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# TAMING – AND NAMING – THE GREEK “SUBJUNCTIVE”

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## 1. Introduction

Linguists tend to want to approach a language on its own terms, so to speak, and find solutions for analytic problems by looking to the language itself. It cannot be denied that this is a valid and highly effective strategy; after all, the speakers of the language generally speaking do not have access to anything but their own language and the resources it provides for analytic decisions. Why then should linguists try to do anything different from that, especially if the goal of linguistic analysis is to develop an account of a language that mirrors native speakers' internalized knowledge, a “grammar”, of their language. Moreover, looking only to language-internal evidence for a particular analysis is certainly a reasonable first step for the analyst to take methodologically; bringing in external evidence, including outcomes of laboratory experiments or even insights from language games or poetic form, is a step that can come after the internal evidence has been assessed, as a type of corroboration for the internally arrived-at account.

Still, linguists also show a healthy interest in language typology and typological/structural comparison between and among different languages. Thus, for all the fact that linguists might like language-internal solutions, it is not at all unusual, and indeed, it is to be expected -- given that linguists do investigate languages on typological grounds -- that a problem in one language can be given illumination by a consideration of another language. Recognizing the value of language typology and typological/structural comparison between and among different languages is thus a suitable complementary approach to looking only to internal evidence.

The particular issue at hand that prompts these methodological musings is a thorny and troublesome problem in the analysis of Modern Greek for which some light from a comparative/typological perspective turns out to be useful.

## 2. The Problem

The problem in question is the verbal forms in Modern Greek that occur with *na* (and *as*, etc.) that have long been a locus of analytic controversy. The issues are well known, but some background is useful here. The analytic problem is that some of the specific verbal forms – and it is important to emphasize “forms” here since a key facet of the issue is how to deal with the distribution of the forms themselves, not their functions – that are found with *na* can occur independently, while others cannot. Thus, with imperfective aspect present tense forms, as (1a) and (1b) show, forms with or without *na* are possible as well-formed stand-alone utterances, whereas with perfective aspect present tense forms, as (1c) and (1d) show, only the combination with *na* gives an acceptable stand-alone utterance:

- |     |                              |                        |                     |                         |
|-----|------------------------------|------------------------|---------------------|-------------------------|
| (1) | a. <i>na</i> $\gamma$ rafo?  | ‘Should I be writing?’ | b. $\gamma$ rafo    | ‘I write; I am writing’ |
|     | c. <i>na</i> $\gamma$ rapso? | ‘Should I write?’      | d. * $\gamma$ rapso | ‘I write’               |

The analytical situation is complicated by the fact that the perfective forms also co-occur with other controlling elements such as WH-words, as in (2a-b), conditional markers, as in (2c), and some conjunctions, as in (2d), among others:

- |     |                               |                     |                                |                       |
|-----|-------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------------|
| (2) | a. <i>otan</i> $\gamma$ rapso | ‘when I write, ...’ | b. <i>opjos</i> $\gamma$ rapsi | ‘whoever writes, ...’ |
|     | c. <i>an</i> $\gamma$ rapso   | ‘if I write, ...’   | d. <i>prin</i> $\gamma$ rapso  | ‘before I write, ...’ |

The generalization about the distribution of these forms therefore can be stated as in (3):

- (3) Modern Greek perfective present forms never stand alone; they must always be introduced by some “controlling” or “determining” element.

Virtually all descriptions and analyses of Greek make this observation, with many noting that there is one main exception to this generalization: the *fiji den fiji* construction, as in (4a), with perhaps also the fixed phrase *opu fiji fiji* as well, as in (6b):

- (4) a. *fiji den fiji* ‘whether he leaves or not’ (literally, “leaves/3SG.PERFVE not leaves/3SG.PERFVE”)  
 b. *opu fiji fiji* ‘run for your dear life!’ (literally: “wherever run/3SG.PERFVE, run/3SG.PERFVE”)

These are fairly isolated exceptions, with the lexicalized character of *opu fiji fiji* removing it from being much of an analytic concern; the *fiji den fiji* construction, however, does have some degree of productivity (cf. *bi den bi* ‘whether he enters or not’ and similarly constructed examples), and, as such, cannot be totally ignored.

