

(Lexical and Inner) Aspect in Greek Idioms

Evangelia Leivada
University of Cyprus

Semantic interpretation of idiomatic expressions is traditionally taken to be derived idiosyncratically and certainly non-compositionally. McGinnis (2002), however, claims that aspect is one instance where idiomatic structures lose their assumed idiosyncratic properties and behave as fully systematic and compositional phrases. In response, Glasbey (2003) provides cases where the aspectual properties of some idiomatic expressions cannot be derived compositionally. The claim made about aspectual compositionality of idioms should entail that the same aspectual properties hold for identical syntactic structures, where one involves the idiomatic expression and the other its non-idiomatic counterpart.

Leaving aside the question whether inner aspect is determined in the lexicon or post-syntactically, I will discuss some asymmetries observed between idioms in Standard Modern Greek (SMG) and the variety spoken in Cyprus, Cypriot Greek (CG), and their non-idiomatic equivalents regarding telicity (or else, inner aspect). Following a classification of aspect that makes a distinction between lexical and inner aspect (e.g. Borik 2006, Megerdooimian 2008, Rothstein 2008) and assuming that lexical aspect refers to inherent aspectual properties of the verb alone, while inner aspect is conveyed by the verb and its arguments (hence referring to the aspect of the verb phrase; Megerdooimian 2008), I suggest that lexical aspect equals inner aspect for the class of the examined idiomatic expressions.

The following table lists some of the idiomatic expressions examined:

examples	variety	idiom	idiomatic meaning	literal meaning
(1)	SMG	<i>kovo ti xoli</i>	‘scare’	‘cut the bile’
(2)	CG	<i>kofko to kuri</i>	‘take a nap’	‘cut the piece of wood’
(3a-b)	SMG & CG	<i>troo xilopita</i>	‘get the mitten’	‘eat mush-pie’
(4)	SMG	<i>travo kupi</i>	‘work very hard’	‘pull oar’

As McGinnis (2002: 669) observes, “*kick the bucket* (an achievement) and *saw logs* (an activity), which cannot passivize, are aspectually identical to their non-idiomatic counterparts, except that an iterative reading of the idiomatic *kick the bucket* is pragmatically unavailable”. One can reasonably assume that the suggested aspectual compositionality between idioms and their literal counterparts primarily refers to inner aspect or telicity, that is, to the “notion of completion or reaching the boundary of the event” that the verb phrase denotes (Megerdooomian 2008: 2). Glasbey (2003) raises an argument against aspectual compositionality in idioms discussing the different aspectual properties of the idiomatic and the literal *paint the town red* in English; she accounts for that assuming that the idiom falls under the category of “fake object resultatives” (Jackendoff 1997): they may appear as resultatives, but the resultative state is real only in the literal verb phrase and not in the idiomatic.

I regard the idiomatic reading of SMG (1) and CG (2) to follow under this category as well, while the contrast between the incompatibility of the time-span adverbial with the idiomatic VP, as opposed to its compatibility with the literal VP, suggests that when it comes to inner aspect, it is not always true that the same aspectual properties hold for the two — even in identical syntactic environments. In (2), the VP, when literal, is telic (accomplishment), therefore can receive modification by time-span adverbials, while the idiomatic counterpart is atelic (state), so adjunction of an *in*-phrase is illicit.

- (1) I Eleni mu ekopse ti xoli se misi ora.
 the Helen me cut.PAST.PERF.3SG the bile in half hour
- i. idiomatic meaning: *not available* (cf. English: ??‘Helen scared me in half an hour.’)
 ii. literal meaning: ‘Helen cut my bile in half an hour.’

- (2) O Petros ekopse to kuri tu se misi ora.
 the Peter cut.PAST.PERF.3SG the wood his in half hour
- i. idiomatic meaning: *not available* (cf. English: ??‘Peter took a nap in half an hour.’)
 ii. literal meaning: ‘Peter cut his (piece of) wood in half an hour.’

Slightly different is the case of the SMG idiom for ‘get the mitten’.

- (3) a. O Christos efage xilopita se pente lepta.
 the Chris eat.PAST.PERF.3SG mush-pie in five minutes
- i. idiomatic meaning: ‘Chris got the mitten in five minutes.’
 ii. literal meaning: *‘Chris ate mush-pie in five minutes.’
- b. O Christos efage tin/mia xilopita se pente lepta.
 the Chris eat.PAST.PERF.3SG the/one mush-pie in five minutes
- i. idiomatic meaning: *not available*
 ii. literal meaning: ‘Chris ate the/one mush-pie in five minutes.’

In this case, the fact that the literal VP cannot be modified by the time-span adverbial is the result of a mass noun as the object of *efage*. Mass nouns (and bare plurals) have the aspectual effect of turning a telic predicate atelic (Verkuyl 1972). If the mass noun *xilopita* ‘mush-pie’ is replaced by *tin/mia xilopita* ‘the/one mush-pie’, then the time-span adverbial is compatible with the literal verb phrase (3b), but of course the idiomatic reading is not available, since the idiom is fixed and involves the mass noun. Still, the fact remains that the mass noun alters the telicity of the predicate only in the literal VP, and crucially not in the idiomatic VP. I consider the ability to modify the latter with the time-span adverbial clearly suggesting that aspectual compositionality between the verb and its internal argument is a property of the literal VP, but not of the idiomatic one.

Note that inner aspect is perfectly sufficient to account for the aspectual properties of the above idiomatic expressions. If, however, lexical aspect is assumed as a domain different from inner aspect in non-idiomatic VPs, then in the idioms examined above, the domain of lexical aspect should coincide with the domain of inner aspect, since the locus of idiomatic interpretation is not the verb alone but the entire VP, consisting of the verb and its object. This leads to the conclusion that in V+OB idioms, lexical aspect is conveyed by the entire VP, thus it equals inner aspect which is also conveyed by the entire VP, whereas for the non-idiomatic counterpart, the VP is responsible for determining only the inner aspect.

Under the assumption that in V+OB idioms, lexical aspect equals inner aspect, the existence of idioms that show different aspectual properties from their non-idiomatic counterparts is justified: for the equivalent non-idiomatic VP, inner and lexical aspect are not conveyed by the same argument(s) and hence do not equal each other. As an alternative, one might entertain the suggestion that no lexical aspect exists in such idioms in the sense in which it exists in non-idiomatic VPs. However, even this kind of proposal would arguably entail that such idiomatic VPs are not aspectually identical with their equivalent non-idiomatic phrases, since the non-idiomatic VPs have both lexical and inner aspect, while their idiomatic counterparts lack the lexical aspect.

Finally, both in SMG and CG there are idioms that have the same aspectual properties as their non-idiomatic counterparts; whether this is accidental or showing compositionality of inner aspect for these idioms or suggesting the need for a different approach of compositionality in idioms remains to be discussed. One example is given in (4), where both the idiomatic and literal VPs are atelic:

- (4) O Nicos travikse kupi gia kero (id.)/ gia deka lepta (lit.).
 the Nick pull.PAST.PERF.3SG oar for weather for ten minutes

- i. idiomatic meaning: 'Nick worked hard for a long time.'
- ii. literal meaning: 'Nick rowed for ten minutes.'