Aspects or Discussed and Narrated World?

As seen above, biqqtul is normally used to express habitual situations. In narrative passages, however, it can replace qatal and describe sequences of situations that are not habitual but singular. Moreover, it turned out that the AP has certain features in common with qatal, but that it cannot be used in narrative passages where only qatal is possible. In these cases the use of the verb forms does not seem to be determined by grammatical factors, but rather by the nature of the texts in which they occur, i.e. discussing texts on the one hand and narrating ones on the other. Should it not be possible then that also the other verb forms do not express tenses or aspects as we have assumed so far but that they are rather determined by the nature of the texts, or that they serve the purpose of letting the receiver know what kind of text he hears?

As already mentioned at the outset, Harald Weinrich maintains in his work Tempus: besprochene und erzählte Welt that the function of verb forms does not consist in the designation of aspectual or temporal categories but rather in identifying passages in a text as discussing (besprechend) or narrating (erzählend). Weinrich illustrates his theory with the help of the beginning of an essay by Thomas Mann where the author describes the death of Goethe. Weinrich divides the text into two passages. The first one starts as follows: “Der 22. März 1832 war gekommen. In seinem Lehnstuhl, ein Oberbett über den Knien, den grünen Arbeitsschirm über den Augen, starb Goethe” (Tempus, 26).

The second one starts as follows: “Ein Schriftsteller. Es ist, meine Damen und Herren, eine recht unfruchtbare kritische Manie, zwischen Dichtertum und Schriftstellertum lehrhaft zu unterscheiden . . .” (ibid. 27).

According to Weinrich (ibid. 31), the first passage is narrative. After the date and the place have been mentioned, the way Goethe died is narrated. In the second passage, however, Mann addresses the readers with meine Damen und Herren ‘ladies and gentlemen’ and thus makes clear that this passage differs from the first one. Furthermore, one can observe a difference in the use of the verb forms: Präteritum ‘Simple Past’ (war ‘was’, starb ‘died’) in the first one, Präsens ‘Simple Present’ (ist ‘is’) in the second one. Weinrich found out that the first passage is dominated by four verb forms that are usually called Präteritum, Plusquamperfect ‘Past Perfect’, Konditional I and Konditional II. In the second Passage, on the other hand, we find the Präsens, Perfekt ‘Present Perfect’, Futur I
and Futur II. Weinrich calls the first group narrating tenses, the second one discussing tenses (ibid. 31).

Narrating and discussing passages are not marked by verb forms only but also by other signals Weinrich deals with in chapters IX and X. The address meine Damen und Herren, for example, is a signal for discussing texts.

The verb forms mentioned so far, are traditionally supposed to designate temporal categories. But also forms usually considered to be aspectual have a place in Weinrich’s theory. They serve to distinguish between the foreground and the background of a narration. The foreground of a narration is the unprecedented event on behalf of which the story is told at all. The essential events without which we were not able to understand the plot make up the foreground of the narration, whereas all other components constitute the background.1 In French, for example, the opposition foreground: background is expressed by the verb forms Passé Simple (il alla ‘he went’): Imparfait (il allait ‘he went’) and Passé antérieur (il fut allé ‘he had gone’): Plus-que-parfait (il était allé ‘he had gone’),2 in English by Simple Past (he went): Past Progressive (he was going).3

Even though discussing and narrating texts or foreground and background are not marked by verb forms alone, we have to presuppose—assuming the validity of Weinrich’s theory—that these forms are used consequently because they are supposed to inform the reader or listener about the exact way something is communicated to him, and for this reason they have to be unambiguous in the first place. It is important to keep this point in mind when we check in the following if Weinrich’s theory is able to explain the use of verb forms in the dialect of Beirut in a more appropriate way than an approach that ascribes temporal and aspectual functions to them. The fact that Weinrich’s work is mainly based on written texts does not mean that it cannot be applied to a spoken dialect because one can discuss or narrate in oral language use, too.

Let us start with the AP. The simple AP can be used in main clauses of discussing texts, irrespectively of the actional value of the corresponding verb, it is, however, not able to express a sequence of events in narrating main clauses. On the other hand, it can describe background situations in narrating subordinate clauses, for example in ḥāl-clauses:

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\text{b-yôm min il-ʾîyyâm w huwwe ʾāʿid ʾiddām baytu zāru xayyu ‘On day, while he was sitting in front of his house, his brother visited him’ (see above, chapt. 21)}
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1 Tempus, 118.
2 Ibid. 118ff.
3 Ibid. 149ff.