So the facts are clear, but the problem lies in both analytic issues and a terminological one. On the analytic side, the questions are just what grammatical and especially morphological category this perfective present form represents and why it should be restricted as it is, being unable to stand alone and always requiring some supportive element that “selects” for it. On the terminological side, the question is just what to call this form and category.

For a language to have essentially a form that is always subordinated to some other form is not unusual at all from a typological standpoint. Cross-linguistically, this is in fact what is found with “subjunctive” forms in many well-known and well-studied languages, such as the Romance languages. As for the label, as Mackridge (1985: 174) observes: “The term ‘subjunctive’ ... suggests that the clause in which a subjunctive appears is subjoined (i.e. subordinated) to another”, and while he was talking about combinations such as *na yrapso* and not the form *yrapso* itself, the point is clear: “subjunctive” is appropriate if we are dealing with something that is always “subjoined”. This question of labeling therefore intersects with the question of whether Greek has a subjunctive mood, i.e. a verbal category associated with subordination.

Thus there is an analytic, as well as a terminological, dilemma here, in that if there is a category, it should be labeled. That is, we need not only to “tame” the subjunctive beast but also to “name” it.

### 3. So, Does Modern Greek Have a “Subjunctive”?

The issue is actually further complicated by another related fact. Given that *na* is a major player in the use of this form, though not the exclusive one, we can further ask, as many have – and this is perhaps where the analytic tangle arises -- whether *na* itself, or *na* as one of a set of determining markers, determines this “subjunctive”. As an alternative, one could say that the particular verb form, specifically the perfective present, is itself the reflection of the subjunctive category. These interrelated questions can be summed up as in (5):

- (5) The set of questions at issue here  
 a. is the combination of *na* (etc.) + Perfective Present (*na yrapso*) a “subjunctive”?, or ...  
 b. is the Perfective Present itself (*yrapso* alone) a “subjunctive”?, or ...  
 c. does *na* itself determine a “subjunctive”?, and in any case ...  
 d. what does “subjunctive” mean here?

In what follows, I stake out my position with regard to each of these questions and then address the analytic and terminological issues that arise from these positions. All are positions that are defensible in and of themselves, so that the combination of them poses a particular framework for addressing the overall issue in Greek morphosyntax of the nature of the *na* forms and the forms with *na*.

To answer (5d) first, I take the position here that “subjunctive” is to be understood only as a morpho-syntactic category, not a functional one; thus subjunctive-like uses are not the issue, though they turn out not to be totally irrelevant. As for (5a), my answer is yes, by virtue of the argument of Veloudis & Philippaki-Warbuton 1983 that the selection of negation marker can be correlated with mood: the negator *den* selects for and thus is an index of indicative mood whereas the negator *min* selects for and thus is an index of a subjunctive, the subjunctive being determined by the combination of verbal forms with *na* and *as*. The relevant distributional facts are shown in (6a-d); note that no matter what position one take on the distribution of the negators, it is simply a fact about Greek that

the imperative mood as such is idiosyncratically (for Modern Greek) not negatable, as shown in (6e), with the unambiguously imperatival form *elate* ‘come/IMPV.PL’.<sup>1</sup>

- (6) a.  $\text{den } \gamma\text{rafo} / \text{den } \epsilon\gamma\text{rapsa} / \text{den } \theta\alpha \gamma\text{rapso} / *_{\text{min}} \gamma\text{rafo} / *_{\text{min}} \epsilon\gamma\text{rapsa} / *_{\text{min}} \theta\alpha \gamma\text{rafo}$   
 b.  $\text{na min } \gamma\text{rafo} / \text{na min } \gamma\text{rapso} / \text{na min } \epsilon\gamma\text{rapsa} / *_{\text{min}} \theta\alpha \gamma\text{rapso} / *_{\theta\alpha} \text{min } \gamma\text{rapso}$   
 c.  $*_{\text{na}} \text{den } \gamma\text{rafo} / *_{\text{na}} \text{den } \gamma\text{rapso} / *_{\text{na}} \text{den } \epsilon\gamma\text{rapsa}$   
 d.  $\text{as min } \gamma\text{rafo} / \text{as min } \gamma\text{rapso} / \text{as min } \epsilon\gamma\text{rapsa} / *_{\text{as}} \text{den } \gamma\text{rafo} / *_{\text{as}} \text{den } \gamma\text{rapso}$   
 e.  $*_{\text{den}} \text{eláte} / *_{\text{min}} \text{elate}$  ‘don’t come’ vs. OK: *min erhete!* ‘NOT come/2PL.PRES.PRFVE’

The inability of imperative forms to cooccur with negation means that the fact that negative commands (prohibitions) are expressed with *min* plus a nonimperative form, as shown in (6e), cannot be used as an argument against taking *min* as correlating with subjunctive mood. In this account, *na* is essentially a marker of subjunctive mood and *min* is associated with subjunctive negation. Thus a prohibitive like *min yrapsis* in (6e) in this account must be analyzed as deriving from subjunctive used as a surrogate negative imperative, e.g. *na min yrapsis* ‘you should not write’. Accounting for *min yrapsis* this way would take advantage of the fact that *na* can sometimes be optional, as with *prin* ‘before’:

- (7)    a. prin fijos ...  
             before leave/2SG.PRES.PRFE  
             ‘before you leave ...’
- b. prin na fijos ...  
             *na*  
             ‘before you leave ...’

There is, however, one undesirable aspect associated with deriving prohibitive *min yrapsis* from *na min yrapsis*: unlike the optionality of *na* with *prin* shown in (7), there is a difference in politeness and indirectness associated with the surrogate subjunctive prohibition that is not present with the simple prohibitive. That is, *na min yrapsis* is more polite and less direct as a negative command than *min yrapsis* is. It is not clear that simply allowing *na* to be optional in this case can achieve that effect. As it happens, the account advocated below in section 4 for categorizing forms like *yrapsis* can answer this issue without reference to mood categories and thus avoids the problem noted here; this is discussed in greater detail below.

Moving on to (5b), here I take the view that the perfective present is identical morphologically at least in terms of endings with all other (indicative) present forms; so the marking for Perfectivity would have to be the telling indicator, but it seems more to play an aspectual role, at least in all other instantiations. For instance, in the future, the difference between *tha yrapso* 'I will write' and *tha yrafo* 'I will be writing' is not a mood distinction; and, as (6a-b) show, it is negated with *den*, suggesting that it is indicative and not a bearer of subjunctive modality.

As for (5c), *na* can certainly be taken as a marker of subjunctive, but a possible complication that such a view entails is that *na* itself occurs with other tense/aspect forms, as shown in (8), with explanations of the combinations and their traditional name according to most grammars:<sup>2</sup>

- (8) a. *na ɛyɾafa* ‘I should have been writing’ (*na* + imperfective past tense (“imperfect”))  
 b. *na ɛyɾapsa* ‘I should have written’ (*na* + perfective past tense (“aorist”))  
 c. *na ixa yɾapsi* ‘I should have written’ (*na* + perfect past tense (“pluperfect”))

The complication here is that under this view, Greek would have not only a *present* subjunctive but also a *past* subjunctive, a *pluperfect* subjunctive, etc. Admittedly, this may not be a serious problem but it does multiply categories simply to sustain the analysis by which *na* is a marker of subjunctive mood. The converse is also problematic: if *na* determines a subjunctive by virtue of combining with the perfective present, what is the status of the other elements that combine with that form, such as *otan* or *an*, seen in (2); here perhaps the position of Barri 1981 is relevant, as he opts for a broader view of what subjunctives can be, via a set of “converters” -- including *otan*, *an*, and *na*, among others -- that select for the Perfective Present. The issue there is that it reduces the matter to a list with no reason for inclusion on the list and no reason even for the existence of such a “list” whose elements have such properties.

