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2019

document version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Link to publication in VU Research Portal

citation for published version (APA)
Nijk, A. A. (2019). *Tense switching in Classical Greek: A cognitive approach*.

Tense switching in Classical Greek
A cognitive approach

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Grammar is at its most interesting when it behaves badly.

For many grammatical categories, it seems intuitively obvious that they encode a certain aspect of conceptual experience. For example, the linguistic opposition between the proximal and the distal seems, on a basic level, to correlate with a distinction between cognitive systems. In the spatial domain, the bipartite division in the demonstrative system between this and that (common to many languages) can be related to different domains within our field of vision: that of 'peripersonal space' (that which is within arm's reach) and that of 'extrapersonal space'. In the temporal domain, linguistic expressions of proximity (the adverb now, the present tense) have an experiential correlate in the 'perceptual moment', a fleeting present, that is neurologically distinct from our experience of the past and future (linguistically designated by then and different tenses).

In practice, however, grammatical categories do not neatly map onto experiential categories in this way. This thesis focuses on the paradoxical use of grammatical elements designating spatio-temporal proximity to designate entities that are actually distal – in particular, on the use of the present tense to designate past events. Trying to reconcile the cognitivist assumption that linguistic meaning consists in conceptual structure with the evident discrepancy between grammatical proximity and experiential proximity, I argue (in the wake of, especially, R.W. Langacker) that the use of the present instead of the preterite presupposes a special conceptual scenario in which the gap between the past and the present is bridged somehow.

The main innovation of this thesis lies in its dynamic approach that acknowledges the existence of distinct usages of the present tense to refer to the past. First, I make a crucial distinction between different ways in which the gap between the past and the present is bridged: one is through the speaker's fictive presence in the past (mental displacement), the other is through assuming the fictive presence of past events in the form of a representation. Moreover, I argue that there are different types of representation scenarios, each with its own peculiar linguistic characteristics and specific tendencies with respect to the use of the present tense to refer to the past. While the main focus is on Classical Greek, the first chapter is cross-linguistic in scope, and the arguments made throughout aim at general validity.

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