CHAPTER TEN

THE USE OF THE IMPERFECT TO EXPRESS COMPLETED STATES OF AFFAIRS. THE IMPERFECT AS A MARKER OF NARRATIVE COHESION

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1. Introduction

Often the aspectual opposition between present and aorist stems of the verb in Ancient Greek is described as follows: the present stem has an imperfective value, expressing ‘a not-completed state of affairs’,\(^1\) whereas the aorist stem has a perfective or confective value, expressing ‘a completed state of affairs’ (e.g. Rijksbaron (1994: 1)). The correctness of this description may be tested when in a narrative a verb is accompanied by an adverbial expression of duration. If this expression of duration indicates the total length of a state of affairs, we should have an aorist stem, whereas, when it does not indicate a total duration, we should have a present stem. However, whereas this is indeed often the case, we also find, unexpectedly, the present stem for completed states of affairs. We will argue that this use of the present stem reinforces the narrative cohesion and is somehow related to the structure of the narrative. We have chosen as corpus Herodotus’ *Histories*, which contain a lot of adverbial expressions of duration in a narrative context.

2. Expressions of duration in Herodotus

In Herodotus, expressions of duration indicate generally a number of years (very rarely a number of days or months). They correspond:

\(^{1}\) We will make use of the term *state of affairs* in its now well known meaning in the Functional Grammar literature: all sorts of events (states, activities, accomplishments, achievements), that are expressed by verbs with their subjects and complements.
– either to the duration of the total *accomplishment* of a *transformative* state of affairs.

  Then the utterance answers the question ‘in how many years’ (e.g. ‘did he complete his journey?’). In French, the question is: ‘en combien d’années?’.

– or to a duration which does not cover a total *accomplishment*. Then we have two possibilities. Either the state of affairs, whether an *accomplishment*, *activity* or *state*, has not been completed and was still continuing at the end of the given duration, this end being taken as reference point. The statement then answers the question ‘for how many years at that moment’ (e.g. ‘had he been building his house?’, or ‘had he been ill?’). In French, the question is: ‘depuis combien de temps?’. Or the state of affairs has been completed, but is not a *transformative* state of affairs (not an *accomplishment*, but an *activity* or a *state*). Then the statement answers the question ‘for how many years’ (e.g. ‘did he reign?’ or ‘was he ill?’). In French, the question is: ‘pendant combien de temps?’.

Therefore three syntactic types must be distinguished:

– Type A answering the question ‘in how many years (did he complete his journey)?’ is expressed in Ancient Greek by the preposition ἐν with the dative. The verb is usually in the aorist stem, which has its *confective* value, expressing a total accomplishment, unless this accomplishment belongs to a repetition the end of which is not taken into account.

– Type B1 answering the question ‘for how many years at that moment (had he been building his house)?’ is expressed in Ancient Greek by an accusative case with or without the preposition ἐπί. The verb is always in the *imperfective* present stem, which means that the state of affairs was not completed at the reference point.

– Type B2 answering the question ‘for how many years (was he ill / did he reign)?’ is also worded in Ancient Greek by an accusative case with or without the preposition ἐπί. But the verb is then, unlike in type B1, sometimes in the present stem, sometimes in the aorist stem. So there is a formal opposition between type B1 and type B2

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2 For the classification of states of affairs into *state, activity, accomplishment, achievement*, see Vendler (1957). For the basic opposition *transformative/non-transformative*, see in particular Ruipérez (1954). This ‘Aktionsart’ typology has also been applied to Ancient Greek in Stork (1982: 33–8), Sicking (1991: 39–42), etc.