

## Aspectual distinctions in the Homeric past tense

In the Homeric epics, verb forms with multiple surface realizations often create observable systems of ‘extension and economy’ in the Parryan sense (Parry 1928). This is especially true for the most common forms of common verbs. So for example the third-person, singular, aorist, active, indicative of δίδωμι variously appears in the *Iliad* as δῶκ’, δῶκε, δῶκεν, δῶχ’, ἔδωκε, and ἔδωκεν, distributed across relatively constrained portions of the hexameter, concentrated at verse initial, medial, and final positions. The six different realizations form metrically identical pairs differentiated by a single phonological element, and allow the poet to describe a giving action in the past in a variety of metrical positions. That this should be the case is expected, more or less, given what we know about the nature of Homeric diction.

Less expected is the way in which this aorist system relates to the imperfect. For δίδωμι, the possible forms of the third-person, singular, imperfect, active, indicative that appear in the *Iliad* are δόσκειν and δίδου. The single use of the iterative δόσκειν coincides with a common position for the aorist and has a plainly imperfective meaning, but the more common δίδου complements the aorist system and in most cases is semantically indistinguishable from an aorist. A similar relationship can be found between the aorist and imperfect forms of many of the most common verbs in Homer, where the aorist system is supplanted by a form of the imperfect.

There are also several instances where corresponding aorist and imperfect forms are used in quick succession as part of a single description, apparently without any meaningful semantic difference. For example, employing the middle of βάλλω, Agamemnon casts his great cloak around himself at B 43 and casts his silvernailed sword around his shoulders in the aorist two verses later at B 45. The use of the same verb twice, with different aspects, to describe what is

fundamentally the same action over a span of three verses suggests not only that the imperfect could occasionally be employed as an aorist, but also that the close proximity of such an imperfect to a ‘true’ aorist did nothing to spoil the illusion.

This observation is at odds with recent scholarship (Bozzone 2014, de Decker 2018), which has emphasized aspectual distinctions in Homeric diction to varying ends. It may be possible in some instances to argue for fine distinctions of meaning when aorist and imperfect forms appear close together. Some significance could attach to the fact that Atreus left behind (ἔλπευ) the scepter to Thyestes in the aorist at B 106, but Thyestes left it behind (λεῖπε) to Agamemnon in the imperfect at B 107. Comparing several such instances, however, I argue that such distinctions can only be made through special pleading. Rather than assuming that additional, often highly complicated, information is encoded in the choice of aspect, we ought to consider the ability of the poet to subordinate aspect to tense one feature of that elusive concept variously called ‘poetic language,’ ‘poetic grammar,’ or ‘*Kunstsprache*’ (Meister 1921, Lord 1960, Watkins 1995, Bakker 1997).

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