On the Interaction of Aspect and Modality: An Argument For the 
Syntactic Relevance of Aspect in Modern Greek

Anastasios Tsangalidis
Department of Theoretical and Applied Linguistics
School of English
Aristotle University of Thessaloniki

1. Syntactic Relevance and the Syntactic Relevance of Aspect

The term *Syntactic relevance* relates to Anderson’s (1982) analysis of inflectional (or morphosyntactic) categories which he understood as *syntactically relevant categories*. Anderson was concerned with the proper location of morphology in the syntactic or the lexical domain. He claimed that inflectional categories which have a role in both morphology and syntax should be treated as syntactic categories; more precisely, he claimed that morphology is divisible into two parts: an inflectional part, which is integrated (and shares theoretical primes) with the syntax, and a derivational part, which is confined to the lexicon and opaque to the syntax. (1982: 591)

For many, this view presupposes or entails what Chomsky (1991: 412) calls “a sharp and principled distinction between inflectional morphology, part of syntax proper, and strictly derivational morphology, part of the lexicon”. In recent generative analyses within the tradition of the *Split INFL Hypothesis*¹, the decision whether a given category is *syntactically relevant* in effect determines, among other things, whether it will be represented as a phrasal category in terms of X-bar theory, the assumption being that all categories that affect the syntax of a language in certain ways must be syntactically represented.

However, in the case of Aspect, Anderson himself speculated whether it should be considered an inflectional category, in that there is not always evidence for its being *syntactically relevant* (1982: 588). Moreover, in the case of Modern Greek, recent analyses have taken Aspect to be a *lexical category*², which need not or cannot be represented in the syntax in the same way as other more obviously syntactic categories, such as Tense or Agreement³.

We will not go into any detailed discussion of this idea of a sharp distinction between the syntax and the lexicon or between inflectional and derivational morphology; for the rest of this paper, however, it will be assumed that these distinctions are indeed clearcut, and it will be argued that, once they are acknowledged, Modern Greek Aspect has to be located in the syntactic rather than the lexical domain.

2. The data

This paper is meant to discuss the interpretations of lexical verb combinations with the particle *tha*⁴, which generally form what is traditionally described as the Modern Greek
future tense. In particular, the discussion will focus on the differences that stem from the interaction of *tha* with the features [+past], and [+perfective], which are taken to be the basic Tense and Aspect distinctions marked in the language; in other words, the discussion will focus on the difference of the four possible complexes shown in (1). The English glosses and the labels in (1) follow Rivero (1990: 139), and in a sense it is precisely these that actually constitute the topic of discussion.

(1)

(a)  tha milai  
    ‘s/he will continue to talk’  
    “Future imperfective”  
    (-perf, -past)

(b)  tha milisi  
    ‘s/he will talk’  
    “Future perfective”  
    (+perf, -past)

(c)  tha miluse  
    ‘s/he would continue to talk’  
    “Future anterior imperfective”  
    (-perf, +past)

(d)  tha milise  
    ‘s/he would talk’  
    “Future anterior perfective”  
    (+perf, +past)

As may be noted in (1), although *tha* is often described as the Modern Greek counterpart of *will* (i.e. a modal/future verbal element), it differs from *will* in a quite obvious way: whereas *will* may be marked for the [+past] feature and thus contrast with *would, tha* is always unmarked; moreover, unlike *will* and *would, tha* is always accompanied by a finite verb form marked for Agreement, Tense, and Aspect.

We should, naturally, expect that Tense and Agreement differences in the lexical verb will result in different interpretations of the whole complex, as indeed they do. However, what has generally been ignored in the literature is the contribution of the aspectual marking to the eventual interpretations. It will be argued that the meaning of these complexes is also dependent on the aspectual value of the lexical verbs that accompany *tha,* and that, more precisely, the eventual [+future] and [+modal] interpretations of a *tha-*complex are determined by the [+perfective] feature marked on the lexical verb. Thus the view of Aspect as a *syntactically relevant* category is strongly supported – especially since the aspectual value will be seen to determine the value of a *tha-*complex in terms of Mood and Tense, which are themselves taken to be *syntactically relevant* categories.

