

Imperfective tenses in the Balkans

Brian D. Joseph
The Ohio State University

- Workshop on Imperfective Modalities●●
Paris, France
(11 September 2023)



An outlier, a marginal actor, in the context of this workshop)

--presenting at the margins (first speaker)

--nothing on the focal area of the Caucasus (rather, my focus is the Balkans and especially Greek)

--I will not talk about modalities (but I do recognize them and their importance to imperfectivity)

But, I do have something to say about imperfective aspect in the latter history of Greek, especially about the morphology associated with the marking of imperfectivity (and ultimately, the Balkans more generally)

The broad picture:

- **across the sweep of the history of Greek, from Ancient Greek (AGrk) up to Modern Greek (ModGrk), there has been steady movement on several fronts towards more overt marking of imperfective aspect**
- **in AGrk, there was a grammatical opposition between imperfective aspect and perfective (“aoristic”) aspect**

- manifested through differences in verbal stem, mostly zero-marking for imperfective vs. overt marking for aoristic, but also in some instances via different endings as well, e.g.:
 - in indicative: imperfective past tense *e-lu-on* 'I was releasing' vs. aoristic past tense *e-lu-s-a*
 - in subjunctive mood: imperfective (present) subjunctive *luēis* '(that) you may be releasing' vs. aoristic subjunctive *lusēis* '(that) you may release (straightaway)' (so also with other verbal moods: optative and imperative)

--in nonfinite forms, e.g. present (i.e. imperfective) infinitive *luein* 'to be releasing' vs. aoristic infinitive *lusai* 'to release (straightaway)', and so also with participles

- no distinction made overtly in present indicative (i.e., no formal distinction between 'I am releasing' and 'I release')**

Some of these facts may be pragmatically motivated, e.g. the present tense is tied to immediacy of actual events, so in a certain sense, all events are on-going and have a certain duration, so a distinction between imperfective and aoristic in the present indicative may be less useful

But some are not explicable in such a way, especially the fact that there is no overt imperfective ~ aoristic distinction in the future tense; rather, there is a single form, e.g. *lu-s-ō* 'I will release' – which apparently is only perfective

Here is where the morphological realization of the imperfective/aoristic opposition begins to get interesting

Late in Post-Classical Greek, and especially within the Medieval period, two developments extended the range of aspectual distinctions.

In particular, the emergence of a periphrastic future tense consisting of conjugated forms of *thelō* ‘want’ (used in a grammatical function as a marker of futurity) + Infinitive and later, when infinitives were replaced by finite complement clauses, *thelō* + finite subjunctive forms introduced by the mood marker *na* (from AGrk *hina* ‘(so) that’) and the continuation of the imperfective/aoristic distinction in the infinitive (and subjunctive), afforded Greek a grammatical means for an imperfective/aoristic distinction overtly in the Medieval/Modern Greek future.

AGrk grapsō ‘I will write’ (only perfective)

Med’l Grk

(early) thélō gráphein

will.1SG write.INF.IMPFV

‘I will be writing’

thélō grapsein

will.1SG write.INF.PFV

‘I will write’

(later) thélō na gráphō

will.1SG SUBJ write.1SG.IMPFV

‘I will be writing’

thélō na grapsō

will.1SG SUBJ write.1SG.PFV

‘I will write’

(later) thélei na gráphō

will.3SG SUBJ write.1SG.IMPFV

‘I will be writing’

(literally: “it-will that I ...”)

thélei na grapsō

will.3SG SUBJ write.1SG.PFV

‘I will write’

ModGrk θα γράφο

θα γράψο

Note that the present perfective form,

e.g. *pléks-o* (1sg) ‘I knit’ vs. imperfective *plék-o* ‘I am knitting’

cannot occur in simple use but is always supported/licensed by some other element

--i.e., it cannot constitute a complete utterance in itself, whereas the imperfective form can (thus, *Plekso vs. OK: *Pleko*. ‘I knit.’

