

# Actions in Time, with Leonard Muellner

## Video Tutorial: Verbal Aspect in Ancient Greek — Describing Actions in Time with Leonard Muellner

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**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Hi this is Claudia Filos. I am with the Center for Hellenic Studies in Washington, D.C. I am recording remotely and I am here today talking with Leonard Muellner, who is a professor of Classical Studies at Brandeis University. He is also the director of IT and Publications at the Center for Hellenic Studies. Lenny, thanks for joining me today for a short discussion.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** What a pleasure.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Yes, so today I was hoping that we could just have a talk about something that some people may or may not know about, it is a topic called “aspect,” and this is something that might be interesting to people whether or not they have an interest in learning Ancient Greek language, but it might help us to understand, sort of, the poetry and myth in Ancient Greek society in general. Can you talk a little bit about how that works, and how it is different from tense?

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** So what we are talking about is – and I hope you will interact with me about this – what we are talking about is verbal aspect, how there are markers on Greek verbs, on all Greek verbs, okay?, and there are markers for voice – like active and passive and middle – but there are also markers on aspect, which is kind of an elusive concept, but, it can take various forms. In other words, in some languages, aspect is, “I heard this third hand from my cousin,” as opposed to, “I witnessed this, what I am reporting to you myself,” or stuff like that. But in Greek, it is about the overall thing at issue is whether you are reporting action, or you are describing action as an on-going process, or a completed one, or – and this is the hardest part of it – or you are reporting action and not specifying whether it is a completed process or an on-going one.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** So that’s super interesting. Right? for us, I think.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** So I think the key thing for understanding how this three-part system works is to understand the categories that were first applied to language by the Prague School of Linguistics in the 30s and 40s, and the big exponent, that most of us have heard of the Prague School of linguistics, is Roman Jakobson. But he was, these people talked about, when we think of oppositions, which are an important feature we think of binary oppositions, like one and zero, which are the pr--, built on, that’s what computers are built on, where something has a property and the other thing doesn’t have it. So our notion of most oppositions is that they are mutually exclusive oppositions, like black and white, or one and zero, but the Prague School distinction is between what are called “marked categories” and “unmarked categories,” and they are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, the best

examples of these sorts of oppositional pairs, is like the opposition between, well, uh, at least in its most unvarnished and maybe to be amended form, the opposition between pants and skirts.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Okay.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** So you could say that pants are “unmarked,” in their opposition to skirts, because both males and females wear pants.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Okay.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Whereas skirts are “marked” because females and some Celtic people wear them. I mean, we are restricted to a certain group, okay? So from the point of ... or, the other example is the one that Greg uses, is the opposition between “short” and “tall.” Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Um hum.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** They are not really mutually exclusive because you can say of a short person, “How tall are you?” Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** In other words, there is a sense of tall that doesn’t really, it means “How high are you?” not whether you are tall or short. Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Um hum.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** So it includes shortness and tallness, okay, in it? The other way of thinking about this is toll booth on the highways, or at least there used to be. Now everybody has electronic gadgets. But maybe most of the people in this audience know tollbooths where you have one lane for passenger cars with exact change, ...

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... and another lane for everyone. Okay? Most people think that if they have exact change, they should go in the exact change lane. But if you have exact change, you could go in the lanes for everybody.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** It is not an exclusive category. It includes people with exact change, passengers with exact change. So that’s the basic idea.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** So can I clarify? The “unmarked” category can include the “marked.” Is that right?

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Exactly. So what you have in Greek in aspects and here are the names of them: is the imperfective aspect, which describes action that is imperfect, in the sense not that it is not perfect, but in the sense that it is not complete ...

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Okay

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... in the sense of *perfetto*; and then you have, and that includes the present and the so-called imperfect tense, which is just the past of the present. These aren't, aspect is not a category that's, it's a category that is totally distinct from tense, okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right, right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Yep. So, and I think the future belongs to the category of the imperfect aspect. And then you have the perfective aspect, so there is imperfective aspect and perfective aspect, and perspective aspect includes, in terms of the indicative at least, perfect tense and pluperfect tense, okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... which describe actions that are complete. So you know the notion is that if you use the perfect of the verb "to die," it is a kind of grim example but I think that it works okay, so the imperfective aspect of "die" is to be in the process of dying, okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Okay.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... present, or if it is imperfect it is in the past, "I was dying."

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** But if you use it in a perfective sense, you're dead, okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** It means "right now, I am dead." And the pluperfect means sometime in the past I was dead, okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** So there's a proverb in Greek which uses the ... well, let's get to the proverb afterwards.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Yeah, yeah. Okay.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** So I think that these two categories are relatively comprehensible and we can express what they mean quite easily in English, ...

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... and they have to be enhanced a little bit because, for example, in the case of the Greek perfect, it means that a process is complete, but it can also describe the state that obtains upon the completion of a process.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Right. Like being dead.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Dead. Right. "I have died." Dead. Yeah. So it's a state, right?

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** It's a state or it's just that you have done it. If you say, "I spoken" in Greek, in the perfect, it means you are finished and you are not going to do it anymore. Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Yeah.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Alright. So we have those two, but the tricky one is the so-called aorist, which is the Greek name for it, which is *a-horistos*, with an "h" in there in Greek. "A" is a negative prefix, as in "amoral" and those things that survive in English, and the *horistos*, the English word that is cognate with it is "horizon," which horizon is the line that divides the sky from the land or the sea, right?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Uh huh.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** So *horizon* in Greek means the divider. Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Okay.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** So what *ahoristos* means is "undivided" or "undividing." Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Okay.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** In other words, it does not make a distinction. Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** So in the terms that we were talking about before, that would be "unmarked," is that what you are saying?

