

Luke 1:29 — **διελογίζετο** ποταπὸς **εἶη** ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος — gives us an opportunity to review two points of grammar that you may not have given much thought to since Elementary Greek: the optative mood and indirect discourse.

We spent very little time with **the optative mood** in Elementary Greek, and Dr. Voelz’s opening comments on p 242 of chapter 38 provide some justification for that: “The function of the optative, extensive in classical Greek ..., was severely limited in Koine in general and in the New Testament in particular.” Moule, *An Idiom Book*, 23, writes: “As compared with the Subjunctive, [the Optative] might be said to be remoter, vaguer, less assured in tone; but inevitably the two domains overlap, and this may be the reason why the weaker Optative has receded.” Jannaris described it as a “secondary subjunctive,” and Robertson deemed it a “luxury of the language” (See Robertson, 935-936). In Hellenistic Greek, most of the classical uses of the optative were replaced either by the subjunctive or by the future indicative (a few even by the imperative). In Elementary Greek, we learned one independent use of the optative without ἄν, to express a **wish**:

εὔροι γυναῖκα.

“May he find a wife!”

and one independent use with ἄν, to express a **potentiality**:

εὔροι ἄν γυναῖκα.

“He might find a wife.” (Voelz, 244-245).

When we studied **indirect discourse**, we noted that Greek and English usage differ with respect to tense and mood when reporting rather than quoting speech. Recall what happens in English when the “main verb,” the “quotative frame” as some grammars refer to it, changes from present to a past tense (“He says that...” ⇒ “He said that...”). English usage requires that we “backshift” the tense in the reported speech one step in time: from “is” to “was” or from “was” to “had been.” Additional adjustments are often required with pronouns (e.g., “I” to “he/she,” “this” to “that” as the time becomes more remote) and time references, but we will focus on the verb here. Yule, *Explaining English Grammar*, 272, shows some typical English shifts when moving from direct (quoted) to indirect (reported) speech:

Quotative Frames:	He said . . . ; She asked . . .
Conjunctions:	that; if
Shifts:	
Tense:	am ↪ was; can ↪ could; have ↪ had
Personal Pronouns:	I ↪ he; you ↪ her; we ↪ they; you ↪ they
Demonstratives:	this ↪ that; these ↪ those
Place adverbials:	here ↪ there
Time adverbials:	tomorrow ↪ the following day
Word order:	Can we . . . ↪ they could . . .
	Have you . . . ↪ they had . . .

These can be quickly illustrated in the following sentences (and we'll assume that this is being reported to people other than those "he" originally said it to):

He says, "I am staying here tomorrow in this house. Can you stop by?"

He says that he is staying there tomorrow in that house, and he asks if they can stop by.

He said that he was staying there in that house the following day, and he asked if they could stop by.

"Greek," on the other hand, "retains the 'tense' and the mood of the statement actually spoken," that is, the "original" that is being reported (Voelz, chap 26, pp 161-165). Look at the following three pairs of sentences:

ἐπερωτᾷ· Ποταπός ἐστίν ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος;
She asks, "What sort of greeting is this?"

διαλογίζεται ποταπός ἐστίν ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος.
She is wondering what sort of greeting this is.

διελογίετο ποταπός ἐστίν ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος.
She was wondering what sort of greeting that was.

It's in this final pair of sentences that we see clearly the difference in Greek and English usage: the present tense ἐστίν is retained in the reported Greek statement even though the quotative frame has changed to a past tense (imperfect); in English, we must "backshift" from "is" to "was." In classical Greek usage when the tense of the main or "quotative" verb is a past tense, present indicative verbs (without ἄν) in the reported speech *may* be changed to present optative—and usually were. (Grammars refer to this as the "oblique optative;" *oblique* comes from the Latin for "indirect." In Latin terminology, indirect discourse is *oratio obliqua*.) In fact, this change of *mood*—not tense—was the most common change in moving from direct to indirect speech in ancient Greek. Perhaps it reflected the "remoteness," or "less assurance" of the optative. And thus, we would end up with what we find in Luke 1:29 ~ διελογίετο ποταπός εἶη ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος, where the indicative ἐστίν has become the optative εἶη.