--when the licensing element is *na* or *as*, it can be argued to be modally different since a different negative marker is used; this distinction in negation has been the basis for some linguists labeling combinations with *na/as* as “subjunctive”

- *ðen pléko / *min pléko* ‘I am not knitting’
- *ipósxome na min/*ðen pléko* ‘I promise not to be knitting’
- *as min/*ðen pléko* ‘Let me not be knitting!’

--when the licensing element is something else, e.g. *an* 'if', *otan* 'when', *opjos* 'whoever', among others, all generally involving some uncertainty or indefiniteness), the form in question can just be treated as an indicative; note that it is negated with a different negator from that found with form introduced by *na/as*, e.g.:

- *an ðen pléko* / **min pléko* 'if I am not knitting'

Thus from an Ancient Greek situation where a single future form was monoaspectually perfective, and with no **overt**** marking for aspect in the future (and no way of indicating which aspect the future form was), Greek has innovated in a direction that allows for an overt distinction in aspect to be made in the future.**

The same holds for the present indicative, but in a slightly more restricted way, due to cooccurrence restrictions on present perfective form.

Going along with this is the emergence of overt marking for imperfective present, especially via the marker *-n-*

--thus whereas in AGrk, the distinction, e.g. in the present subjunctive, was formally oppositional, i.e. privative in nature (*lu-∅-* vs. *lu-s-*), in ModGrk it is overtly marked by phonological substance (*li-n-* vs. *li-s-*)

--

Different views of what the *-n-* is doing there in forms like *líno*:

My idea:

--this is a morphological/grammatical development here an extension of the *-n-* of AGrk (and PIE nasal affix for formation of present stems (e.g. the type of Sanskrit *chi-n-d-anti* 'they cut' , Hittite *sar-n(in)-k-anzi* 'they seek retribution', Greek *ku-ne-ō* 'I kiss' – note AGrk present *deik-nu-mi* 'I (am) show(ing)' (ModGrk *đix-n-o*) vs. aorist *e-deik-s-a* 'I showed', and AGrk present *kam-n-ō* 'I (am) work(ing)' vs. aorist *e-kam-on* 'I worked')

Alternative view (Katsouda 2007, endorsed by Tzakosta, To appear):

--occurrence of -n- (also -z-) in present (imperfective) stems is motivated *phonologically*, as an epenthesis (anaptyxis) to break up a hiatus

“Consonant anaptyxis takes place in vocalic environments solving instances of hiatuses. It is a phonological process reported for the verbal system of Ancient Greek, as the latter was transformed in time, and is still valid in Modern Greek and its dialectal variants. Katsouda (2007) claims that consonantization is part of the grid of language change processes regarding the ancient Greek verbal system. /n/ and /z/ are considered to be the main consonants breaking vocalic sequences:

1. a. **lúō (AGrk) → lino (ModGrk) ‘solve-1PRES.SG.’**
b. **kleiō (AGrk) → klíno (ModGrk) ‘close-1PRES.SG’**
c. **ptúō (AGrk) → ftíno (ModGrk) ‘spit-1PRES.SG’**

2. a. **dakrúō (AGrk) → dakrízo (ModGrk) ‘cry-1PRES.SG’**
b. **artúō (AGrk) → artízo (ModGrk) ‘bake-1PRES.SG’**
c. **louō (AGrk) → louízo (ModGrk) ‘bathe-1PRES.SG’**
d. **xríō (AGrk) → xrízo (ModGrk) ‘anoint-1PRES.SG’**

Tzakosta:

“The reasons for the selection of /n/ and /z/ over other consonants are not fully described, although there are proposals according to which /n/ and /z/ prevail due to their frequency effects (Katsouda 2007). Consonantization is considered to be part of a more general restructuring of the ancient Greek verbal system under the structural pressure **for the unification of verbal conjugations and the maximum possible unified behavior of isosyllabic verbal stems which share vocalism.”**

Two points to make here:

