

Imperfective Modalities in Classical Armenian: the Case of the *Irrealis*

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1 Introduction

Armenian is an Indo-European language, first documented in the 5th century CE, that until the end of the 19th century was thought to be part of the Iranian language family; this was conclusively disproved by HÜBSCHMANN (1875). Since then, the strong Iranian influence on Armenian—mainly from Parthian, to a lesser extent from Middle Persian (cf. e.g. BOLOGNESI (1960); MEILLET (1911–2); MEYER (fthc.a))—has been one important strand of research into its linguistic history.

Another important linguistic contact language is Greek. The translation of the New Testament is thought to be the earliest piece of Armenian literature, before original works appear in the mid-to-late 5th century CE. The biblical corpus has been taken as the basis of most grammatical and other linguistic treatises on Classical Armenian (e.g. STEMPEL 1983); this choice is unfortunate, esp. with regard to syntax, since both the Armenian NT and later translated texts of the so-called ‘Hellenising School’ (Arm. *Yunaban Drpoc*‘) imitate the Greek original in matters of word order, word composition, and syntax, at times even introducing new grammatical categories (e.g. gender; cf. MURADYAN 2012:91–2).

For this reason, more recent scholarship LAFONTAINE AND COULIE 1983; MEYER fthc.b; WEITENBERG 1993 has called for a change in methodology, effectively treating the NT corpus and other translated texts separately from those originally composed in Classical Armenian. In this way, external influences from Greek are more readily distinguishable through statistical analysis; Iranian influence is far more pervasive, and much more difficult to investigate in all but lexical and phraseological matters.

In what follows, the modal use of the Armenian imperfect is considered in two small corpora: the Gospels on the one hand, and works of early Armenian historiography (Agat‘angelos, Koriwn, P‘awstos Buzandac‘i, Łazar P‘arpec‘i, Ehišē) on the other. On this basis, the veracity of the grammatical tenets presented in JENSEN (1959) will be re-evaluated and potential external influences determined.

2 Use of the Imperfect

Broadly speaking, Classical Armenian distinguishes its past tenses, aorist and imperfect, along aspectual lines: the imperfect expresses actions with an emphasis on continuity (1) or iteration (2), whereas

the aorist is used for punctual actions without interest in the process of the action.¹

- (1) *ayl t'agawor=n Valēs nelēr z=k'ristoneic'*
 but king.NOM.SG=DET PN oppress.3.SG.IPFV OBJ=Christian.GEN.PL
žolovurd=n [...] ew et xraman t'agawor=n Valēs
 community.ACC.SG=DET and give.3.SG.AOR order.ACC.SG king.NOM.SG=DET PN
 'But Emperor Valens kept oppressing the Christian community [...] and Emperor Valens gave an order.' (P'awstos Buzandac'i IV.9)
- (2) *gayin hanapaz, patuirein nma, ew urax linein*
 come.3.PL.IPFV constantly order.3.PL.IPFV 3.DAT.SG and happy be.3.PL.IPFV
 'They constantly came, gave him orders and were happy.' (Ezник 244)

The imperfect is furthermore used in conditional clauses introduced by the conjunction (*e*)*t'ē*.² Next to counterfactual conditionals, which are treated in detail below, the imperfect also occurs in cases of the historical *realis*, presumably in its iterative sense.

- (3) *isk yet mahu=n k'ahanayapeti=n t'ē arnēr ok' hangist*
 but after death.GEN.SG=DET chief_priest.GEN.SG=DET if do.3.SG.IPFV INDF solace.ACC.SG
alk'atac'=n mec patižs krēr i t'agaworē=n
 poor.DAT.PL=DET great punishment.ACC.PL bear.3.SG.IPFV from king.ABL.SG=DET
 'But after the death of the chief priest, if (=whenever) anyone gave solace to the poor, he received a severe punishment from the king.' (P'awstos Buzandac'i V.31)

3 The *Irrealis* in the New Testament

The standard grammatical entry for counterfactual conditional clauses (JENSEN 1959:§583γ) reads as follows:

Im Nebensatz Indikativ eines Vergangenheitstempus, im Hauptsatz desgleichen. Durch diese Konstruktion werden irreale Bedingungsverhältnisse ausgedrückt. [...] Zum Ausdruck der Irrealität der Gegenwart dient das Imperfectum sowohl im Nebensatz wie im Hauptsatz. [...] Die Irrealität der Vergangenheit kann durch das [...] Plusquamperfectum [...] ausgedrückt werden, das entweder in der Protasis oder in der Apodosis auftritt, während im anderen Gliede ein gewöhnliches Vergangenheitstempus genügt. [...] Doch genügt in diesem Falle bisweilen die [Gegenwarts-]Konstruktion

The examples below illustrate present *irrealis* (4), past *irrealis* (5), and a mixed past-present *irrealis* (6).

- (4) *sa t'ē margarē ok' ēr, apa gitēr t'ē ov kam*
 3.NOM.SG if prophēt.NOM.SG INDF be.3.SG.IPFV then know.3.SG.IPFV COMP who or
orpisi ok' kin merjenay i sa
 what_kind INDF woman.NOM.SG approach.3.SG.PRS to 3.ACC.SG
 'If he were really a prophet, he would know who and what kind of woman approaches him.'
 (Lk. 7:39)

¹Next to the present and aorist system, there is also a periphrastic perfect and pluperfect tense, consisting of a participle in *-eal* and an optional copula; their usage is rather complex and ranges from notions of concomitance to resultative states.

²The conjunction (*e*)*t'ē* fulfils numerous syntactic roles: it serves as COMP, introduces direct and indirect questions (including Wh-questions), marks the protasis of conditional clauses, etc. For a fuller discussion of its functions, cf. JENSEN (1931).

- (5) *tēr* *et'ē ast lieal ēir,* *elbayr=n* *im*
 lord.NOM.SG if here be.PTCP be.2.SG.IPFV brother.NOM.SG=DET 1.POSS.NOM.SG
č'ēr *mereal*
 NEG=be.3.SG.IPFV die.PTCP

‘Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.’ (Jn. 11:21)

- (6) *et'ē sirēik'* *z=is,* *apa urax lieal ēr* *jez*
 if love.2.PL.IPFV OBJ=1.ACC.SG then happy be.PTCP be.3.SG.IPFV 2.DAT.PL

‘If you loved me, you would have rejoiced (lit. it would have been happy for you).’ (Jn. 14:28)

In all surveyed instances, the Armenian Gospel translation follows the Greek original in its usage of tense.³ A minor problem arises owing to another class of conditional clauses, as represented by (7) below.

- (7) *ew asēk* *et'ē ēak'* *y=awurs* *harc'=n* *meroc',* *oč'*
 CONJ say.2.PL.PRS if be.1.PL.IPFV in=day.LOC.PL father.GEN.PL=DET 1.POSS.GEN.PL NEG
 καὶ λέγετε εἰ ἦμεθα ἐν ταῖς ἡμέραις τῶν πατέρων ἡμῶν οὐκ
halordēak' *arean* *margarēic'=n*
 shed.1.PL.IPFV blood.GEN.SG prophet.GEN.PL=DET

ἂν ἦμεθα αὐτῶν κοινωνοὶ ἐν τῷ αἵματι τῶν προφητῶν

‘And you said: “If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have shed the blood of the prophets.”’ (Mt. 23:30)

In (7), both the Greek original and the Armenian translation employ the imperfect in both protasis and apodosis. Yet, from context it is evident that the passage requires a past *irrealis* reading. An explanation is found in the fact that Greek cannot form an aorist of the verb εἶμι ‘to be’, and thus uses the imperfect form for both *irrealis* construction. Armenian followed suit in providing a strict translation *verbum pro verbo* instead of making use of its morphosyntactic advantage by rendering ἦμεθα as, e.g., *lieal ēak'*.⁴ Accordingly, (7) is one of those instances referred to by JENSEN above, in which the present *irrealis* construction ‘suffices’ to express the past.

Apart from conditional clauses *sensu stricto*, the imperfect also occurs in its *irrealis* function in unfulfillable wishes.