2.1. The marking of perfective aspect

The formation of the aspectually marked forms need not concern us in any detail; it will only be noted that each verb in Modern Greek, may be seen to ‘have two stems’ which generally correspond to the [+perfective] distinction. The imperfective stem is generally unmarked, and there are many possibilities for deriving the perfective stem from the imperfective one; however, it has long been debated whether there is any regularity in this process, or indeed whether there is a morphological process involved in the first place. To take one fairly standard view of these facts, Mirambel’s (1959) presentation of the four main possibilities for the formation of the perfective stem is summarised in (2):
(2) (a) tro-o fa-o ‘I eat’ -perf +perf

(b) men-o min-o ‘I stay’ -perf +perf

(c) kle-o klaps-o ‘I cry’ or dhin-o dhos-o ‘I give’ -perf +perf -perf +perf

(d) fern-o fer-o ‘I bring’ or tim-o timis-o ‘I honour’ -perf +perf -perf +perf

First, there are totally suppletive cases, involving a completely different stem, as in (2a); a second option, shown in (2b), involves vowel change only; this may be more complex, as in (2c) with additional affixation, or rather simpler as in (2d) which involves affixation only. According to Mirambel, there are only four verbs in the first category, very few in the second, quite a few in the third, and many in the fourth, most of which involve the regular affixation with -σ.

Yet, it should be noted that although it has been debated whether this formation of the perfective stem is a regular morphological process or not, all descriptive grammarians who understand this distinction in terms of Aspect stress that Aspect is especially important in the Greek verbal system, with the crucial opposition between imperfective (continuous/durative) and perfective (aorist/punctual); this dichotomy extends throughout the ... verbal system.

(Joseph, 1983: 79)

In other words, all tenses and moods may be seen to include forms that realise this distinction. However, I will ignore all other differences in the use of perfective and imperfective forms, which, nevertheless, could also support the view of Aspect as a syntactically relevant category in Modern Greek. My sole argument will refer to the striking regularity of the interpretations which result from the interactions of the perfective and imperfective forms with the particle tha, to which we turn immediately.

2.2. Tha in traditional grammar

With only few exceptions, traditional grammars of Modern Greek fail to appreciate the potential nonfuture uses of tha-complexes. At best, they sometimes mention some modal uses of some tha-forms, variously described as “syntactic”, “periphrastic” or “derived” moods; these uses have never been described in full and are usually only mentioned in discussions of the mood system.

In particular, traditional grammars seem to concentrate on the various authors’ views on the nature of the accompanying verb forms, and mostly on the question whether one should regard them as indicative or subjunctive forms; this relates to the more general question whether there is a subjunctive mood in Modern Greek marked on the verb itself, a question that need not concern us here. Thus, instead of listing the various views on the existence of an indicative-subjunctive distinction in Modern Greek, the data will be presented in the light of two recent a-theoretical descriptive works, namely Hesse (1980) and Mackridge (1985).
3. Recent descriptive analyses of *tha* and *tha*-complexes

Hesse (1980) was probably the first who did not implicate any distinction between indicative and subjunctive combinations with *tha* but addressed the facts directly; he divides the functions of *tha* into two main groups, which he labels the future and the inferential senses; and he states that, in general,

*tha* is used to indicate that what is referred to must be taken with a certain reservation.

It covers a wide range from mere guess to logical conclusion.

(ibid.: 59)

Concerning the perfective nonpast form, he states that its combination with *tha*, as in (3), “always refers to the future. It is the normal unmarked future tense, used whenever neither repetition nor development ... nor completion is to be stressed” (ibid.: 60).

(3)  

*tha* erthi stis tris  

*iha [-past], [+perf])

‘s/he will come at three’

Secondly, the combination of *tha* with the imperfective nonpast forms is used to express either inference (with present-time reference), as in (4), or futurity as in (5),

(4)  

aplose to xeri tu sto metopo mu: tha exis pireto mu kani  

‘He put his hand on my forehead: I think you have a temperature, he said’  

(Lit.: you will have (*tha* [-past] [-perf]))

(5)  

oli nixta tha vadzhizume  

(*tha* [-past] [-perf])

‘We shall be walking all night’

and, as he observes, this complex “occurs much more frequently in the inferential than the future sense” (ibid.: 61), i.e., utterances like (4) are more frequent than utterances like (5). The contrast between (3) and (5) may be seen in examples like (6):

(6)  

dhe tha ton pandrello ego; dhe tha kiname ego mazi tu.  

*tha* [+perf] [-past]  

*tha* [+perf] [-past]

‘I shall not marry him. I shall not sleep with him’

where both forms refer to the future, but, as he notes, “the marriage is a single occurrence” and therefore perfective; whereas “the sleeping together is a probably repeated action” and therefore imperfective.

