occur in the present tense: *qarseite, egw eimi:mh; fobeisqe* (have courage, it is I: do not be afraid). Still, the aspectual force (except in the case of *eimi*, which is aspectually vague) holds despite discourse function. *Jesus’* point is *not* “keep having courage,” and “stop being afraid” (common overexegeses of the present imperative). In the second case, it is true that the disciples were afraid, but this insight is gleaned from context, not the tense of the imperative.

The imperfect tense, also imperfective in aspect, fills in details not essential to the plot, but which the writer paints for added understanding. Like the present tense, the imperfect views the action of the verb as in progress, but adds a semantic remoteness (whether temporally or logically).²¹ Of the four imperfects in Mk. 6:45-52, three involve *eimi* (6:47, 48, 52). It is

¹⁷ 72 times in Mark.

¹⁸ Fanning, *Verbal Aspect*, 233.

¹⁹ Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 196.

²⁰ Systemic linguistics rightly identifies *choice* as the key to significance.

²¹ Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 207.

probable that Mark uses the imperfect to avoid the present, and a potential aspectual prominence; in other words, the imperfect here may have been the best way to say nothing. The imperfect ἠῆλεν παρελθεῖν αὐτοῦ (he wished to pass by them) is prominenced, however, by the use of the imperfective. While it is not part of the main plot, it apparently is intended to explain why Jesus came to them (6:48).²² The action is remote in that Jesus' passing by was intended, not yet actual: the remoteness is probably best classified *physical remoteness*.²³

The Frontground Plane of Discourse

Morphologically speaking, the perfect (and pluperfect) tense is the most complex. This, and its comparative rarity in the New Testament, suggest that it is the most heavily “weighted” aspectually. Therefore, perfects are the most prominent feature of the discourse landscape, singled out for special attention by the writer. There are no finite verbs in the stative (perfect and pluperfect tense) aspect in Mk. 6:45-52, but one periphrastic contains a perfect participle. Although participles have a different aspectual function in discourse and are not dealt with in this study, the clause αἱ δὲ καρδίαι αὐτῶν ἠρκεῖσθαι (but their hearts were hardened) appears worthy of special notice.²⁴ Even apart from discourse analysis, this insight into the disciples' reaction can be seen to be the point of this pericope. The disciples' hardheartedness and lack of understanding is a Markan theme.²⁵ It appears that Porter is correct, and that the evangelist “marked” this sentence by his use of the perfect participle. Discourse prominence

²² The phrase presents a major interpretative issue. See the student's “Significant Grammar” paper on Mk. 6:48 for further discussion.

²³ Decker, 234.

²⁴ As part of a periphrastic, it is not merely a participle, but rather functions as part of a unit parallel to finite verbs (i.e. the copulative is incomplete without it).

²⁵ See the student's “Significant Grammar” paper at 6:52 for a development of this.

explains this usage here, rather than an attempt to see “completed action with present results” (as per the traditional definition of the perfect). In fact, there is no demonstrable previous event when the disciples’ hearts were hardened. Rather, the state of hardness is being emphasized, with no reference to the process itself.²⁶ It may be noted that in periphrastic constructions, both the copulative verb (eijni) and the participle contribute to the sum meaning of the construction; therefore, if temporal remoteness is incipient in hh, this can be identified as a past event. However, the temporal meaning does not come from the perfect participle.

Conclusion

The general picture of the verbal aspectual character of the discourse in Mk. 6:45-52 shows perfective verbs (aorist) setting the basis (background) for the story, while the imperfectives (mostly present verbs) fill in the foreground with explanatory detail. The perfect participle in the periphrastic hh pepwrwmenh is the foreground of the discourse—the item of prominence, the point of the narrative. Porter’s model predicts this quite accurately. While it would be premature to affirm a system based upon such a small sampling, this study seems to validate Porter’s approach, the most promising of the discourse analysis methodologies.

²⁶ “Whether a previous event is alluded to or exists at all is a matter of lexis in context and not part of aspectual semantics.... The stative aspect distances itself from the process itself, referring to the state of the represented process.” Porter, *Verbal Aspect*, 259, 401.

Appendix: Aspectual Flow of Mark 6:45-52

6:45	Kai; eujū;" hñagkasen tou;" maqhta;" auj tou'	A	And then he urged his disciples
	eñbhñai eij" to; ploion kai; proagein eij" to; peran pro;" Bh qsaidan,	a p	to get into a boat and to go before him to the other side toward Bethsaida,
	eñw" aujto;" apoluei ton oclon.	HP	while he dismissed the crowds.
6:46	↪kai; apotaxameno" aujtoi"	a	↪And after taking leave of them
	aphlqen eij" to; oñro" proseukasqai.	A p	he went away into a mountain to pray.
6:47	↪kai; oñyia" genomenh"	p	↪And as it had become late
	hh to; ploion eñ meñw/ th" qal assh", k ai; aujto;" mono" epi; th" gh".	I*	the boat was in the middle of the lake, and he was alone on the land.
	↪kai; iñwn aujtou;" basanizomenou" eñ tw/ eñ aunein,	a p a	↪And seeing them being tormented as they were rowing
6:48	hh gar ol añemo" eñantio" aujtoi", peri; tetarthn fulakhn th" nukto;" eñcetai pro;" aujtou;"	I* HP	(for the wind was against them), around the fourth watch of the night he came toward them
	peripatwh epi; th" qal assh"	p	walking on the lake
	kai; hñelen	I	and he wished
	parelqeih aujtou'.	a	to pass by them.
6:49	↪oil de; iñdonte" aujton	p	↪But the ones who saw him
	↪epi; th" qal assh" peripatouhta	p	↪walking upon the lake
	eñloxan	A	thought
	ofti fantasma eñstin, kai; añekraxan:	P A	that it was a ghost, and they cried out:
6:50	pante" gar aujton eidon	A	for they all saw him
	kai; eñtaracqhsan.	A	and were frightened.
	ol de; eujū;" eñ al hsen met! aujtwh,	A	Then immediately he spoke with them,
	kai; legei aujtoi": qarseite, eñgw eijmi: mh; fobei'sqe.	HP P P*	and said to them, "Have courage, it is I: do not be afraid."
	kai; añebh pro;" aujtou;" eij" to; ploion kai; eñkopasen ol añemo", kai; lian »ek perissou¼ eñ eñautoi" eñxistanto:	A A A	And he went up to them into the boat and the wind ceased, and they were completely amazed.
6:52	ouj gar sunhkan epi; toi" añtoi",	A	For they did not understand regarding the loaves,
	añ l! hh aujtwh hl kardia pepwrwmenh.	I*-r	but their heart was hardened.

Key: A,a = aorist; P,p = present; I,i = imperfect; R,r = perfect; F,f = future; __-__ = periphrastic; *= form of eijmi. Capitals indicate finite verbs. Lowercase letters indicate non-finite verbals (i.e. infinitives, participles).