- a) **Role of hiatus is probably overstated: note that there are lots of examples of vowel hiatus (*omilía* ‘speech’, *Aθenaïkos* ‘Athenian’, *piimáton* ‘of poems’, *antiïikos* ‘anti-viral’ (*anti-* ‘anti-’ + *io-* ‘virus’ + *-iko-* ‘ADJ’))**

- b) **to say it is phonologically induced ignores the fact that only when it has a grammatical function do we see n or z as “hiatus breakers”**

Note that like the -n-, the -z- has its origins in an AGrk suffix that was the result of sound changes involving present-stem marker *-j-, so that the -z- was associated with present tense and thus with imperfectivity (z = zd or dz in AGrk but => [z] relatively early in PostClassGrk

‘change’: PRES.IMPFVE *allaz-ō* < *allag-j-

vs. AORISTIC *allaks-* < *allag-s-

‘care’: PRES.IMPFVE *phrontiz-ō* < *phrontid-j-

vs. AORISTIC *phrontis-* < *phrontid-s-

A further question regarding the spread of overt imperceptive marking in Greek:

--is it internal change or a change triggered by or enhanced by formal and functional situation with imperfectivity in neighboring languages?

--that is, it can all be described in Greek-internal terms, but it is interesting that rise of overt marking for imperfective brings Greek in line with most of its Balkan neighbors

Coincidence?? Or a contact effect?? A common analytic problem when areal situation is taken into account, so consider ...

... the broader Balkan picture:

--Slavic: a Perfective/Imperfective aspectual opposition is inherent in the lexeme but also involved in derivation.

- Prefixation generally renders an imperfective perfective, e.g., Macedonian *bara/pobara* ‘seek [IPFV/PFV]’, *bori/zbori* ‘wrestle/begin to wrestle [IPFV/PFV]’, *piše/zapiše* ‘write/write down, register [IPFV/PFV]’.
- Suffixation usually renders a perfective imperfective, e.g. Mac *kaže/kažuva* ‘say [PFV/IPFV]’, but certain suffixes are perfectivizing, e.g. BSl *čuka/čukne* ‘knock.3SG [IPFV/PFV]’. In some cases, the difference is encoded only in the stem vowel, e.g. Mac *frli/frla* ‘throw [IPFV/IPFV]’.

--Romani: generally no perfective/imperfective contrast within the present. Rather Romani has a secondary aspectual opposition, remote/nonremote, and the imperfective-remote is imperfect vis-à-vis the present and the perfective-remote is pluperfect vis-à-vis the aorist, which also generally functions as the perfect.

Thus, the Romani present/subjunctive opposition is not really an aspectual contrast.

Interestingly, individual dialects copy Slavic prefixes for derivation, and the lexical items involved (e.g. *kinel/pokinel* ‘buy’, *del/dodel* ‘give’) can be aspectually specialized. Still, these are basically lexical rather than grammatical phenomena insofar as they do not pervade the verbal system.

Albanian: has mainly completed vs. incompleted action aspectual distinction in the present, with a past tense (called the “imperfect”) for past general or habitual or even progressive action:

***këndoj* ‘I sing’ vs. *këndoja* ‘I used to sing; I was singing’**

**But when the verb denotes a momentary action in progress,
there can be marking via a pre-verbal element (a “particle”):**

***këndoj* ‘I sing’ ~ *po këndoj* ‘I am (just now in the
process of) singing’)**

**vs. *këndoja* ‘I used to sing’ ~ *po këndoja* ‘I was (just then in the
process of) singing’**

**For present tense progressives, Albanian also has a periphrastic
construction with verb ‘to be’ along with an element *duke* (*tuke*
/ *tu* in Old Albanian, *tue* in dialects) plus the participle:**

***Jam duke kënduar* ‘I am singing’ (literally “I-am DUKE sung”)**

Historically there is some evidence of *-n-* in the present vs. no *-n-* in non-present:

present *merr* < *me-Hr-**n**-ō- (with *-rr-* < *-rn-* regularly)

vs.

aoristic past *mor-* < *me-e-Hr-om 'take'

