

The Verbal Attentiveness of Zorba: Joy as a Verb Conjugated in His Life's Sentence

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ABSTRACT

This paper reads Alexis Zorba, the eponymous protagonist of Nikos Kazantzakis's *Zorba the Greek* (2008), as a living syntax of joy. Drawing on metalinguistic theory – particularly the grammatical primacy of the verb – and the Indian philosophical framework of the *purusharthas* (*dharma*, *artha*, *kama* and *moksha*), the paper argues that Zorba's existence is verb-led. It is a coherent yet improvisational sentence governed by the gerundial act of 'joying'. His dance, music and sensory attentiveness are examined as embodied philosophical expressions rather than pleasure-seeking. The paper further contends that while the *purushartha* schema illuminates Zorba's way of being, his exuberant vitality ultimately exceeds and destabilises any fixed framework.

Keywords: verbal attentiveness, purusharthas, syntax of being, embodied joy, svadharma

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Men have sunk very low. They've let their bodies become mute and they only speak with their mouths. But what d'you expect a mouth to say? What can it tell you?

– Zorba the Greek

With his weathered, sun-kissed skin, wild, untethered spirit and laughter, Alexis Zorba is an elemental force; he is a man whose very being dances on the edge of chaos and order; he weaves music, emotion and embodiment into a powerful witness to living fully and freely. In *Zorba the Greek* (2008), Nikos Kazantzakis meditates on the human condition through the unlikely friendship between an introspective intellectual and the exuberantly passionate Zorba. When Zorba is seen as a man written in the grammar of existence, then his syntax is action driven by a nucleus: a verb 'joy'. Whereas Zorba's life is an active sentence: verb-led, coherent in motion; the narrator's is a passive, noun-like life. Zorba does not live life from a distance; he conjugates it, breathes it, embodies it. Thoughts and beliefs do not drive him. What runs at the core of his being is a forceful verb, a doing: joying. It is the verb 'joy' that adds drama to the unfolding of his life. It is this verbliness that produces events, happenings, moments to remember; it is 'joy' that clicks these events, which would otherwise cluster together in suspended animation. Furthermore, extending what Joe Moran writes in *First You Write a Sentence* (2019) that 'life is a noun but it can only be lived as a verb' (68), we can better understand how Zorba embodies this paradox. Life, grammatically, may appear

as a static subject, but its true meaning only emerges when it is affixed verbally: 'living'. Zorba refuses to treat life as an abstract concept or a problem to be solved; instead, he enacts it and turns existence into a series of embodied verbs: dancing, laughing, working, loving and living. He transforms the noun 'life' into the verb 'living', through sensory and emotional presence. Where the narrator approaches life as something to be observed and categorised, Zorba jumps into it as something to be done, felt and risked. His every action reaffirms Moran's insight that meaning does not arise from naming life, but from moving through it. In this sense, Zorba is not just a character; he is a verb in human form, and his way of being turns grammar into philosophy and philosophy into lived experience. Just as syntax becomes visible when we read the sentence it shapes, Zorba's soul is seen in movement. His syntax is dynamic – as mentioned above – a syntax that dances, falls, rises and sings. In him, the verb 'joy' propels the sentence of life. Zorba reminds us that to live well is to enact life: breath by breath, word by word, step by step. This paper aims to explore how the character of Zorba embodies a living syntax of joy, where dance, desire and embodied action become philosophical expressions of living.