<sup>1</sup> I use *elate* here because some imperative forms in the plural are identical to the perfective present form, e.g. *fijete* 'leave/PL'; singular forms are similarly unambiguous and could be used here to make the same point, e.g. neither *\*den kane* nor *\*min kane* are possible for 'don't do!'. with the singular imperative *kane* 'do!'.

<sup>2</sup> See Agouraki 1991 for a review of possible positions on status of *na*.

Thus, no matter how one treats *na* vis-à-vis the subjunctive, problems arise. If *na* is taken to determine the subjunctive, then the forms in (2) would not be subjunctives -- and note that they are negated with *den* (e.g. *an den yrapso* ‘if I don’t write’),<sup>3</sup> even though indefinites, as in (2b), and conditionals, as in (2c), are domains where “subjunctive” mood might be expected on cross-linguistic grounds. If, instead, forms like *yrapso* alone determine subjunctive mood, then one has to question what the function of *na* is in (1a) and what the status of the imperfective form in (1a) is; is *na* a complementizer, a subordinating conjunction, or the like, despite its prosodic weakness, i.e. the fact that it never occurs alone and is always unaccented?<sup>4</sup> Thus, some solutions have focused on particular combinations, making this more a syntactic issue, as with Veloudis and Philippaki-Warbuton 1983, while others, e.g. Barri 1981, have emphasized the role of selection by certain elements, with *na* simply being one of a set, not necessarily a natural class of elements.

#### 4. Light from Hibernia

As suggested in section 1, taking a cross-linguistic view on a problem, especially when the language-internal resources for a solution are exhausted, can be fruitful. I suggest that taming and naming the Greek subjunctive is just such a case. In particular, while I am sympathetic to solutions such as those discussed in section 3, this seems to be a case where we can gain some insight by focusing on the verb *form* itself rather than the elements that combine with it, and then looking to other languages with similarly restricted forms. One especially attractive parallel is to be found in some of the Celtic languages, Welsh and Irish being the best examples.

In particular, in Old Irish (as also in modern Irish and Welsh, but most clearly instantiated in Old Irish), one finds a distinction in verb forms known as “*absolute*” versus “*conjunct*” for simple verbs, i.e. verbs that consist essentially just of the verbal root, and a related distinction known as “*prototonic*” versus “*deuterotonic*” for compound verbs, i.e. verbs that consist of the verbal root augmented with prefixes, which are often called prepositions but can also be referred to as preverbs. This somewhat complicated situation in Old Irish is described as follows in Thurneysen (1946: §542):

In most tenses and moods the person endings have two form, to which the names ‘conjunct’ and ‘absolute’ have been given .... The conjunct flexion occurs:

1. In all verbal forms compounded with prepositions
2. In simple verbs:
  - (a) after the verbal particles *ro* [marking perfectivity] and *no* [marking certain past tenses];
  - (b) after the conjunctions and particles listed in § 38, 2 under the name of conjunct particles;
  - (c) in the archaic examples where the verb stands at the end of its clause.

The absolute flexion is confined to simple verbs in positions other than the above-mentioned. It alone has relative forms with special endings (§ 566 f.).

Some examples of these forms, showing the differences between absolute and conjunct, are given in (9):

(9)	<i>Absolute:</i>	berid	‘he bears’	<i>Conjunct:</i>	do · beir	‘he brings’
		mórmair	‘we magnify’		ní móram	‘we do not magnify’
		léicit	‘they leave’		co lécet	‘how do they leave?’

