Thesis summary
This thesis is an investigation in the use of the present tense to designate past events (the alternation between the past and present tenses in these contexts is called ‘tense switching’). While it focuses mainly on Classical Greek, the account developed here is intended to be valid for other languages as well, and chapter 1 is explicitly cross-linguistic.

The argument in this thesis departs from the cognitivist assumption that the meaning of the present tense lies in the conceptual structure it evokes, so that the use of the present tense to refer to the past should be understood in terms of a special conceptual scenario in which the gap between the past and the present is bridged somehow.

Chapter 1 presents a general theoretical framework for understanding the phenomenon of tense switching. It is argued that the construal of past events as part of the present can be achieved in two ways. First, the speaker can pretend to be displaced to the past scene (displacement scenario). Second, the speaker can assume the presence of the past events in the actual here and now through the medium of a representation (representation scenario). The essential difference is that in the first case, the description of the events will be like an actual on-the-scene report, while in the latter case, the description will have the characteristics of a retrospective narrative. Moreover, the representation scenario may take on different forms, as there are different kinds of representations that may bridge the gap between the past and the present (such as a play, video footage, or more schematic representations).

In chapters 2 to 4, this theoretical framework is applied to three different types of tense switching in Classical Greek. Each type prototypically corresponds to a particular degree of narrativity: scenic narrative, summary narrative, and non-narrative discourse.

Chapter 2 focuses on scenic narrative, where the distance between story time and discourse time is small. This type of narrative seeks to imitate the character of actual experience. Here we find the ‘mimetic’ use of the present tense to refer to the past. The mimetic present conveys the pretense that the past events are presently being simulated or re-enacted. This is reflected especially in the predilection of the mimetic present for verbs denoting concrete events, for first person marking (reflecting the speaker’s engagement with the events in the narrative), and for certain aspects of grammatical ‘simplicity’ (clause-initial position of the verb, singular rather than plural marking, et cetera). Moreover, the pretense of re-enactment usually goes hand in hand with communicative dynamism, i.e. newsworthiness and discourse relevance.

Chapter 3 focuses on summary narrative, where the distance between story time and discourse time is large, and the description of the events is more abstract, with less appeal to immediate experience. Here we find the ‘diegetic’ use of the present tense to refer to the past. The diegetic present highlights the immediate accessibility of the designated event in the medium of the discourse. Its pragmatic function is to signal to the addressees that they are to update their mental model of the discourse in the light of salient developments. The diegetic present has an affinity with certain attention-management strategies (in particular, proliferation of subordinate clauses and the use...
of the particle δὴ ‘then’, ‘so’ to mark discourse progression), subordinate clauses that cue an imminent change in the narrative dynamic, and, to some degree, heavier coding material for the subject.

Chapter 4 focuses on non-narrative discourse. Here we find the ‘registering’ use of the present tense to refer to the past. The registering present evokes a record of the designated event. The pragmatic function of this use is to signal that the designated event is well-established in shared cultural memory, which serves both to elevate the status of this event (giving it an ‘official’ or ‘canonical’ air) and to underline the legitimacy of the speaker’s assertion.

All in all, this thesis advocates a flexible approach to tense switching that is sensitive to the different semantic structures and pragmatic implications evoked by the present tense referring to the past in different types of contexts.