

Suzanne Fagel MA, Leiden University  
Department of Dutch Language and Culture  
P.O. Box 9515, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands  
[s.v.fagel@hum.leidenuniv.nl](mailto:s.v.fagel@hum.leidenuniv.nl)  
[www.stylistics.leidenuniv.nl](http://www.stylistics.leidenuniv.nl)

## The Stylistic Creation of an Antihero

Tense and Aspect in Arnon Grunberg's *The Asylum Seeker*

### Introduction

Main characters in modern novels are more often adequately characterized as 'antiheroes' than as 'heroes'. Sometimes they are plain psychopaths, like Brett Easton Ellis' Patrick Bateman in *American Psycho*. Sometimes it is their inaction or indecision that drives the reader crazy, like Proust's Swann or Joyce's Leopold Bloom. But the *actions* of a character or the otherwise horrific *content* of a story are not the only reasons for the reader to dislike a main character. The *style* of a text can also play an important role in the creation of an antihero.

How does a style create an antihero? I will present the novel *De Asielzoeker (The Asylum Seeker)* by the successful modern Dutch novelist Arnon Grunberg as a case study. I will show how Grunberg's stylistic use of tense and aspect contribute to the feeling of distance and disgust readers experience when they read about the thoughts and actions of the main character Christian Beck, who can unmistakably be classified as an antihero. Beck is an overly formal man, who has given up on his own happiness, and whose sole principle in life now is to make his wife happy. A task in which he fails miserably. I will show how this stylistic use of aspect (on the microlevel) contributes to the theme and interpretation of the novel (macrolevel) and to the effect the text has on the reader.

*The asylum seeker* is narrated mainly in the present tense. I will argue that Grunberg uses the present tense in an exceptional way. In my analysis, I will use linguistic theory on aspect (Boogaart and Janssen 2007) and on the function of the present tense (Clement 1991, Fleischman 1990), to analyze Grunberg's specific use of aspect and to explain the distancing effect on the reader. In *The Asylum Seeker*, tense and aspect are not just used to situate the narrative events on a timeline (tense: past, present and future) or indicate the nature of the actions (aspect: ongoing or terminative), which is more standard practice in narrative (Fleischman 1990). Usually, the present tense is used to express action in the here-and-now. However, in *The asylum seeker* there is very little action. This is caused by the linguistic way situations and events are presented in the novel. Using linguistic theory on lexical aspect, I will show how Grunberg's use of the present tense create an effect of time standing still and distance.

I will furthermore show that this effect is not only caused by present tense and aspect, it is a combination of different linguistic means including verb use, use of nouns, and use of adverbs. These stylistic features all add to the effect of generality in the story. And thirdly and finally, I will show that this use of aspect, the present tense, and other linguistic characteristics contribute to the thematic interpretation of the novel.

## **A very formal man**

*The asylum seeker* was published in 2003, and it tells the story of Christian Beck, a former novelist who is now a translator of user manuals, and his girlfriend Vogel, who live together in an apartment in Göttingen, Germany. In the beginning of the novel, Vogel discovers she is terminally ill. She wants to do something good in the little time she has left, and she announces that she wants to marry an asylum seeker from Algeria, so he can get a residence permit. Beck agrees to her wish.

Christian Beck is the main character of this novel. He leads an inconspicuous life. He has put a stop to his own emotions and desires and his sole purpose in life is to make his girlfriend happy. In theory this is a very laudable goal, but unfortunately, what Beck thinks is good for himself or his girlfriend does not turn out to be good in real life. His decision to suppress his own emotions has made him into a very formal man, bordering on the verge of insanity. He himself does not realize this, he thinks he is doing what is best for everyone.