Moving on to past forms, concerning the perfective past form combined with *tha*, Hesse notes that this is “only used in the inferential sense” (ibid.: 62), as in (7),

(7)  

nomise stin arxi pos *tha* ejine kapiio dhistixima  

‘In the beginning he thought that some accident must have happened’  

(Lit.: will happen (*tha* [+perf] [-past])

whereas the combination of *tha* with the imperfective past forms “has a very wide range of uses” (ibid.: 63), which he divides on the basis of whether the aspectual value seems absent (comparable to the French conditionnel) or is retained. He then defines four possibilities, exemplified in (8) through (11). When aspect appears to be absent, the interpretation can be conditional (as in (8)) or past future (as in (9)); whereas when the aspectual imperfective value is present the complex may be iterative (as in (10)) or inferential (as in (11)): 
(8) **tha ti filuse** an dhen itan toso kondos

\((tha + [+past] [-perf])\)

‘He would kiss (or would have kissed) her, if he were not so short’

(9) ipe pos **tha ti filuse**, otan jirize apo to taksidhi

\((tha + [+past] [-perf])\)

‘He said that he would kiss her when he came back from the journey’

(10) opian ki an sinanduse, **tha ti filuse**

\((tha + [+past] [-perf])\)

‘He would (=used to) kiss every girl he met’

(11) tote fandazome, **tha ti filuse**

\((tha + [+past] [-perf])\)

‘At that moment, I imagine, he was kissing her’

Mackridge (1985, ch. 9) makes similar observations, and gives the various combinations the interpretations which are summarised in (12) and (13); of these some clearly involve a futurity element, some may or may not, and some clearly do not.

(12) Imperfective verb combinations with **tha**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) [-past] [-perfective]</th>
<th>(b) [+past] [-perfective]</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>tha tis milai</strong></td>
<td><strong>tha tis miluse</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>he will talk to her</td>
<td>he would talk to her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or he will be talking to her</td>
<td>or he would be talking to her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or he must talk to her</td>
<td>or he would have talked to her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or he must be talking to her</td>
<td>or he was about to talk to her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>or he must have talked to her</td>
<td>or he must have talked to her</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>he must have been talking to her</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(13) Perfective verb combinations with **tha**:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>(a) [-past] [+perfective]</th>
<th>(b) [+past] [+perfective]</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>tha tis milisi</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>he will talk to her</td>
<td>he must have talked to her</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

What should be stressed in view of these data, however, is the striking difference between the number of possible interpretations of imperfective and perfective verb combinations with **tha**. As can be easily seen in (12) and (13), whereas the imperfective forms allow all kinds of interpretation, the perfective forms represent the two extremes: the perfective nonpast is strictly future, and the perfective past is strictly nonfuture.
At this point, let us take a second look at the forms in (1), and in particular at Rivero’s English equivalents: her glosses are what would be expected if the various constituent features were simply added to one another: [-past] [-perfective] results in (1a), ‘S/he’ll continue to talk’; [-past] [+perfective] is (1b), ‘S/he’ll talk’; similarly, [+past] [-perfective] is (1c), ‘S/he would continue to talk’, and [+past] [+perfective] results in (1d), ‘S/he would talk’. However, as can be easily seen in (12) and (13), the data involve interaction of semantic features rather than mere addition of one feature to another; after all, it is a well-known semantic fact that, as Chierchia & McConnell-Ginet (1990) put it:

[tense interacts in complicated ways with the auxiliary system, inflectional morphemes and negation, and its treatment involves addressing questions that are central to the overall organization of grammar (224).]

4. More theoretical analyses

Although we should now turn to the generative tradition of the Split INFL Hypothesis, and the analyses in (14), (15) and (16) which are probably the only attempts to derive that-complexes in the syntax, it will suffice to note that none of the three structures presented immediately below can account for the differences reviewed above — and they do not even attempt such an account.12

(14)  [CP[MoodP[NegP[FutuP tha [...[TenseP...[VP]]]]]]]

(15)  [NegP[TenseP tha [AgrP[VP]]]]
      (cf. Tsimpli (1990: 236 (20))

(16)  [IP tha [AgrP[TenseP[AspP[VoiceP[VP]]]]]]
      (cf. Rivero (1990: 137, 143))

Thus, since these formal analyses apparently shed no light to these systematic differences of interpretation, which, interestingly, do stem from a formal opposition, it seems that a less formal account might be more appropriate. In this connection, Langacker’s (1991) analysis of some comparable facts in English will be relevant. At this stage no full application of his ideas to the Modern Greek data can be attempted; however, what follows seems to indicate that such an approach is a lot more promising than either the generation of the relevant forms with no reference to their use and interpretation or than the mere descriptive taxonomy of their possible uses (or, of course, than the traditional indicative/subjunctive distinction, which can, allegedly, account for such differences).