As noted above, the distinction between “*deuterotonic*” and “*prototonic*” forms is similar; the terminology refers to the placement of stress in the string of elements making up compound verbs (preverbs plus verbal root), whether it is on the second element in the string (e.g. *beir* and *tibi* in the examples in (10)) or on the first element in that string (e.g. *as* and *con* in the examples in (10)),<sup>5</sup> but the distribution is just like the absolute/conjunct distinction, as shown in (10):

<sup>3</sup> In high-style writings in the archaizing variety *katharevousa* (now largely abandoned but widely used into the mid-to-late 20<sup>th</sup> century in academic and legalistic contexts), clauses with *an* ‘if’ were negated with *min*, e.g. *an mi sfaló* ‘if I am not mistaken’.

<sup>4</sup> I draw a distinction between this (subordinating) *na* and the deictic presentational predicate *ná* (always accented) ‘here!’; see Joseph 1981 for discussion.

<sup>5</sup> There are phonological changes in the preverbs and root associated with being stressed or not; those are irrelevant here but they account for the difference between, e.g., *as* and *e* or *beir* and *pir* in (10). The underlying forms given in (10) are meant just as

(10)	<i>Deuterotonic</i>	as · beir ‘says (stress: as · <u>beir</u> )	<i>Prototonic</i>	ní · epir ‘he does not say’ (stress: ní · <u>epir</u> (= /ní- <u>as</u> -ber/)
		con · tibi ‘mocks (stress: con · <u>tibi</u> )		ní · cuitbi ‘he does not mock’ (stress: ní · <u>cuib</u> i (= /ní- <u>con</u> -tib/)

Importantly for Greek, the conjunct and prototonic forms occur only when there is some supporting/governing element, and they do not stand alone, thus paralleling the restriction on the Greek perfective present forms exactly.

Furthermore, it is not just the use of verb forms in Old Irish that parallels the Greek situation, but there is also a set of so-called “conjunct particles” that must be given attention, for these are particles that require the conjunct and prototonic forms; these include such elements as the negative *ní*, the conditional/concessive *cia* ‘although; even if’, combinations of prepositions fused with the relative pronoun (e.g. *cosa* ‘with whom’), and the interrogative marker *in*, among several others.

Moreover, just as with the few cases (one productive and one unproductive) like *fiji den fiji* where there is no governing particle, so too does that happen occasionally in Old Irish with conjunct and prototonic forms. A somewhat productive use of these otherwise bound forms comes in the so-called “responsive” form, which is a verb form repeated from a question to signal an affirmative response, e.g. *Ní-chumci sòn* ‘Thou canst not (do) that’ ... *Cumcin écin* ‘(Yes), I can indeed!’, where *cumcin* is a dependent form, here prototonic. A more restricted usage is the phenomenon known as Bergin’s Law, described by Thurneysen §513b as follows: “Simple and compound verbs may be placed at the end of their clause; the former then have conjunct flexion (§ 542), the latter prototonic forms”. This is an “archaic feature” by Thurneysen’s reckoning, found, as he says, only “in Irish poetry and in non-metrical ‘rhetorical’ prose”.

I propose, therefore, as solution to the problem of the Modern Greek subjunctive and the behavior of the perfective present forms, that we need to recognize the relevance for Greek of an Irish-like distinction between absolute and conjunct forms. That is, we can extend the value of the traditional Irish distinction outside of Celtic and categorize *yrapsō* as a “conjunct” form. This move has the direct benefit of recognizing overtly this form’s restricted distribution and explains why it is found only with some “supporting” element, i.e. why it cannot stand alone.

This is rather like Barri’s approach, but it focuses on the verb form rather than on the elements that combine with it, though a set of “conjunct particles” for Greek would need to be identified. Interestingly, there is considerable overlap between the types of items that would be on the Greek list and those in the Old Irish set, in that in the respective lists of both languages, there is a negator (Irish *ní*, Greek *min*), a conditional element (Irish *cia*, Greek *an*), and relative-like forms (Irish *cosa* and other prepositional relatives, Greek indefinites like *ópjos* with their similarity to (historically) related relatives such as (*o*) *opíos*), among some others.

