

Future-marked conditionals in Greek: The grammaticalization of a speech-act construction

Greek conditionals with future marking in the protasis are considered ungrammatical by traditional grammars or at best acceptable to some speakers only (Kleris & Babiniotis 2005). Typological studies (e.g. Hedin 2000) note that such constructions are both marginal and marked in a language that, like English, uses a present-tense form of the verb to mark future reference. Quantitative analysis of data from the HNC and the GkWaC corpora reveals that, although less frequent than non-future marked conditionals, the construction is not idiolectal or restricted to informal register, and correlates significantly with certain lexico-grammatical features and a special pragmatics: a) the verbs *thelo* “want” and *boro* “can” in the first-person or third-person generic reference and in the imperfective past are the most common ones in the protasis, b) the apodosis also contains a verb in the imperfective past, c) the protases are more likely to occur with unexpressed subjects, which is consistent with the fact that their content is pragmatically inferred and taken for granted anyway. Consider, for example, (i),

- (i) *an tha borusa me titlus na apotiposo*
if FUT can- IMPF.P.1SG with titles to express-NP.1SG
tis protereotites aftes, tha eleya oti ine
the priorities these, FUT say- IMPF.P.1SG that be-PRES.3PL
o sxediasmos me taftoxroni ilopiisi draseon.....
the planning with simultaneous realization actions-GEN
“If I could (literally: if I would be able to) express these priorities in titles, I would say that they are the planning with the simultaneous realization of (certain) projects...”
(HNC)

featuring the verb *boro* in the expected tense-aspect template and presenting as a condition the speaker’s (completely) given ability to present the priorities in question (not only I can, I’m already in the process of doing it). The protasis does not therefore express negative epistemic stance (Fillmore 1990), as would have been the case with a non-future imperfective, but serves as an almost formulaic, hedged or polite introduction to the statement in the main clause. Although the alternative scenario is possible to imagine (i.e. one’s ability to say something can be construed as a prerequisite for one’s actually saying it), the data indicate that the construction is not really about alternative worlds (i.e. a predictive) and instead functions as a speech-act conditional (Dancygier & Sweetser 2005). Purely predictive examples, although few, are also attested; again, the content of the conditional clause is always contextually given, and purposeful conditionalizing serves to reestablish alternatives or simply challenge the interlocutor’s assessment of something as given.

We argue that an analysis relying on instance-based, frequent patterns (Tomasello 2003, Goldberg 2006, Bybee 2006) allows for a) a fine-grained analysis of constructional semantics-pragmatics, b) a realistic assessment of compositionality (the normally unexpected presence of distanced forms in speech-act conditionals is motivated by the fact that the future + imperfective past of *thelo* and *boro* is conventionally associated with the expression of politeness in non-conditional contexts as well), c) a motivation for the construction’s extending from “prefabs” (Bybee 2006) to other verbs and to non-past contexts, offering insights to the relationship between predictive and speech-act conditionals.

APPENDIX

- (1) *an tha thele kapios na kaθorisi to profil aftu tu enos,*
if FUT want-IMPF.P.3SG someone to determine-NP.3SG the profile this the one
tha boruse na ipostiriksi oti o rolos tu kinite
FUT can-IMPF.P.3SG to support-NP.3SG that the role his move-PRES.3SG
paralila i poli konda sto rolo tu ekdoti
parallel or very close to-the role of-the editor
“If someone would want to determine the profile of this one (director), s/he could support that his role moves in parallel or very close to the role of the editor.”
- (2) *an tha thelame na metaferume kapiro arxio ston topiko mas skliro diskio,*
if FUT want-IMPF.P.1PL to move-NP.1PL some file to-the local our hard drive
tha eprepe na patisume me to deksi pliktro tu pondikiou...
FUT have to- IMPF.P.3SG to press-NP.1PL with the right click of-the mouse
“If we would want to move a file to our own hard drive, it would be necessary to press with the right click of the mouse (on the file).”
- (3) *an tha boruse na ipostirixti me perisotero aksiopisto tropo,*
if FUT can- IMPF.P.3SG to be supported. NP.3SG with more reliable manner
i eiptosis mias kaθolikis kvandikis sindetikotitas tha itan terasties
the consequences of-a global quantum connectivity FUT be-IMPF.P.3SG huge
“If it could be supported in a more reliable manner, the consequences of a global quantum connectivity would be huge.”
- (4) *an tha borusa na miliso sximatika tha eleya oti*
if FUT can- IMPF.P.1SG to talk-NP.1SG schematically FUT say- IMPF.P.1SG that
eyo tin eneryia ke tis ebnefsis mu tis perno apo anthropus
I the energy and the inspiration my them take-PRES.1SG from people
san ton Θoδopo Angelopulo...
like the Thodoros Angelopoulos....
“If I could (lit: would be able to) speak schematically, I would say that I take my energy and my inspiration from people like Thodoros Angelopoulos...”

(HNC)

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