Langacker (1991, ch. 6) makes some observations concerning “the temporal implications of modal predication”. One of them which appears to be relevant here is the claim that modals are aspectually transparent, and that this has certain consequences for the temporal interpretation of the relevant forms. His examples refer to what he describes as perfective lexical verbs in English. He states that for example, “like jump, may jump is perfective; and like be angry, may be angry is imperfective”. He then considers the temporal interpretation of

(17) She may jump.
and notes that

Due to the future oriented nature of a modal, the envisaged jump cannot be situated in the past. Location in the present (coincident with the time of speaking) is precluded for the same reason that true present tense perfectives are normally infelicitous: it cannot be presumed that a perfective event has exactly the same duration as a speech event describing it. Hence she may jump is only taken as indicating the possibility of a jump occurring in the future (261-2).

"By contrast, an imperfective such as"

(18) She may be angry.

is also susceptible to a present construal. This is for the same reason that present tense imperfectives are freely permitted: any subpart of an imperfective process counts as a valid instance of the processual category, so that portion which precisely coincides with the speech event can be profiled as a present-time instantiation (262).

5. A semantic account of the Modern Greek data

It can be easily seen that this reasoning can be transferred directly to the case of Modern Greek perfectives and imperfectives in combination with tha, to which we turn immediately, again starting with the nonpast forms, that is (12a) and (13a).

It was seen (in (13a) above) that perfective nonpast combinations may only have future-time reference; whereas imperfective nonpast combinations (in (12a)) allow both future and present interpretations. In the same manner as Langacker’s account of the English facts, it can be seen that in both cases these forms cannot refer to the past: on the one hand, tha is not only future-oriented, it is in fact the main future marker in the language; on the other hand, there is nothing on the lexical verb that could relate these forms to the past¹⁴, therefore, possible past-time reference is excluded. In other words, in considering tense alone, all nonpast combinations with tha would exclude past-time reference and would allow both present and future interpretations. However, as we have seen, the situation is further restricted due to the aspeccual marking.

Thus, in the case of perfectives (in (13a)), location in the present is excluded for the same reason as in English: a perfective event cannot have exactly the same duration as the speech event describing it. And in the case of imperfectives, there is no reason to exclude present-time reference and therefore both future and present are allowed (as in (12a) above).

Moreover, in the case of the perfectives, the argument is stronger in Modern Greek than in English for two reasons: first, as we have seen (in section 2.1. above), perfectivity is a grammaticalised category in Modern Greek and not only a lexical property of individual verbs; secondly, Modern Greek perfectives cannot occur free in the nonpast form at all (as shown in (19a)) and, therefore, obviously, they can never refer temporally to the time of speaking¹⁵. Whereas an imperfective nonpast form may occur free and then its temporal reference may coincide with the time of speaking or not (as shown in (19b)).
Let us now turn to the interpretation of the past forms combined with *tha* (in 12b and 13b); this may be seen to follow in a similar manner; again the only difference in the formation of (12b) and (13b), is this same difference in the aspectual value.

The interpretation of the imperfective combinations in (12b) is rather straightforward: being imperfective past forms combined with a future/modal particle, both future-in-the-past and various modal interpretations are allowed (cf. the corresponding uses of would-combinations in English).

However, what at first sight seems extraordinary is the impossibility of some futurity element in the case of the past perfective combination (in (13b)), and the fact that its only possible interpretation is what Hesse calls the inferential interpretation, and Mackridge translates as He must have talked.

One possible explanation might be that the perfective past being the unmarked and most common past tense in the language, is much too past or much too real or definite to allow a nonpast interpretation; given the feature of definiteness in the perfective past form, there is no possibility that the event described may be located in the future-in-the-past: in other words, in uttering (13b), there can be no question whether the event was completed or was going to be completed; what is only questioned is whether it positively took place or not. Alternatively, the complex in (13b) may be seen as a normal perfective past form, the assertiveness of which is only modified by the presence of *tha*.

In any case, it seems to be obvious that again the event described by (13b) cannot be seen as a sequence of moments in time, of which one might be identified as a reference point in the past or in the future-in-the-past; whereas the event described by the imperfective complex in (12b) may be seen as such a sequence, and thus may be conceived as an event to be completed in the future-in-the-past.