- (8) *et'ē gitēir* *du* *gonē y=awurs* *y=aysmik* *z=xalatut'īwn=n*
 if know.2.SG.IPFV 2.NOM.SG only in=day.LOC.PL in=such OBJ=peace.ACC.SG=DET
k'o
 2.POSS.NOM.SG

‘If only you knew of the peace open to you (lit. your peace) in these days.’ (Lk. 19:42)

Table 1 below summarises the distribution of conditional clauses across the Gospels, illustrating that (with the exception discussed above) they do indeed conform to JENSEN’s precepts.

Since the examples from the NT have yielded no unexpected findings, a closer investigation of similar structures in non-translated texts is in order. As opposed to the above, any ‘aberrant’ behaviour there cannot be attributed to adherence to a Greek *Vorlage*, but must be due to other factors.⁵

³Greek uses the imperfect for the present *irrealis* and the aorist for past past *irrealis*; in addition, the apodoses of counterfactual conditionals are marked as such by the modal particle ἄν, which has no counterpart in Armenian.

⁴Note, however, that in other instances like (5) above, Armenian has rendered the passage *ad sensum*.

⁵Influence from Iranian in this matter can be excluded, since Parthian and Middle Persian differentiate *realis* and *irrealis* by using indicative and optative, respectively (DURKIN-MEISTERERNST 2014).

	as expected	not as expected
present <i>irrealis</i>	15	0
past <i>irrealis</i>	3	1
mixed <i>irrealis</i>	9	0
other (wishes, etc.)	2	0

Table 1: Occurrences of *irrealis* conditionals in the Gospels

4 The *Irrealis* in Original Texts

The *irrealis* conditional clauses occurring in the original texts initially do not paint a radically different picture. Here, too, many instances adhere to the rules stated above; these are illustrated, in the same order as above, by (9–10).

- (9) *bayc' t'ē gitēi t'ē y=aysm hetē kayc'ē*
 but if know.1.SG.IPFV COMP from=DEM.ABL.SG after remain.3.SG.SBJV.PRS
y=uxtin imum [...] arjakēi z=na xalalut'eamb
 in=covenant.LOC.SG 1.POSS.LOC.SG send.1.SG.IPFV OBJ=3.ACC.SG peace.INS.SG
y=iwr ašxarh=n
 in=3.POSS.ACC.SG realm.ACC.SG=DET
 'But if I knew whether he would keep his covenant with me hereafter [...] I would send him in peace to his own realm.' (P'awstos Buzandac'i IV.54)
- (10) *zi et'ē kac'eal ēak' i patuirani=d k'um,*
 for if remain.PTCP be.1.PL.IPFV in commandment.LOC.SG=DET 2.POSS.LOC.SG
tēr, [...] šnorheal linēr k'o mez z=keans
 lord.NOM.SG grant.PTCP be.3.SG.IPFV 2.GEN.SG 1.DAT.PL OBJ=life.ACC.PL
anc'aws
 painless.ACC.PL
 'For if we had observed your commandment, Lord, [...] you would have granted us life without pain' (Agat'angelos §76)
- (11) *zi t'ē mardoy p'rkeal ēr z=jez i carayut'enē [...]*
 for if man.GEN.SG save.PTCP be.3.SG.IPFV OBJ=2.ACC.PL from servitude.ABL.SG
i mec barkut'iwn brdēik' z=arajin tēr=n jer
 into great anger.ACC.SG provoke.2.PL.IPFV OBJ=first master.ACC.SG=DET 2.GEN.PL
 'For if a man had saved you from servitude [...] you would provoke your first master to great anger.' (Elišē III, p.56)

Like in the Gospels, the original texts also use the imperfect to express unfulfillable wishes.

- (12) *zi law ēr inj mah*
 how good be.3.sg.ipfv 1.dat.sg death.nom.sg
 'How sweet would death be for me!' (P'awstos Buzandac'i VI.9)

So far, so unspectacular. It becomes more interesting, however, when considering examples in which said rules do not apply. Below are some examples of *irrealis* clauses with an 'unexpected' aorist (13) and perfect (14).