Furthermore, this approach solves the dilemma raised by the prohibitive construction of the type *min yrapsis*, discussed above in section 3. In this account, *min* simply becomes one of the conjunct particles, joining *otan* and *opjos* and others, and there is no need to associate it with the more polite negative command introduced by *na*; in that way, no account is needed of the absence of *na* in *min yrapsis* or the difference in politeness between the two forms of negative commands (*na min yrapsis* and *min yrapsis*). It is admittedly an idiosyncratic, and thus unexplained, fact that *min* is used in this way and selects for the conjunct form, but in a sense that is no more idiosyncratic than the fact that imperative forms cannot be negated in Modern Greek; they were negatable in Ancient Greek, for instance.<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, in this approach, there is the side benefit of showing how linguistic typology, in the form of information on an issue in one language can offer illumination on a difficult problem in the analysis of another language. It does mean recognizing absolute/conjunct as a relevant morphological distinction for Greek, but it is one that is needed independently for Irish and Welsh, and thus in a sense is “available” in the universal inventory of categories.

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rough indicators of the morphemic make-up of the forms in question and not as a thoroughly worked out analysis of Old Irish morphophonology.

<sup>6</sup> This account, admittedly, requires that the *min* of *na min yrapsis* and the *min* of *min yrapsis* need to be treated as different, though possibly related, elements. Janda and Joseph 1999, though, have argued for just that position, claiming that these two instantiations of the form *min* are to be separated from one another, even though allied in some ways as part of a morphological “constellation”.

## 5. Some Drawbacks

The solution proposed here is not without some drawbacks. For instance, the categorization of perfective present forms as “conjunct” does not really explain the facts, but rather puts them in a context where they become understandable; that is, with this labelling, assuming it has some cross-linguistic significance, the Greek form can be aligned with the behavior of “conjunct” forms in general, cross-linguistically. The question of why conjunct forms behave this way is a different analytic issue that cannot be addressed here but must remain a question for further research.

Moreover, the parallel between Greek and Irish proposed here is not exact. The Greek verb forms are not different from ones that occur as “absolute” forms, yet in Irish, the conjunct and absolute forms do differ. Also, Greek has verbs that are compounded with preverbs, as does Irish, some of them even cognate (e.g. Greek *pro* and Irish *ro*), but the behavior of preverbs is very different in the two languages; preverbs in Greek do not select for a conjunct verb form in the way that preverbs in Irish trigger the occurrence of conjunct forms..

Still, what I suggest is compelling about this proposal are three key aspects of it. First, it focuses on the form, not on the function to which the form is put, and in that way offers a basis for the clarity that the concreteness of actual forms and their distribution affords, as opposed to the abstractness sometimes encountered when one tries to categorize various functions as same or different. Second, the Celtic distinction has some of the same quirks that the Greek situation does, in that there are forms that always co-occur with an odd assortment of items that are not really characterizable as a natural class. Finally, there are even a few more or less isolated exceptions to reckon with in each language. For these reasons, I submit, extending the Celtic absolute/conjunct distinction to Greek provides a basis for both taming and naming the Greek subjunctive.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> There is a final argument for this proposal that involves a somewhat lighthearted appeal to authority. Such an appeal is not always the best sort of argument but it is perhaps worth mentioning here in a footnote, and thus as a secondary source of support. This is especially so since an appeal to this authority is one that is hard to ignore in the Greek context. The scholar who coined the terms “absolute” and “conjunct” for Old Irish was the 19<sup>th</sup> century German scholar who was the founder of Celtic philology, Johann Kasper Zeuss. While his name was pronounced [zojs], if it is Hellenized, to Ζεϋς, then we can see that we must take it seriously: how many of us can say that a solution we offer to an analytic problem is truly something διόσδοτον!