6. Conclusion

It should be quite clear that there is still a number of questions to be answered in relation to the use of these forms; the most obvious of these will be when or why one of the options presented in (12) is preferred. And, further to the semantic features and their interactions which have just been mentioned, a lot seems to depend on factors beyond the level of grammatical or even semantic categories such as Modality, Tense or Aspect and their respective values. For example, Hesse’s observation that *tha* + imperfective nonpast complexes (i.e., forms like those in (4), (5), or (12a)) are more often present than future, may be seen to follow from pragmatic factors: as he also notes, in considering an example like (20), the interpretations in (20a) or (20b) are “of course less frequent”. In other words, such a complex will occur “much more frequently in the inferential than the future sense”, i.e. (20c) is preferred to the other two, because it is generally more often necessary or useful. At this stage it may only be said that these pragmatic or similar factors do not generally appear to be in conflict with the general effects of Aspect presented above.

(20)  *tha zvini*  (*tha* [+past], [-perf])

(a)  “s/he will be switching off”
(b) ‘s/he will regularly switch off’
(c) ‘s/he must be switching off’

To sum up the original topic: on the assumption of a framework which insists on drawing “a sharp distinction” between the syntax and the lexicon, it has been shown that Aspect should fall in the domain of the former—especially since everybody seems to be prepared to regard both Tense and Mood as syntactically relevant categories, and Aspect was seen to determine both Tense and Mood values in the data examined.

However, one final point to make concerns the very distinction between the levels of the syntax and the lexicon. One can easily agree that the marking of the feature [±perfective] in Modern Greek is too idiosyncratic—as far as morphology is concerned—and as such takes place in the lexicon. However, as we have seen, the use of the combinations of the relevant forms with *tha* is completely systematic. Therefore, their morphological irregularity contrasts sharply with their syntactic regularity, and, quite obviously, this situation does not favour any sharp distinction between the syntax and the lexicon.

Notes


2. The details of what is meant by “lexical category” in various distinct analyses of this kind (e.g. Joseph & Smirniotopoulos (1993), Philippaki-Warburton (1990) or Tsimpili (1992)) need not concern us here; however, it will be concluded that such decisions were not based on syntactic evidence. The exclusion of Aspect from the class of syntactically relevant categories (and, consequently, from the clause structures in (14) and (15) below) was mainly due to morphological irregularity, while the effects of Aspect in the syntax were not taken into account; cf. also Tsangalidis (1993, 1994).

3. It should be noted that Anderson (1982: 588) also speculated whether Tense could always be seen as a syntactically relevant category; however, all the relevant analyses of Modern Greek appear to have taken this for granted.

4. *Tha* has been variously described as a particle, clitic and affix; however, its precise theoretical status need not concern us here.

5. Note, however, that Rivero (ibid.) describes these glosses as “approximate”.

6. For various views in the literature see the references in note (1); also Efthathiadis (1974), Joseph (1991), and Joseph & Smirniotopoulos (1993).

7. However, an extreme lexicalist view would claim that there is no productive process at all and that both stems are stored independently in the lexicon, since, after all, both stems are marked as [+] or [-] perfective (cf. Tsimpili (1992: 56-7); also Joseph & Smirniotopoulos (1993)).


9. Cf. the relevant chapters in Triandafyllides (1941), Mirambel (1959), Tzartzanos (1946, 1953), and Tsopanakis (1994).

and subjunctive; Tsopanakis (1994) is the most recent exposition of the opposite (traditional) view.

11 The examples and the English glosses in (3) through (11) are taken from Hesse (1980).

12 It should also be noted that at least the latter two analyses presented here, face a number of problems in descriptive terms—which will be ignored here (but see Tsangalidis (1993) and (to appear)).

13 I am not concerned here with the precise semantic content of these forms and the features involved; however, it is clear that these are related to Aspect, and, in any case, as will be seen below, the case for Modern Greek is not affected.

14 This would in fact be a possible option in Modern Greek, although not in English; cf. the discussion of the forms in (1) above.

15 A perfective nonpast form, however, may occur without tha or any other particle in certain restricted contexts; yet, this fact does not affect the argument here, as in all these contexts present-time reference is also excluded; cf. an milisi ..., tis milisi tis oxi ..., milisi dhl milisi ..., opoie milisi ..., and so on (i.e., forms which correspond to if s/he speaks ..., whether s/he speaks or not ..., whenever s/he speaks ..., and the like), none of which may coincide with the time of speaking (cf. Tsangalidis (1993: 46)).

16 Cf. the forms in (2) and the references in note (7); also, Tsangalidis (1993, 1994).

17 Needless to say, regularity need not be equated with absolute transparency of the kind implied by Rivero’s glosses in (1); that the interpretations in (12) and (13) are not as straightforward as those in (1), does not necessarily make them irregular or idiosyncratic.

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