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Exactly. But here's the tricky part. What you have got then is a three-part system, what my examples of "unmarked" are totally two-part examples. You can see how this works if you think of it as a triangle, okay?, At the top of the triangle, for example, there is the word "lion," which means a specific kind of animal, when I say a "lion" it doesn't specify its gender, it's the lion as opposed to the lamb, let's say, or to a wolf, right?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** It's a category, okay? and it doesn't necessarily have gender. But if you put that lion at the top of the triangle and at the bottom ends of it you put "lion" on one

side and “lioness” on the other, there is the sense of “lion” that means male lion, okay?, and there is another sense that means female, that then it’s in opposition to “lioness.” So in a certain sense that is the way that the Greek aspects work. On the top, you have the aorist, which is just the category of an action. Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** yeah, yeah, yeah.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** It doesn’t specify whether it is ongoing or not. And then you have the two categories that are opposed to one another. So what’s difficult is to appreciate what an aorist does in Greek.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** That’s hard and it does things. For example, you can make proverbs in the Greek in the aorist ...

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... because they have a kind of timelessness to them, okay? that’s one thing, but also they don’t specify whether their action is on-going or not. They are markers that are left out there, okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** We don’t have this in English.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right. So it is totally different. But that’s what is so fascinating to me, right? It is a different way of communicating the ideas of what is happening in the world.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Exactly, so the grammar books say “oh, you translate the aorist indicative as a simple past,” and even the standard grammar book that we use, the Hansen and Quinn, says that the aorist is simple aspect.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right, right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Well, that is, okay. But, anyway, since there is only a past tense of it in the indicative, people learn that aorist just means “I did it.” But that in a sense means it’s perfect. In English we don’t have this category. So it’s a really difficult to get your head into the notion that you have a form which is really just focusing on the action without specifying something about it, just as “lion” isn’t male or female. Do you know what I mean?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Yes, yes. Exactly. And I think that a triangle is a beautiful way to describe that situation, that relationship, right?, between the “marked” and the “unmarked.” So then I mean, so then when we are starting to think about, let’s say, we are reading *The Iliad*, or we’re reading some ancient Greek poetry, can you talk a little bit about the way that that can be used

in order to make poetry and myth function, do the things that it can do do, because this is really functional, this is functional poetry. It is trying to change the world, right?

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** It is. I think that you have a whole kind of esthetic to the way you use ... For example, the imperfect has a past tense and the aorist as a past tense in narrative and in Greek poetry, and Homer, or other texts. So that I think that it's another way of thinking about unmarked forms is that they are the default, the default narrative tense is aorist. Okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Yeah.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** That means that the imperfect is in opposition to it and is a marked form, and a restricted one. And so is the pluperfect, okay?, If you want to think of it in those terms, and the perfect. But I think, whatever .... you don't use perfect and pluperfect as narrative tenses in Greek. They are something else, okay?. But the aorist and the imperfect are continually in opposition to one another, and at a certain point in Greek, you can also use the present as a narrative tense, which is kind of mind-boggling to us. That is sub-standard in English to use a present as a narrative tense. Stuff like, "So I says to him ...," that's bad English, right? That's sub-standard English. So anyhow, but so it becomes even more complex after a certain point, but in heroic poetry, the opposition is between imperfect and aorist, and the aorist is kind of just narrative, you are just describing what happens, and then bingo! all of a sudden, you have the imperfect which visualizes things, I think.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Okay, yeah.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** And which slows things down, if you want. And so a nice example of this, for example, when a god or a goddess like Thetis, when she appears to Achilles, okay?, she does things like she comes in the aorist, but when she is sitting there it is in the imperfect, okay?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Sitting next to him.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** Sitting next to him, okay? So, and you use the particle *hra* or *ara* [ῥα or ἄρα] with that ...

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... which we think is the visualization particle, right? So you can see that you have a coincidence between the notion of slowing the film down and asking you to visualize something, and also the way you use these different forms – verb aspects – to express the highlighting of certain things, or the slowing down of certain things.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** So in a very fundamental way, I mean, the use of this aspect is really affecting the way that the group that is around and interacting with the performer is receiving it and ... integrating it.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... visualizing it as you do. I mean, if you, you know, I think it is a really crucial thing to think of narrative ... We don't have so much experience any more of verbal narrative, right?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** um-hum.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** ... while a person doing gestures, and stuff like that. Verbal narrative. I mean, we do in our interactions with our family and friends. But in an artistic media, we don't have that right?

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** But I think that the closest thing in my experience was when I was a kid when radio was a big narrative medium.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right, right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** And so you learned to imagine in your head what people were saying, the story that they were telling you. And it's a very vivid thing because it is your imagination that gets activated by the images. Whereas our medium is film and the images are all being fabricated for you, you don't have an opportunity to do the imagining for yourself.

**CLAUDIA FILOS:** Right.

**LEONARD MUELLNER:** And so these cues that point out things about the way the action is being represented I think are very powerful in a linguistic and cultural system like that.