Beck idolizes his girlfriend. He calls her his wife although they never married. Actually, we never get to know her real name, she is called 'his wife' or with her nickname 'Vogel', which means 'Bird'. But although Beck feels a close connection to his wife, he never makes love to her. He idolizes her too much. His rigid way of living and his decision to ban all emotions out of his life, because they only lead to misery, have estranged her from him. But they still stay together and in a strange way care for each other. Because Beck does not touch her any more, his wife has taken up the habit of caring for people who don't have much and who are miserable. She gives away old clothing, she works at an asylum center. And she also takes home 'men who have nothing in the world' (poor, handicapped or ugly men) and sleeps with them. The asylum seeker she marries to give him a permit, is one of these men. Beck's wife marries him, she takes him home and Beck retires to his usual place under the hatstand, where he always sleeps when his wife brings home men.

The story is told by a third person narrator, and the main focaliser is Christian Beck. We only get access to Beck's thoughts and his view on the world. The narrator hardly ever corrects Beck's view on things and almost never voices his own opinion. *The asylum seeker* is written in the present tense, but there is something special going on in Grunberg's use of the present tense. This becomes evident when we look at a quotation from the novel.

1. 'Beck looks at the napkin with the Christmas tree decoration on his lap. He understands that it is not easy for the men of his wife. She does not belie him, like he belied her, she always says: 'This is my husband.' Or words of similar import. And when the men of his wife have to go to the lavatory, they have to pass by the hallstand, and beneath the hallstand they see him, the man of whom they would perhaps wish that he was not there. Like a warning he lies there. He has thought about entering a convent, but it was not necessary. He carries his convent along with him.'

## **The historical present**

That there is something special about the present tense in *The Asylum Seeker*, becomes clear when example 1. is compared to other texts where the present tense is used, like 2. and 3.

2. “Yesterday, I was walking in the park when suddenly this man *comes* up to me and *says...*”
  
3. ‘Staring in the dark for half an hour, useless staring at the road in the direction from which he will be coming. When I look at my wrist watch, my eyes are hurting me again. [...] Behind me, where the bushes are lower and thinner, Bennie is moving. He must be bored as well, all this useless waiting. I move around on my hands and feet. The ground is unusually slick because of the rain. I press my rifle firmly to my side.’ (Hugo Claus – *De Metsiers*)

Examples 2. and 3. present two instances of the way the present tense is usually used in narrative texts. The present tense can for instance be found in anecdotes like 2. Using the present tense underlines the suddenness of the experience: ‘suddenly this man comes up to me’. It also expresses directness: the narrator is reliving the experience and at the other end of the communicative line the hearer or reader gets a very lively and direct account, almost as if he were there. This stylistic feature where events that took place in the past are recounted in the present tense is called the ‘historical present’.

The same directness and liveliness can be found in literary novels which are narrated in the present tense. Example 3. contains the opening lines of the novel *De Metsiers* by the Flemish author Hugo Claus, a story entirely told in the present tense. You experience the events as they unroll, as if you were there, lying in the grass next to this man who is carrying a gun and waiting for someone.

So in general the effects of the historical present in narrative, whether it is used in a small paragraph or in an entire novel, can be summarized as follows:

- Suddenness
- Liveliness
- Immediacy
- Suspense
- Readerly involvement

### **Unusual use of the present tense**

When we look at example 1., we can notice some differences in the way the story is presented compared to the regular use of the historical present/present tense (examples 2. and 3.). First of all, it is a *third person* narrative instead of a first person account, which already creates a distance: there is a narrator who possesses an overview, although he almost always focalizes the main character Beck. Usually, the present tense is used in combination with a *first person* narrator (Clement 1991). The combination of present tense and first person narration strengthens the effect of liveliness and direct experience: it can for instance be used in the description of the recollection of a very lively past memory. The combination of present tense and third person narration can be considered ‘rare’. The third person has a distancing effect, and therefore combines more naturally with *past tense* narration, in which someone who possesses an overview of the situation recounts the events that have taken place.