- (13) *uraxut'awn patrastec'er, et'ē kac'eal ēak' i patuiranin*
 happiness.ACC.SG prepare.3.SG.AOR if remain.PTCP be.1.PL.IPFV in covenant.LOC.SG
 'He would have granted [us] happiness, if we had observed the covenant [with him].'
 (Agat'angelos §75; expect PLPF for AOR, cp. (10) above)
- (14) *t'ē jer srti mtōk' ē tueal z=erdumn, ziard*
 if 2.GEN.PL heart.GEN.SG mind.INS.PL be.3.SG.PRS give.PTCP OBJ=oath.ACC.SG how?
karēr [...] p'axč'el
 be_possible.3.SG.IPFV flee.INF
 'If you had given the oath wholeheartedly, how was it possible to flee?'
 (P'awstos Buzandac'i IV.16; expect PLPF for PRF)

While there are only very few instances like (13, 14) above, in which completely 'extraneous' tenses occur, another unexpected pattern consists of the imperfect being used in both protasis and apodosis in *irrealis* conditionals that judged by context must be past, and where accordingly pluperfects would be expected.

- (15) *zi et'ē oč' bacaw ač'awk' tesanēin z=yoyś=n xndalic' ew oč'*
 for if NEG open.INS eye.INS.PL see.3.PL.IPFV OBJ=hope.ACC.SG=DET joyous and NEG
karēin isk gorcel z=aynpisi mec arak'inut'awn
 be_able.3.PL.IPFV do.INF OBJ=such great virtue.ACC.SG
 'If they had not seen with open eyes the joyous hope, they would not have been able to do such great good deeds.' (Elišē VI, p. 125; expect PLPF)

As the data in Table 2 below illustrates, occurrences of this kind, and such where the apodosis of a past *irrealis* is expressed by an imperfect, are not infrequent.

	as expected	unexpected apodosis	unexpected protasis	both clauses unexpected
present <i>irrealis</i>	19	0	0	0
past <i>irrealis</i>	1	15	0	6
mixed <i>irrealis</i>	7	1	1	0
other (wishes, etc.)	6	0	0	–

Table 2: Occurrences of *irrealis* conditionals in original texts

The data suggests that the construction portrayed by JENSEN as the norm for the past *irrealis* is overall less common. Example (16) illustrates the more frequent patterns with an imperfect in the apodosis.

- (16) *et'ē ēak' kac'eal miabank' [...] canuc'anēak' ekeloc'=n i*
 if be.1.PL.IPFV remain.PTCP united.NOM.PL show.1.PL.IPFV arriver.DAT.PL=DET on
veray mer t'ē
 above 1.GEN.PL COMP
 'If we had remained united [...], we would have shown to those coming on top of us, that ...'
 (Łazar P'arpec'i III.32)

5 Preliminary Conclusions

It is evident from its usage in counterfactual conditional clauses, unfulfillable wishes, and counterfactual comparisons that the Classical Armenian imperfect has a distinctly modal function as the *irrealis* next to its declarative *realis* use. In a sense, it refers not only to incomplete, but also incompletable actions.

JENSEN's evaluation of the usage of imperfect and pluperfect in counterfactual conditional clauses, however, cannot stand as is: there is a clear difference between tense usage in the NT and the original texts. The Gospels, as listed above, follow a more rigid pattern, likely inspired by Greek usage.

The statistical dominance of past counterfactuals with pluperfect protasis and imperfect apodosis could be due to a number of reasons:

- choice of tense is based on the aspect of the action concerned, irrespective of tense relations (cf. 15 above)
- the tense of the protasis indicates tense relations, while the apodosis reflects relation to reality (but then what about 15: generalising?)
- the pluperfect is viewed as part of the imperfective system (since it is periphrastic); this would require a complete restructuring of the Armenian verbal system

Further inquiry into these and other texts will have to provide further evidence in order to gain deeper insight into this question. At present time, an aspectual interpretation of the data may be most sensible, even though it makes relating hypothetical actions and narrative tense a matter of context.

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