To understand Zorba is to read him as one reads a sentence. A sentence is not read as a list of parts; rather, it is read in its entirety to let its syntax unfold the thought it embodies. Derived from the Greek *syntaxis*, meaning 'to arrange together', syntax cannot be understood as static order but as dynamic coordination, the bringing together of disparate elements into meaning. In this sense, syntax becomes a metaphor for being. Zorba's life is not a random sequence of pleasures or reactions; it is an improvised yet coherent structure, with 'joy' as its governing verb. Where others seek to master life through theories or doctrines, Zorba orders his existence through action, flesh and blood. The narrator sees it in the character of Zorba and says that

I weighed Zorba's words – they were rich in meaning and had warm earthy smell. You felt they came up from the depths of his being and that they still had a human warmth. My words were made of paper. They came down from my head, scarcely splashed by a spot of blood. If they had any value at all, it was to that mere spot of blood they owed it. (301)

His 'sentence of life' is active voice, present tense, verb-first. Syntax, like spirit, is only visible in enactment – when the sentence moves, when the body dances, when the music plays. As syntax brings language into meaningful form, Zorba's way of living brings the rawness of experience into a lived coherence. He lets himself be guided by rhythm rather than by societal norms. In this way, he becomes his own syntax. In this metaphor, Zorba is not a noun nor an object. He is verb made flesh.

To understand Zorba's character, I employ metalanguage since it also perfectly corresponds with the *purusharthas*. In Indian philosophy, the *purusharthas* – *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *moksha* – can be understood as a complete framework for a well-lived human life. If we metaphorically view life as language, then each *purushartha* represents a key syntactic function: a necessary part of the sentence of being. A sentence requires grammar, subjects, objects, tone, mood, voice, punctuation, etc., to be coherent; similarly, a life needs structure, substance, pleasure and release. *Dharma*, roughly translated as the principle of duty, right

action, order and alignment, functions like syntax in a sentence; it provides order and cohesion. Without *dharma*, life, like language, collapses into chaos. *Artha*, which refers to a sense of meaning, material success and accomplishment, aligns with nouns, subjects and objects – the tangible things we interact with, pursue or accumulate. These form the ‘content’ of our life sentence. *Kāma*, the pursuit of pleasure, beauty and desire, plays the role of the adjectives, sensory verbs and imagery that give a sentence its emotional colour and aesthetic richness. Without *kāma*, life would be grammatical, perhaps even meaningful, but it would lack poeticity. Finally, *moksha*, or liberation, parallels punctuation, silence or white space; the moment of release beyond the sentence. Similar to how a sentence ends in a full stop or a poem pauses in a line break, *moksha* signals the letting go of striving. It is in these pauses that sentences transpire to be meaning-making; the reader transcends the metonymic chain and understands it with a holistic flash of understanding.

Taken together, these four elements form the syntax of being: a sentence and a life become fully expressed only when all are present in balance. Zorba, though seemingly chaotic, lives this fullness intuitively: he works with purpose (*dharma*), enjoys the material world (*artha*), delights in love and art (*kāma*) and releases control through his dance (*moksha*). To reiterate, he lives the entire grammatical life, always in ‘being’.

While Zorba may appear to prioritise *kāma*, his way of being is far more holistic. His life reflects an instinctive integration of all four *purusharthas*. It forms a complete grammar of existence. His *dharma* is evident in his honest labour, his loyalty and the ethical code by which he navigates relationships. He does not believe in moralising and works with integrity and reverence for the tasks at hand. *Artha* manifests in his engagement with the material world, his love of food, money, companionship, and the simple needs that root him in the human experience. *Kāma*, most visibly, animates his dance, his laughter, his music and his unfiltered joy. He recognises and appreciates beauty devotionally. In his case, *moksha* is sensed in all of his actions through his capacity for detachment-in-participation: Zorba holds nothing too tightly, not even love nor success. His joy is real because it is free. In this way, Zorba embodies life’s full syntax.