Secondly, when we look at the events that are described in example 1 (requoted below for convenience), there are not many events that take place in the story-now. The two italicized verbs denote 'action verbs' in the story-present. Most of the paragraph deals with what is generally ('always') the case when his wife brings home a guest. These sentences provide the background against which the events in the foreground of the story take place.

1. 'Beck *looks* at the napkin with the Christmas tree decoration on his lap. He *understands* that it is not easy for the men of his wife. She does not belie him, like he belied her, she always says: 'This is my husband.' Or words of similar import. And when the men of his wife have to go to the lavatory, they have to pass by the hallstand, and beneath the hallstand they see him, the man of whom they would perhaps wish that he was not there. Like a warning he lies there. He has thought about entering a convent, but it was not necessary. He carries his convent along with him.'

Thirdly, although this paragraph is situated shortly after a description of the asylum seeker passing the hall stand on his way to the lavatory, it does not deal with just this singular event, it gives a description in plural, it tells what *all* 'the men of his wife' do. The plural noun 'men' and the adverb 'always' contribute to the generality of the situation. Fourthly, in the sentence 'Like a warning he lies there' we can see that the present tense is not just used to describe a situation in the here-and-now: it is used in a general sense. And fifthly and lastly, the paragraph ends with a kind of general statement or aphorism: 'He carries his convent along with him'. This does not just happen in this paragraph, but the same mode of general description and use of aphorisms to conclude a paragraph, occurs over and over again in the novel.

These stylistic features give the novel an air of generality, and the prominence of background information entails that there is little narrative progression in the novel. Time almost comes to a standstill. In *The Asylum Seeker*, the present tense does *not* create an effect of liveliness, immediacy or involvement, 'experiencing the events as they unroll'. How is it possible that the same present tense that creates immediacy and involvement in one novel, can be used to create a distancing effect in another novel? The flexibility of the present tense and the working of 'lexical aspect' are the main reasons for this phenomenon, and we will look into these factors of aspect and present tense more closely in the following paragraphs.

### **Present tense and lexical aspect**

The present tense can be used to describe events in the here and now, but it can also be used for other types of presentations of events. This is because the present tense does not entail the meaning [+now], it rather signifies the absence of any marking for time (Fleischman 1990). The present tense can be used to describe events in the following four categories:

- a. An event in the here-and-now
- b. An event that lasts up to now
- c. A habit / regular occurrence
- d. A general statement / rule / aphorism (E-ANS 30.1)

Category 3 and 4 are predominantly present in *The asylum seeker*. Furthermore, these categories present static situations instead of actions and events. The linguistic category of aspect is what causes the difference between actions/events on the one side and states on the

other side. As we saw in example 1., there are relatively little events in the here and now; most sentences deal with background information: they give stative information about Beck, his habits and his opinions. Lexical aspect is a property of clauses, not only of verbs. The use of an active verb does not necessarily mean that the sentence denotes an activity or event. Adverbs and nouns also contribute to the creation of aspect, as can be seen in the following examples (4-8).

4. Bob ate.
5. Bob ate a sandwich.
6. Bob ate a sandwich everyday.
7. Lots of people eat sandwiches.
8. Bob always eats a sandwich.

Sentences 4-8 vary (among other things) on the scales of telicity (telic/atelic). (4) is atelic, but addition of 'a sandwich' turns (5) into a telic sentence. (6) on the other hand, is atelic again, because of the repetitive character of the action, created by the addition of the adverb 'everyday'. (5) is an event and a telic activity, but (7) and (8) are states because of the general (atelic) nature of the subject (7) and adverb (8). Arnon Grunberg regularly turns activities into states by using general nouns and general temporal adverbs. He does not write 'His wife says', but he writes: 'His wife *always* says...'. And he does not talk about singular events ('The asylum seeker has to pass him on his way to the lavatory'), but describes them in plural ('The men of his wife have to pass him on their way to the lavatory').

