

**Discourse Function of Verbal Aspect
In Mark 9:33-41**

A proper understanding of verbal aspect indicates that it is highly beneficial to examine the pattern employed by an author over the course of a passage. The placement of marked verbs within the context of unmarked verbs must suggest to the reader who is sensitive to how Greek writers employed verbal aspect that certain ideas or events are being emphasized. Thus, Mark's use of verbal aspect in the passage under scrutiny is the next step in exegesis.

CHART I All Verbs in Mark 9:33-41 according to Aspect*

*excluding all present εἶμι verbs (4)

	Aorist	Present	Imperfect	Perfect	Future
Indicative	7	5 (9 with εἶμι)	6	0	2
Participle	3	3	0	0	-
Subjunctive	4	1	-	-	-
Infinitive	1	1	-	-	-
Imperative	0	1	-	-	-

This chart reveals a total of 15 verbs in the aorist, 11 in the present, and 6 in the imperfect. While only 2 are in the future, no perfects are found at all. As is common in narrative, the aorist is used most commonly to simply state events that happened, with no unusual emphasis. However, the placement of the imperfective verbs among these aorists will be of interest.

CHART II Perfective (Aorist) versus Imperfective (Present and Imperfect) Verbs
(in order of occurrence) (P means a present of εἶμι)

33 A P I I	34 I A	35 A A P P P F
36 P A A A	37 A P P P A	38 I A P I I
39 A P P A (F) A	40 P P	41 A P P A

This second chart suggests some sort of grouping done, perhaps unconsciously, by Mark. If Porter's verbal aspect theory is correct, the inherent significance of the imperfective forms is that they bear more weight, more emphasis, in comparison to the unmarked perfective forms. Whereas the perfective forms view the action as a whole, complete event, the imperfective views them in process of occurring. Therefore, the non-aorist forms in this passage should be analyzed. Furthermore, according to the above chart, it appears that Mark used a progression of similar-type verbal forms, not simply a random or every-other pattern.

The following are observations from Mark 9:33-41 in regards to aspectual flow:

- ◆ 5 or the 6 aorist indicative verbs are found in narration of events. Putting these six verbs in sequence to “reconstruct” the storyline would yield the following results:
 - “And he entered.”
 - “on the way they had argued.”
 - “taking a child, he stood him.”
 - “embracing him, he said.”
 - “We saw someone casting...”
 - “But Jesus said.”
- *In this case, it seems the aorists do not give a very complete storyline, but they are to some extent the backbone for the narrative.
- ◆ Except for the present form λέγει, all the present indicative verbs occur within direct discourse. This seems to indicate Mark's style of writing (and that of most Greek writers?) more than an intentional emphasis being placed on these verbs. Perhaps the present tense lends itself better to discourse. Verse 37, however, does seem to use the present for emphasis, for it is placed in juxtaposition with two subjunctives, the first an aorist, and the second a present.
 - ◆ The imperfect verbs are both in narrative and discourse. The first three may be explanatory for what happened in Capernaum, where they had entered. Or, it may place emphasis on the event they portray: the argument and ensuing silence. Then, in verse 38, imperfects are used three times. In the first use, there is no clear implication for its existence. The second use is conative, and the third is related to the lexis of the word “follow,” which assumes a process rather than a complete event.
 - ◆ Verse 33 - διαλογιζομαι In its first instance, Jesus uses the imperfect to place emphasis on the fact that the disciples were *arguing* on the way. In the second instance, the narrator uses the unmarked aorist to emphasize instead the silence due to

being reminded about their petty argument and to emphasize the content of the argument.

- ◆ Verse 34 – θελει / εσται The use of the present for “desire” makes this word stand out and catch attention, and the use of the future emphasizes the necessary attitude that brings about the described desire.
- ◆ Verse 35 - λεγει As mentioned in the grammar paper, this indicates the start of a new pericope. In this passage, it introduces Jesus response to the problem of searching for greatness. It is observed that the ensuing two times λεγω is used to introduce something Jesus says, it is found in aorist form.
- ◆ Verse 37 - δεχομαι This verb is used four times in a row in different forms. The first is aorist and thus is not the focus of the statement. It is a simple declaration of a potential situation. The second use, a present, is emphatic; *it is me that person receives!* A textual variant may suggest that the third use is an aorist again, setting up a pattern of A-P-A-P. This would mean that the second of each pair is being emphasized; in each case the second object of receiving is greater in the mind of the recipient than is the first. And the second pair is greater than the first, making the last object (the one who sent Jesus) most emphatic (also a present), though he is received simply when someone receives a child in Jesus’ name. Even if the textual reading is preferred, there is still a logical progression, and the fact of Jesus and the one who sent him being received is emphatic.
- ◆ Verse 39 – κωλυετε Here, Jesus emphasizes the word “forbid” as he rebukes the twelve for what they did. (do NOT *forbid*) Then he goes on to use unmarked forms (and a future) to describe the fact that such a person could not turn right around and curse him.

Conclusion

Mark 9:33-41 lends little clear evidence to actually affirm Porter’s theory, but it certainly does not contradict it. In other words, as a test case, the theory remains viable. For instance, there are a majority of verbs in the aorist form, though not an overwhelming one. On the whole, it appears that the aorist is used to state events in the narrative that would not be emphasized by the reader; examples include ειπεν, ειδομεν, and επηρωτα. On the other hand, an imperfective form is used for verbs that the writer would probably want to emphasize, such as, “whoever receives

one of such children in my name *receives* me.” Thus, the theory of Porter seems very likely, both in terms of verbal aspect and the phenomenon of emphatic markers inserted in a flow of narrative thought, and it stands the test of Mark 9:33-41.