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Infinitives

You will be able to—

1. understand how infinitives work in English and Greek as verbal nouns;
2. recognize and write the infinitive forms in the present, first and second aorist, and perfect for the active, middle, and passive voices;
3. learn the many ways infinitives can be translated;
4. gain more practice in translating and working with Greek; and
5. master ten more high-frequency vocabulary words.

Introduction

Infinitives are indeclinable verbal nouns usually indicated in English by “to” + verb (e.g., He went inside to call a friend). A finite verb is one that is limited by a subject. In English, a nonfinite verb, or infinitive, is not limited by a particular subject.

In Greek an infinitive may take a subject, an object or be modified by some qualifier. For example, “He came to put the ball in the box” uses “the ball” as the object of the infinitive and “in the box,” which describes location, to modify the infinitive “to put.”

Functions

As a noun, an infinitive may function as the subject of a sentence (e.g., To swim in the summer is fun) or the object of a finite verb (e.g., He told him to come.) However, infinitives are not declined with case, gender or number like nouns. They are indeclinable.

Thus Summers notes that in Mark 9:26, ὥστε τοὺς πολλοὺς λέγειν ὅτι ἀπέθανεν is translated “so that many said that he was dead.” Note that “many” is an accusative plural, and yet it functions as the subject of the infinitive “to say” (*Essentials*, 157).

As a verb, the infinitive may take an object (e.g., I came not to destroy the law). It may substitute for the imperatival verb sometimes. In Greek an infinitive may go with a noun in the accusative that functions as its subject. It comes as either a present or aorist and takes voice but not person.

As David Black has said, it should be noted that the infinitives may “be rendered as participles or as indicative verbs” on occasion, although most often the English infinitive (to + verb) will work (*It’s Still Greek to Me*, 115). A Greek infinitive may also function adverbially by telling when (before, after, while) a verbal action took place, cause (because), purpose (in order that) or result (so that, with the result that).

Greek Infinitive Introduction

The Greek infinitive is found in the present, aorist, and perfect tenses. The infinitive's "tense" is determined by the stem from which it is built and from the context. In the infinitive, the ending indicates aspect and have little to do with actual tense (time). μή is used, instead of οὐ, to negate an infinitive as we have seen for the participles. οὐ is largely for the indicative and μή for everything else.

Tense Means Aspect of Action

A movement must be made away from seeing infinitives as related to time. The tense of the infinitive indicates aspect, or type, of action, rather than time. The present represents action in progress. The aorist indicates complete action that simply says something happened without indicating when. The perfect is used for state of being.

While learning infinitives, when the aspectual function of the infinitive is highlighted, translate present tense infinitives "to continue to x," Aorist tense "to x," and perfects "to have x+ed."

Present = to continue to call (this is clumsy, so we will just use "to call")

Aorist = to call

Perfect = to have called

Infinitive Forms

Active	Middle	Passive
Present Infinitive		
λύειν to loose	λύεσθαι to loose oneself	λύεσθαι to be loosed
First Aorist Infinitive		
λῦσαι to loose	λύσασθαι to loose oneself	λυθῆναι to be loosed
Perfect Infinitive		
λελυκέναι to have loosed	λελύσθαι to have loosed oneself	λελύσθαι to have been loosed
Second Aorist Infinitive, λείπω (to leave)		
λιπέειν to leave	λιπέσθαι to leave oneself	λειφθῆναι to be left
Present Infinitive of εἶμι		
εἶναι (to be)		

Translation Examples

ἀλλ' ὁ πέμψας με βαπτίζειν ἐν ὕδατι ἐκεῖνός μοι εἶπεν
But the one who sent me to baptize in [with] water, that one said to me (Jn. 1:33)

οὐ δύναται ἰδεῖν τὴν βασιλείαν τοῦ Θεοῦ.
He is not able to see the kingdom of God (Jn. 3:3).

διὰ τοῦτο οὖν μᾶλλον ἐζήτουν αὐτὸν οἱ Ἰουδαῖοι ἀποκτείνειν.
Therefore because of this the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him (Jn. 5:18).

Articular Infinitive

A Greek infinitive may also function adverbially by telling when (before, after, while) a verbal action took place, cause (because), purpose (in order that) or result (so that, with the result that). Greek expresses the adverbial function by using a preposition + an article + infinitive. This type of infinitive is called an “articular infinitive” because it takes a neuter article. The case of the article will match the infinitive’s function in the sentence. The articular infinitive may also be used as a noun or adjective complement. Wallace observes that only 291 of the 2291 uses of the infinitive have the article (Wallace, 264). Hence most infinitives are anarthrous.

Thus, in εἶχον πρὸ τοῦ τὸν κόσμον εἶναι παρὰ σοί, the infinitive εἶναι with the preposition specifies the time of the verb more closely (before). It is translated, “[The glory] I had with you before the world was” (Jn. 17:5; Wenham, *Elements*, 86).

Infinitives are frequently used with prepositions and the neuter article. In such cases, the prepositions take on rather clearly defined roles:

διὰ	+ article	+ infinitive	= because [causal usage]
εἰς	+ article	+ infinitive	= in order that/to [purpose or result]
ἐν	+ article	+ infinitive	= when, while [temporal, contemporaneous]
μετά	+ article	+ infinitive	= after [temporal, antecedent action]
πρίν	+ article	+ infinitive	= before [temporal, subsequent action]
πρό	+ article	+ infinitive	= before [temporal, subsequent action]
πρός	+ article	+ infinitive	= in order that [purpose or result]

While often the preposition with the infinitive indicates time, it also is used to indicate *purpose* (especially with εἰς and πρὸς). Purpose may also be expressed by an articular infinitive with the article in the genitive or even an infinitive just by itself. With ὥστε, it often refers to a *result* (Mounce, *Basics*, 298).

Complementary Infinitives

As in English, infinitives can be used to complete the idea of the verb (e.g., Zach began to run.) In Greek, several verbs are often followed by a complementary infinitive (Mounce, *Basics*, 296):

δεῖ	+ infinitive	= It is necessary + to run (inf.)
ἔξεστι(ν)	+ infinitive	= It is permitted + to stand (inf.)
δύναμαι	+ infinitive	= I am able + to come (inf.)
μέλλω	+ infinitive	= I am about + to write (inf.)

Infinitives for Indirect Discourse

Machen notes that the infinitive + an accusative is used to express indirect discourse (*New Testament Greek*, 139). ὅτι is also used to introduce indirect discourse (e.g. I told you to go to the store).

ἔλεγον οἱ ἄνθρωποι αὐτὸν εἶναι τὸν προφήτην.
The men were saying that he was the prophet.

ἠρώτων αὐτὸν μέναι παρ' αὐτοῖς.
asking him to remain with them (Jn. 4:40 vid. Wallace, *Beyond*, 604).

Chant: Infinitives (to loose)—get the rhythm down

εἶν	εσθαι		(Present)
εἶν	εσθαι	ἦναι	(2nd Aorist)
αι	ασθαι	ἦναι	(1st Aorist)
ναι	σθαι		(Perfect)

Vocabulary

αἰτέω	I ask (70)
αἰώνιος, -ον	eternal (71)
ἀποκτείνω	I kill (74)
κεφαλή, -ῆς, ἡ	head (75)
πίνω	I drink (73)
πλοῖον, -ου, τό	boat (68)
πῦρ, -ός, τό	fire (71)
τηρέω	I keep, guard (70)
ὔδωρ, -ατος, τό	water (76)
χαίρω	I rejoice (74)