And, the 2/3sg *present* ending *-n* (*bano-n* 'you live / (s)he lives') is probably from a generalization (with reanalysis) of the *-n-* of PIE nasal verbal formations

Alb *po* and *d/tu(k)e* are innovations within Albanian:

***po*: possibly < earlier **pēst*, a composite of an asseverative **pe* and a form of ‘be’ (**est*) (Hamp apud Joseph 2011b), by a semantic change in which it took on (‘it is so’ > ‘just so now’ > a momentarily progressive sense (like *just now* in Indian English))**

***d/tu(k)e*: built on locative deictic **tu* (cf. *kētu* ‘here’) and Proto-Albanian **k-* (PIE **k^w-*) with interrogative/relative value; semantic development unclear (to me at least)**

Thus Albanian shows expansion of overt marking for presential (progressive) aspect, but does so in a way that moves the language morphosyntactically away from Balkan “partners” with regard to the formal means of Balkan marking of aspect, though it is consistent with Balkan distinction (but note that the imperfective/perfective opposition itself could be seen as inherited, since it is found across IE)

Still, *po* came to fit in with the overall structure of the verbal complex, which both internally (within Albanian) and externally (within Balkans) is a template focused on the verb with various modifiers for tense, mood, negation, argument structure, with the elements all lined up in the same order (so that *po* and *duke* are external-to (i.e., to-the-left-of) weak pronouns which are inside of (i.e. to-the-right-of) the aspectual markers:

FUTURE TENSE (dialectal example for Greek and Macedonian for greater parallelism):

Alb	s'	do	të	j	a-	jep
	NEG	FUT	SUBJVE	him.IO+it.DO		give.1SG
Grk	ðe	θe	na	tu	to	ðóso
	NEG	FUT	SUBJVE	him.IO	it.DO	give/1SG
Rmn	nu	o	să	i	-l	dau
	NEG	FUT	SUBJVE	him.IO	it.DO	give/1SG
Mac	ne	kje	da	mu	go	davam
	NEG	FUT	SUBJVE	him.IO	it.DO	give/1SG

'I will not give it to him'

SUBJUNCTIVE

Alb	të	mos	j	a	jep?
	SUBJVE	NEG	him.IO+it.DO	give.1SG.SUBJUNC	
Grk	na	min	tu	to	đóso?
	SUBJVE	NEG	him.IO	it.DO	give.1SG
Rmn	să	nu	i	-l	dau?
	SUBJVE	NEG	him.IO	it.DO	give.1SG
Mac	da	ne	mu	go	davam
	SUBJVE	NEG	him.IO	it.DO	give.1SG

‘Should I not give it to him?’

Albanian *po / d/tu(k)e* and verbal complex

Nuk	po	e	shikoj
NEG	PO	it.DO	see.1sg

Nuk	jam	duke	e	shikuar
NEG	be.1sg	DUKE	it.DO	see.PTCPL

'I am not seeing it'

Finally, what Balkans show is that markers of aspect, including imperfectivity, and grammatical oppositions *can* be borrowed – here are some cases (minimal data here; see Friedman & Joseph 2024 for details):

- aspectual prefixes in Meglenoromanian from Macedonian (e.g. *durmíri* ‘sleep’ *zǎdurmíri* ‘fall asleep’ (borrowed prefix here giving perfective); *turnári* ‘return’ *priturnári* ‘return repeatedly’ (borrowed prefix here giving a sort of imperfective (iterative))
- Slavic prefixes in Romani dialects for derivation (with ultimate aspectual specialization in some instances), e.g. Arli Romani in North Macedonia has the somewhat imperfective *kinel* ‘purchase (in general)’ ~ *pokinel* ‘buy (take possession of)’ (somewhat perfective)

Thus, we can say a lot about imperfectivity in Greek and the Balkans, but as with everything, there is more to learn and thus no doubt more to say, since ...

... our knowledge is still (somewhat) imperfect, so to speak.

THANK YOU

MERCI

ΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΩