The syntax and semantics of the Latin perfect

Latin verbs are typically marked for tense (present, past, future), voice (active and passive)\(^1\) and mood (indicative, subjunctive etc.). In addition to this there are two stems, the *infectum* and the *perfectum*.\(^2\) The *perfectum* is held to be the product of the merging of the inherited perfect and aorist stems (Clackson and Horrocks 2007, 20). Thus inherited perfect stems showing reduplication, e.g. *pepigi*, from *pango* ‘fix’, sit side by side in the same paradigm with inherited aorist stems in -s-, e.g. *dixi*, from *dico* ‘say’. Furthermore, from behaviour of the sequence of tenses, it is clear that the present perfect was regarded both as a primary, i.e. non-past, and a secondary, i.e. past, tense form. By the time of our earliest Latin texts, the merging of the former perfect and aorist paradigms is complete, although the presence of parallel forms (e.g. *pepigi* besides *panxi*, and *feci*, from *facto* ‘make’, beside reduplicated *vhevaked* from Praeneste, CIL I\(^1\) 3, where \(vh = f\)) suggests that this has taken place not long before the language’s first attestation (Clackson and Horrocks 2007, 20).

The general scheme, in the indicative, is given in the following table:

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Active</th>
<th>Passive</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Infectum</td>
<td>Perfectum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present</td>
<td>am-o</td>
<td>ama-v-i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Past</td>
<td>ama-bam</td>
<td>ama-v-eram</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future</td>
<td>ama-bo</td>
<td>ama-v-ero</td>
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</tbody>
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However, it is not a *priori* clear how accurately to describe the distinction between the two stems *infectum* and *perfectum*. The issue relates to the relationship of the perfect with both aspect and voice.

In terms of aspect, the problem is that, while the *infectum* is very often used to describe imperfective aspect,\(^3\) the *perfectum*, insofar as it encodes anteriority as often as it encodes perfectivity, is less clearly defined. To what extent may the distinction be put down simply to that between imperfective and perfective? Traditional grammars identify two functions for the morphological unity termed the ‘perfect’ in Latin: thus Allen & Greenough (1887, 198) distinguish the Perfect *definite*, and the Perfect *historical*. The former is equivalent to an anterior meaning, describing a situation holding at reference time as the result of a prior event, while according to them the latter describes an event ‘having taken place indefinitely in past time’, i.e. a simple past or perfective.\(^4\) Yet the behaviour of the *perfectum* is on many occasions closer to that of a perfective. Thus in Old Latin texts the *infectum ~ perfectum* alternation in the future often carries the aspecual perfective ~ imperfective distinction.\(^5\) This usage is preserved in Classical Latin, although more commonly the future perfect is found denoting anteriority.\(^6\) Furthermore, certain verbs in the perfect and pluperfect describe the state of the subject at reference time without necessarily referring back to a prior event.\(^7\) This is true not only of defective verbs, that is verbs without a present stem, such as *odi* ‘hate’ and *memini* ‘remember’, but also of a number of change of state or location verbs with full paradigms, such as *(co-g)nosco* ‘know’, *venio* ‘come’, *consuesco* ‘accustom (oneself)’, *obsolesco* ‘wear out, become obsolete’.

In terms of voice, the issue is that while the *infectum* has a synthetic passive, the *perfectum* has an analytic passive. This is the case in the *perfectum* even where the underlying verb has ‘active’ semantics, although carrying passive morphology, i.e. in the case of so-called ‘deponents’, e.g. *sequor* ‘follow’, *aggrelier* ‘attack’,

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1. The inherited perfect stem had no voice distinction. As the perfect was integrated into the rest of the verb system, an analytic form was developed for it, consisting of a finite form of *esse* ‘be’ and a participle in -*tu* (inherited *-*to-).
2. For the earlier history of the Latin perfect, and implications for the Italic hypothesis see Meiser (2003), as well as Clackson’s critique (Clackson 2005).
3. Excepting, of course, the historic present.
4. Allen and Greenough (1887, 198). The distinction between the two senses of the perfect is underlined in Latin syntax by the different temporal sequence of dependent clauses according to the sense of the perfect which is in play (Clackson and Horrocks 2007, 20).
blandior ‘flatter’. Should the semantics of the perfect be derived in the same way both for verbs with a full paradigm and for deponents, despite the two morphological forms? For authors who argue, working in a generative framework, that deponent verbs are marked for a conjugational class feature [Passive] which is responsible for their lack of active paradigm independently of their semantics, the conclusion can be drawn that both analytic and synthetic forms derive from the same underlying syntactic structure. However, this view potentially overlooks semantic features which are shared by members of the group of deponents, notably the fact that the subject is often a beneficiary or an experiencer, and that the object (if present) is not physically affected.

Adopting the framework from Bybee et al. (1994, 68ff.), I will show that the Classical Latin perfect encompasses both anterior and perfective semantics, and that the situation as it presents itself in Classical Latin can be explained by assuming a development path similar to that of resultative to anterior to perfective that Bybee et al. describe. I proceed on the basis that the ‘passive’ forms are semantically medio-passive. This is to say that these forms are employed not only to describe the state of patient direct internal arguments, but also internal cause arguments which, though they play some role in bringing about the event described by the verb, nevertheless themselves undergo change by virtue of the action of the verb. Although there are not insignificant obstacles to understanding Latin deponents under a middle framework (Baldi 1976), and notwithstanding a certain degree of fossilisation, I argue that the difficulties may not be as severe as first supposed if the middle semantic in Latin is not defined in terms of strict reflexivity, per Baldi, but rather in terms of internal causation. I propose a development trajectory along the following lines. At an earlier stage of the language where the perfect describes a result state or situation of the subject, the active form would have been used to describe the result situation of the external argument, while the analytic form in -tus- would have been used to describe that of the direct internal argument or internal cause. Subsequently, when the perfect in general expanded to encompass the anterior and perfective, the analytic form, on account of its paradigmatic relationship with the active, expanded in the same direction, thereby accounting for the past perfective usage of middle and deponent perfects in the Classical language.

References

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9 Embick (2000, 225).
10 Clackson and Horrocks (2007, 225).
12 For the productive middle voice in Latin, see Baldi (1976).
13 For internal and external causation see Levin and Rappaport Hovav (1995).