Yet, this harmonious mapping is not without tension. To view Zorba entirely through the lens of the *purusharthas* risks reducing his unruly vitality into a closed system. The framework presupposes a delicate equilibrium, a grammar of life in which *dharma*, *artha*, *kāma* and *moksha* appear as coordinated parts of a whole. In the metaphor of syntax, each *purushartha* is a structural element that secures meaning: *dharma* offers cohesion, *artha* provides content, *kāma* colours it with affect and *moksha* punctuates it with release. But Zorba’s life resists such harmony. His syntax is not symmetrical; it is full of ellipses, ruptures and sudden accelerations. He embodies *kāma* most visibly, yet his pleasures spill over into *moksha*, where joy becomes a kind of liberation. His *artha* is unstable, gained and squandered with equal fervour. His *dharma* is not a social code but an instinctive *svadharma*¹, improvised

¹ *Svadharma* (from Sanskrit *sva* = one’s own + *dharma* = law, duty, order) means ‘one’s own duty’ or ‘the law of one’s own being’. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, it refers to the unique responsibility, role or path that is proper to an

moment to moment. If syntax is meant to stabilise meaning, Zorba unsettlingly expands it and proves that meaning is not secured by rigid balance, but by movement, rhythm and vitality.

What this exposes is the fragility of the *purushartha* schema when confronted with a being who conjugates life rather than conceptualises it. The narrator reads Zorba as though he were a complete grammar of existence, but Zorba himself never aspires to such completion. He lives in flashes of presence – a sentence always in motion, never fixed. In this sense, the *purusharthas* may illuminate his way of being, but they cannot contain it. Zorba both confirms and exceeds them: he works, loves, plays and releases, but always with a surplus of energy that leaks across categories. His ‘joying’ destabilises the framework, suggesting that the syntax of being is not a settled order but an improvisation where verbs take precedence over structures.

This paradox matters because it reveals the tension between philosophical system and lived existence. The *purusharthas* articulate what life ought to be, but Zorba embodies how life insists on being lived – excessively, unevenly, with dissonances that nevertheless cohere. In him, the four aims are not balanced like the clauses of a perfect sentence but tangled like a poem in free verse, held together not by rules but by rhythm. Zorba shows that the grammar of existence is not mechanical order but dynamic vitality: not the balance of categories, but their overflowing. His way of being forces us to ask whether any framework, however elegant, can ever do justice to the raw improvisation of life itself.

A verb is the moment of awareness in a sentence. A reader unconsciously seeks and senses a sentence’s shape and comprehensibility through verbs to settle into meaning. In *The Philosophy of Grammar: A Study of the Living Language, Emphasizing the Ideas that must Underlie the Science of Grammar* (1965), Otto Jespersen calls the verb ‘a life-giving element’ (86). It initiates action and animates structure. However, a verb alone is only the beginning. A sentence truly becomes alive when its entire syntax, its clauses, its phrases, its words, its syllables, its phonemes, its stops and pauses, its frequent rests, its inflectional rises and falls, its prolonged tones, its stresses and harmonious measures, its proper pronunciation, are dotted with the frequency of aliveness. When a sentence lives, it animates all its components; from its consonants and vowels to its meaning, it gains vitality through its connection to the central action. Virginia Tufte, in her book *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*, states that

Verbs can help to animate other structures, their energy level becoming almost contagious. Their intensities and rhythms invigorate other parts of speech and syntactic arrangements to create sustained patterns and levels of activity. (64)

Zorba, like the verb in a sentence, is deeply aware. He lives from the centre outward. And just as a verb injects life into a sentence, Zorba’s aliveness infuses those around him, most notably, the narrator. Zorba’s way of being is contagious. It activates something dormant in

individual according to their nature, temperament and social position, even if it seems difficult or imperfect, as opposed to following another’s duty (*paradharma*).

others. He inspires others to think about life, to feel it, move through it and, finally, to live it. He gives the narrator a piece of advice, entreating him to live, that

You're young and pretty tough, eating well, drinking well, breathing exhilarating sea-air, and storing up energy – but what are you doing with it all? You sleep alone, and it's just too bad for the energy! You get along there tonight – yes, lose no time! Boss, everything's simple in this world. How many times must I tell you? So don't go and complicate things. (124)

Zorba, through his contagious presence, seems to have convinced the narrator to live fully in his own terms. The narrator admits it when he says, 'Woe to him who cannot free himself from buddhas, Gods, Motherlands and Ideas' (198).