Concerning NT usage with indirect questions, Robertson (pp 1043-1044) writes:

It is only necessary to say that as a rule the same mode [=mood] is retained in the indirect question that was in the direct.... We have the ind. [indicative] after secondary as well as primary tenses. This is the common idiom in the N. T. as in the κοινή..... The other examples of the opt. [optative] in indirect questions [that is, where the optative was not used in the direct question] are all after secondary tenses and the change is made from an indicative or a subj. [subjunctive] to the optative. These examples all occur in Luke. As instances of the opt. where the direct had the ind. see Lu 1:29; 3:15; 18:36..... In all these examples the indicative ... could have been retained.

And from p 1030:

When the aorist optative represented an aorist indicative of the direct discourse the opt. represented past time. Usually the optative and subjunctive are future as to time. We have the optative in the N. T. in indirect discourse only in Luke. It was in the κοινή a mark of literary care, almost Atticism, quite beyond the usual vernacular. And with Luke the idiom is almost confined to indirect questions.

By *reporting* this as indirect speech—rather than quoting Mary directly—Luke switches from “drama” to “narrative” (cf. Yule, *Explaining English Grammar*, 271ff) and is also able to add the idea of διαλογίζομαι: Mary was really thinking this over, pondering it very carefully—she didn’t just “say” it. Remember that the greeting perplexed her greatly. Later we will see her treasuring things up and pondering them carefully in her heart [2:19]. Still, Luke could have written

διελογίζετο ποταπός ἐστιν ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος,

—which would have been perfectly acceptable, especially by Koine standards—but he wrote instead

διελογίζετο ποταπὸς εἶη ὁ ἀσπασμὸς οὗτος.

That is, his reported, indirect wording of the question is given with εἶη, the present *optative* active 3rd person singular form of εἶμι. As Robertson noted above, if the “original” question is indicative, this is largely a matter of style. It may not be *too* anachronistic to say that this might have sounded to Theophilus like “she was troubled at His saying, and cast in her minde what maner of salutation this should be” (KJV, 1611) or “she was abashed att His saynge: and cast in her mynde what maner of salutaciō that shulde be” (Tyndale, 1526) sound to us. (I apologize, but my obsession with fonts *required* me to use the long “s” [f] that was used in English printing until roughly 1800.)

But what was Mary’s original or hypothetical (unspoken) question? Was it: “What sort of greeting is this?” (indicative) or could it have been “What sort of greeting might this be?” (optative)? Without getting ourselves embroiled in current debates about the “oblique optative” or even the differences between *may* and *might* in proper English usage, let me try to get to the point.

My chief goal was to make you aware of the optative form and suggest an explanation of its presence. The majority of commentators regard this as the optative of indirect discourse and explain it as being one of the chief indicators of indirect discourse in Greek: the mood is changed to indicate that this is a statement made by someone other than the narrator and, as such, reflects the speaker’s perspective and timeframe. Although both Robertson and Moulton raise questions about the “original” question behind our indirect question (especially given the fact that manuscript D includes ἄν), Zerwick is one of the few I read on this passage who directly calls into question viewing this as an optative “shift” brought about by the dictates of indirect discourse. He regards this simply as the potential optative but without ἄν: “Our Lady was wondering what sort of salutation that «might be», εἶη without ἄν (an «oblique optative» would be out of place here!)” (Zerwick, *Biblical Greek*, §339.2). In his *Grammatical Analysis* (p 172), he

leaves the question open: “εἴη opt. εἰμί either as indir. question, *it was* §346 or indicating a theoretical possibility (with ἄν understood), *it could be* §339.”

And that brings me to my point and my question: how are we best to understand Luke’s Greek and Mary’s mind? Although most commentators explain this as the optative of indirect discourse, they *translate* it as a potential optative. Among the recent English versions I surveyed, only the NASB translates Lk 1:29 as if the “original” question were indicative: “But she was very perplexed at *this* statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this **was**.” Every other version I consulted offered a translation the same as or similar to ESV’s “But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this **might be**.”

I want to ask *you*, however, to share your opinion with me. Do you think the “original” was indicative or optative? And what difference does it make in the way we understand Mary’s question? **Please include a sentence or two in your discussion board post giving your answer and your thoughts.**

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