### Action verbs

As for Grunberg's verb use, even the verbs that *do* denote actions or events in the here and now, score low on the scale of activity. There is a lack of intentional action on the part of Beck. In the first chapters, we encounter activities like 'Beck awakens', 'He sees the frightened face of his wife' and 'He understands that it is not easy for the men of his wife.' The inactivity and generality of Beck's verbs becomes especially clear when his verbs are compared to those of other novelists. In my PhD-thesis, I compare *The Asylum Seeker* with a novel by the Dutch writer Renate Dorrestein. It shows that her stories contain a lot more 'verbs of action' than Grunberg. In *The Asylum Seeker* not only individual sentences, but entire paragraphs give background information (about Beck's work as a translator, about the past activities of his wife, about Beck's opinions and beliefs etc.). There is little narrative progression of the story in the present. The examples 9-11 are representative for Grunberg's style.

9. There **is** a residue of night cream sticking to her nostril, *like so often at this time of the day.*
10. Beck **looks** at the face of his wife, her dark eyebrows, her skin – *he is a man who loves skin, the spots, the little lumps, the flakes, the unwanted hairs, but also the softness, the warmth, the sweat, the pores that open in the heat.*
11. He **smells** his wife, he **smells** her deodorant, that has a predominant smell, *on hot days that smell is almost too much for him, but he never says a word. It is useless to express everything that is on your mind [...].*

The words in bold denote active verbs, in the present; the italicized past denote background information. What becomes clear from these examples, is that even though sentences start active, they still end backgrounded, stative and general. And if we look closely at the active verbs in bold, *Looking* and *smelling* and *being* aren't very active verb categories either. Verbs

of perception, communication and existential or relational verbs (*to have* and *to be*) are used more frequently than verbs of material action and verbs that denote active, intentional behavior. The combined use of these different stylistic means that express 'generality' can also be seen in example 12. This example presents some events that take place when the health of Beck's girlfriend is deteriorating:

12. The hospital sends a wheelchair, because walking is becoming more and more difficult for her. The delivery man asks how long they intend to use the wheelchair. Beck buys tubes of liquid soap, which the bird loves, and facial masks in large quantities, especially the blue ones. The fight against death is being fought out on the level of the facial mask, because all other levels have failed.

There is no mention of the exact time these events take place; the sending of the wheelchair is not situated in a clear moment in time. The plurals and the absence of definite articles in 'tubes' and facial masks' also contribute to disengaging these sentences from an exact moment in time. All of the above examples have a similar effect. In terms of linguistic aspect, they denote imperfective states instead of activities. The verbs are stative, and the descriptions are at a general level.

### **A combination of stylistic means**

The effect of time standing still and the generality of *The Asylum Seeker* are caused by a combination of stylistic means, including verb use and aspect, but also a collection of other linguistic characteristics:

- Verb use: a lack of action
  - A lot of referential and existential verbs (to be, to have)
  - A lot of verbs of communication or mental processes
  - Relatively little verbs of action
- Aspect: a lot of background information, atelic aspect: states instead of activities.
- Adverbs of time create a repetitive effect: 'Always', 'often', 'in general'.
- The use of rules, aphorisms, general statements: 'Normally they don't use napkins, but since they now have a guest, Beck decides, paper napkins are appropriate.'
- The use of plural nouns: 'the men of his wife', 'containers of facial cream', 'strawberries'.
- General nouns / function names instead of personal names: 'the bird', 'the office', 'the disease' (which is not named), 'the asylum seeker', 'colleagues', 'thesis on 'something with animals''.
- Use of 'One' or general-'you' in stead of a personal pronoun ('I').

### **Quantitative and qualitative methods**

Before I turn to the literary interpretation of the novel, I would like to briefly explain my method of analysis. My research interest is in the relation between stylistic means on the microlevel of the text and how these linguistic elements contribute to the interpretation of the story on the macro-level. I use linguistic theory to account for my literary and stylistic interpretations. For instance, in my analysis of tense and aspect in Grunbergs *The asylum*

*seeker*, I look at how present tense and aspect are usually used on the basis of already existing linguistic theory; by comparing *The asylum seeker* to linguistic theory and to other texts, differences and characteristics of Grunberg's use of aspect come to the fore.