Central to this 'joying' is Zorba's use of music and dance as existential acts that reveal his philosophy of life. Zorba does not perform dance; dance does and undoes him because, for him, it is cathartic – a way of confronting suffering, expressing the inexpressible and celebrating existence in its rawest form. Zorba, while explaining to the narrator what he does when he feels choked with emotion, shouts, "'Dance!' and I dance. And I feel better!' (79). In contrast to the narrator's reliance on abstract thought and detachment, Zorba's musicality affirms life in the face of tragedy and absurdity. Zorba's dance is more than a spontaneous celebration; it is an existential act through which he channels the chaos and suffering of life into movement, much like Shiva's cosmic dance, the *tāṇḍava*, which transforms the turbulence of creation and destruction into a rhythm of order and transcendence. After Madame Hortense dies and the mine collapses, Zorba responds with dance. In his book *Touch: Recovering Our Most Vital Sense* (2021), Richard Kearney suggests, 'Zorba the Greek offers a vivid example of how dance transforms grief in embodied mourning' (176). Zorba, like Shiva, dances to transform reality. Like Eastern *Advaita* thought, his philosophy affirms that body and spirit, pain and pleasure, are not opposites but complementary modes of experience. For him, it reaffirms life in the face of its absurdity. His gestures express a raw, primal joy, which comes from accepting life's transience. The narrator realises it early in the novel, 'it is he who has discovered the truth, I thought. His is the right path' (82). He understands that Zorba's philosophy cannot be stated in words and concepts. He realises Zorba's advantage:

That man has not been to school, I thought, and his brains have not been perverted. He has had all manner of experiences; his mind is open and his heart has grown bigger, without his losing one ounce of his primitive boldness. All the problems which we find so complicated or insoluble he cuts through as if with a sword, like Alexander the Great cutting the Gordian knot. It is difficult for him to miss his aim, because his two feet are held firmly planted on the ground by the weight of his whole body. . . . We educated people are just empty-headed bords of the air. (68-69)

Zorba may not have been taught in school, but he has practically acquired through empirical experience. Going by how we understand humans, Zorba can never be considered an ethical man, yet everything he does results in a kind of ethics beyond good and evil, beyond normal standards. He works from a system of his own, *svadharma*. And he is beyond classification. He says, Free yourself from one passion to be dominated by another and nobler one. But is

not that, too, a form of slavery? To sacrifice oneself to an idea, to a race, to God? Or does it mean that the higher the model the longer the tether of our slavery? Then we can enjoy ourselves and frolic in a more spacious arena and die without having come to the end of the tether. Is that, then, what we call liberty? (26-27)

Zorba's dance is a form of *amor fati*, a love of one's fate, through which Zorba embraces every experience, no matter how painful. Dance, in this context, becomes a radical existential statement: to move is to resist paralysis; to dance is to live. Zorba's dance does not follow prescribed steps or external codes, but arises from his attuning to being. Zorba's movement arranges emotion, memory and presence into lived coherence. In his dance, we see the body become language; the self, become sentence, structured by breath and joy. Zorba finds meaning through movement.

Zorba's dance, particularly at moments of loss or collapse, is not a gesture of resilience; it reflects a cosmic principle embodied by *Nataraja*, the Lord of the dance in Indian mythology. Shiva's dance, the *tāṇḍava*, is not simply artistic or ecstatic; it, in the words of Heinrich Zimmer, plays a 'cosmogonic function, in that it arouses dormant energies which then may shape the world' (152). Similarly, Zorba dances when all else fails: after the death of Madame Hortense, after the mine collapses, after the narrator's rational plans dissolve. He moves to incorporate destruction into the rhythm of existence. This mirrors the symbolism of *Nataraja*, whose raised foot offers liberation while the other stamps out ignorance. While the narrator tries to control through intellect, