

An analysis of the aspect use in the epic-Ionic -σκ-iteratives in the *Iliad*

by Filip De Decker

Abstract: In this article I will address the use of the imperfect and aorist with the so-called “epic-Ionic iteratives” in the *Iliad*. Their origin and meaning are debated, but while it is mostly agreed that they describe iterative, habitual and/or durative actions (or a combination of these), some argue that they have no (additional) meaning (and are not different form forms without the suffix) or that they are imperfective. If this is indeed the case, the question would be why they are also found in the aorist and not simply in the imperfect. In this article I discuss the 135 instances of the *Iliad* and will try to show that the differences between aorist and imperfect valid for the non-iterative forms also apply to the iterative forms (with some exceptions, as is the case with all grammatical rules). I start by determining my corpus (providing facts and figures and explaining why I leave out certain forms), then proceed to briefly discussing previous scholarship on (Homeric) Greek aspect, and then proceed to the actual aspectual analysis. In my analysis I start from the traditional approach (distinction punctual vs. durative) and combine this with Vendler’s verbal classifications and the distinction perfective – imperfective as defined by Comrie, Bertinetto, Bache and Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca and applied to active verbs in Homer by Napoli and to Anatolian verbs by Pisaniello. I will not address the origin of the suffix, the use of the suffix and the difference between the forms with and without it, nor the question whether this suffix can be used as evidence for a Graeco-Anatolian *Sprachbund*.¹

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1 Previous scholarship on (Homeric) Greek aspect

1.1 Perfective versus imperfective aspect

The literature on aspect is infinitely long and it goes without saying that I cannot address all the books, articles and contributions on the issue.

For perfective and imperfective I will use the following definitions (which in my opinion are still valid today): *perfectivity indicates the view of a situation as a single whole, without distinction of the various separate phases that make up that situation; while the imperfective pays essential attention to the internal structure of the situation* (Comrie 1976: 16, accepted in Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 125–126, Bhat 1999: 45–49, 58), and (*perfective*) *will typically denote a single event, seen as an unanalysed whole, with a well-defined result or end-state, located in the past. More often than not the event will be punctual, or at least, it will be seen as a single transition from one state to its opposite, the duration of which can be disregarded* (Dahl 1985: 78, Bybee & Dahl 1989: 55, Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 54, Bache 1997: 304, Bhat 1999: 45–49, 58), and actions described by the imperfective can be (in the description by Comrie 1976: 24–40, followed in Deo 2006: 48–98, Dahl 2010: 69–73) *habitual and continuous (progressive or non-progressive)*, or (as Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 125–127 state in more in detail) *progressive (ongoing at reference time, with dynamic verbs)*, *continuous (progressive, ongoing at reference time, with static and dynamic verbs)*, *habitual (customarily repeated on different occasions)*, *iterative (repeated on a particular occasion)*, *frequentative (habitual, ongoing and frequent)* and *continuative (ongoing, with the intent of the agent to keep the action going)*. I want to add that the distinction between *frequentative*

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tive and *iterative* is also an important one as the latter refers to *events repeated on the same occasion*, while the former to *events repeated on different occasions* (Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca 1994: 127, Bhat 1999: 53). In his analysis of the Italian indicative, Bertinetto (1986 *passim*, but especially the schema on page 119, see also Pisaniello 2020: 15–29, especially 22, 2022: slide 4) distinguished between imperfective with *abituale*, *continuo* and *progressivo* and perfective with *compiuto* and *aoristico* → *ingressivo* (I leave the terms in Italian, as a precise and accurate one-to-one translation is not entirely possible).

For my purposes here, I would follow these analyses and say that imperfectivity refers to habitual, ongoing and repeated actions (I add a category “repeated”, because not all repeated actions are ongoing and/or habitual, but would not distinguish so sharply between continuous, continuative and progressive, as Bertinetto and Bybee, Perkins & Pagliuca would do).

1.2 Greek aspect

The literature on Greek tense and aspect is very large (as that on tense and aspect in general),² and time and space constraints prevent me from discussing the previous scholarship in detail, and I will therefore briefly summarise the uses of the three past tenses – the pluperfect, the aorist and the imperfect – first.³ All three tenses are used to refer to the past, but the choice between

² In Bentein (2016: 25) two websites with an immense bibliography were quoted, but, unfortunately, they are no longer active (at the time of writing, i.e. 17.I.2023). See also chapter 1 in Porter (1989 (1–73) with a discussion on the study of Greek aspect from the Alexandrian scholars until 1989 and the introduction in Napoli (2006: 24) with a list of the most important modern works on aspect until 2006. — The most extensive list with works (until 2000) on tense and aspect can be found in Binnick (2001), online: <https://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.471.8160&rep=rep1&type=pdf> which lists about 6600 works.

³ As Van Emde Boas & Huitink (2010: 149) point out, the important reference works for Greek syntax are still Kühner & Gerth (1898, 1904), Schwyzler & Debrunner (1950) and Smyth & Messing (1956). For the tense usage in Classical Greek, one can use also Humbert (1960), Bornemann & Risch (1973), Delaunoy (1988) and Rijksbaron (2002) and Van Emde Boas & Rijksbaron & Huitink & De Bakker (2019, chapter 33), but for Homer specifically, the reference works are Krüger (1859 for syntax), Vogrinz (1889), Monro (1891) and Chantraine (1953 for syntax), although almost all 19th century grammars discuss Homeric examples as well. A large part of

them is based on aspectual value and not on relative chronology: the aorist does not indicate anteriority *per se*, but only refers to the punctual meaning of the action or a completed action,⁴ the imperfect is used for durative actions in the past, conative actions and depictions of past actions,⁵ and the pluperfect describes a completed state in the past and can express simultaneity to actions in the past, and is not used to state anteriority in the past (contrary to its namesake in Latin).⁶ Generally speaking, the distinction be-

the research into Greek tense and aspect has been done in the 19th century (as can be noted from the bibliography). More recent studies on Homeric aspect and tense, are Friedrich (1974 – with non-Indo-European parallels), Romagno (2005), Napoli (2006), García-Ramón (2012) and Hettrich (2016), and the individual case studies of Amigues (1982) on τίκτω, Létoublou (1989) on the verbs of motion, Katselou (2004) on the story of Meleagros in Phoinix’s speech to Akhilleus and Hollenbaugh (2018) on *Iliad* 1 and Hollenbaugh (2021) on Homer in general.

- ⁴ Buttman (1810: 486–493), von Thiersch (1826: 515–519), Bernhardt (1829: 380–384), Madvig (1847: 109–114), Aken (1861: 5,14–16), Curtius (1864: 230–233), Vogrinz (1889: 260–264), Goodwin (1890: 24), Monro (1891: 65), Kühner & Gerth (1898: 154), Gildersleeve (1900: 90), Chantraine (1953: 187–189); Schwyzer & Debrunner (1950: 280–281), Salmon (1950: 165), Sedgwick (1957: 117), Smyth & Messing (1956: 414), Humbert (1960: 120–121), Bornemann & Risch (1973: 213–219), Rijksbaron (1988: 244–248), Duhoux (1992: 358–364), Van Emde Boas & Rijksbaron & Huitink & De Bakker (2019, chapter 33). — Krüger (1846: 170–174) derives this meaning from the original inchoative meaning of the aorist.
- ⁵ Buttman (1810: 486–493), von Thiersch (1826: 511–516), Bernhardt (1829: 370–376), Madvig (1847: 111–112), Krüger (1846: 167–169, 1859: 90–92), Aken (1861: 11–14), Curtius (1864: 228–230), Vogrinz (1889: 260–264), Goodwin (1890: 6–7), Monro (1891: 63–64), Kühner & Gerth (1898: 142–146), Gildersleeve (1900: 88–90), Sedgwick (1940, 1957), Schwyzer & Debrunner (1950: 275–277), Smyth & Messing (1956: 423–427), Humbert (1960: 116–118), Bornemann & Risch (1973: 213–216, 220–222), Rijksbaron (1988, 2012), Duhoux (1992: 386–390), Van Emde Boas & Rijksbaron & Huitink & De Bakker (2019, chapter 33).
- ⁶ Bernhardt (1829: 379–380), Aken (1861: 5), Vogrinz (1889: 260), Goodwin (1890: 18), Delbrück (1897: 228), Brugmann (1904: 569–571, 578), Wackernagel (1920: 151, 191), Kieckers (1926: 27), Thieme (1929: 1–5), Schwyzer & Debrunner (1950: 286–287), Smyth & Messing (1956: 435), Humbert (1960: 131), Bornemann & Risch (1973: 222–223), Duhoux (1992: 437), Kümmel (2000: 82–83), Katselou (2004: 50–51); Tichy (2009: 86). — Buttman (1810: 486), von Thiersch (1826: 125), Madvig (1847: 113) and Rijksbaron (2002: 38) were less outspoken: *In many cases the plu-*

tween aorist and imperfect is described in terms of momentaneous and punctual versus durative (see already Buttmann 1810: 488–490), but it has never been worded as accurately as by Pott (1833: 57): *der griech. Aorist verhält sich zum Impf. (und Praes.) wie Punct zur Linie* (hence the description “punctual”). He was neither the first nor the last to observe this, however,⁷ and nowadays the difference between present and aorist stem is more described in terms of duration and completion or boundedness (as e.g. in Jacquinod 2017: 686, but see already Buttmann 1810: 488–490), or imperfective versus perfective (as e.g. in Van Emde Boas & Huitink 2010: 140–142 and Hettrich 2016:§1.1).⁸

In addition to the description or focus of the action (completed or not, perfective or not), it was noted in the 19th century already that the meaning of the root also played a role as well. This was the case in the analysis of forms such as ἔφην and ἔστην, which appear to have the same formation and meaning, with the latter being interpreted as an aorist and the former as an imperfect, while there are no morphological reasons why the reconstructed forms **(hie-)b^heh₂m* and **(hie-)steh₂m* should be considered as different formations,⁹ besides the fact that the former only has root presents in the oldest forms of the individual languages and the latter a reduplicated present and an entire paradigm.¹⁰ Especially in the case of ἔφην this classification as an

perfect serves to express a ‘past-in-the-past’, i.e.: the state expressed by the pluperfect is located before a state of affairs mentioned in the preceding context. — Already Krüger (1859: 92) noted that the perfect and pluperfect could be used as aorists and stated that the pluperfect did not have any specific meaning on its own.

⁷ Pott’s comparison of point to line was quoted, almost *verbatim*, in Aken (1861: 5, *Dauer – Vollendung – Punkt* and especially 15 *Der Aorist bezeichnet häufig den Punkt, auf den sich die Bed. (sc. Bedeutung) der ganzen Handlung concentriert, die ἀκμή, Spitze derselben*, 1865: 11), Mutzbauer (1893: 11) and Delbrück (1897: 230, quoting Mutzbauer), without mentioning Pott’s name however. See also Bornemann & Risch (1973: 214), also without mentioning Pott’s name.

⁸ The list of recent treatments of tense and aspect in Greek is obviously much longer.

⁹ They are written in the currently accepted reconstructions, not in the forms of the 19th century.

¹⁰ Buttmann (1839: 11–12) and later Curtius (1873: 181) had already noted that the meaning of forms such as ἔβην, ἔφην and ἔστην was aoristic, but that their classification depended on the present tense verb: ἔβην was considered an aorist in Greek, because **βῆμι* did not exist, but ἔφην was interpreted as an imperfect, because *φῆμι* did exist. For the fact that in the oldest times no formal distinction between aorist and