Wherever possible, I use quantitative data to underscore my findings. But 'the use of the present tense' and especially 'aspect' turned out to be categories that are hard to quantify, because aspect is created not on word level, but on the sentence level. The creation of aspect is an intricate interplay of verbs, adverbs and nouns (cf. examples 4. to 8. above). Counting verb categories, the use of temporal adverbs and use of general nouns *separately* did not turn out to be a very fruitful approach. Neither did a more general analysis in terms of 'foregrounded' and 'backgrounded' sentences. I found that a qualitative approach was more helpful, and analyzed sentences, parts of sentences in qualitative terms: I used categories like states vs. activities, general statements / aphorisms, habitual activities, formal expressions, clichés, etc. I would welcome an additional study which can underline my findings with quantitative data. But in the light of my research project, which consists of stylistic analysis of a corpus of five novels, for me it is more important to focus on a broad spectrum of linguistic features and their effects in different texts, instead of developing a sound quantitative analysis of just one novel.

### **Conclusion: Literary effect**

In the final paragraph of this paper, I want to show how the stylistic mechanisms presented above tie in with the literary interpretation. The novel explicitly tells us that Beck has given up on his own desires and emotions. He has replaced feelings and desires with a very rigid system of rules. He wants to be insignificant, serving. He acts formal, his main goal is to be polite at all times. Beck is a real antihero, and the novel expresses Beck's outsider position several times, in quotations like 13.:

13. He clenched his fist, but since there was no one paying any attention to that fist he stopped doing it. That is also the reason why he has retreated from the world, he does not want to live in the middle of it anymore, only next to it. It is impossible to be happy and to live in the midst of the world.

Grunberg's use of tense and aspect ties in with the literary interpretation of the novel. In *The Asylum Seeker*, several linguistic elements contribute to the effect of timelessness, inactivity and distance in the novel:

- The use of the present tense
- The use of stative aspect
- Plural and non-specific nouns (wife, asylum seeker, colleagues)
- Stative verbs (to be, to have), few verbs of material action
- Temporal adverbs (often, always, never, usually)
- Rules, formalities, aphorisms, general statements

The effect of these stylistic means is that it underscores the fact that Beck is not participating in life any more. The linguistic factors give a stylistic expression of the main theme of the novel: the novel states that a man who has given up on all his own desires and emotions, and who wants to live on the sideline, is not a genuine living human character anymore. Beck is merely

watching from the sideline: he looks at his wife, he smells her deodorant, but he does little more than that: he reacts to his wife, but does not undertake any intentional actions by himself. Because of this inaction, the novel becomes an 'antinarrative' and Beck is truly an antihero. And as I have shown in this article, Arnon Grunberg's novel does not only express this in its *contents*, but also through the *style* of the text.

## References

- E-ANS: Elektronische versie van de 2e, herz. dr. van de *Algemene Nederlandse Spraakkunst* uit 1997. <http://www.let.ru.nl/ans/e-ans>.
- Boogaart, Ronny and Theo Janssen: 'Tense and aspect'. In: *The Oxford handbook of cognitive linguistics*. Ed. By D. Geeraerts and H. Cuyckens. Oxford, 2007, 803-828.
- Clement, Marja: 'Present – Preterite: Tense and Narrative Point of View'. In: *Linguistics in the Netherlands 1991*. Ed. F. Drijkoningen, A. van Kemenade. Amsterdam, 1991 (AVT 8), p. 11-20.
- Fleischman, Suzanne: *Tense and narrativity, From Medieval Performance to Modern Fiction*. London, 1990.
- Grunberg, Arnon: *De asielzoeker*. Amsterdam, 2003.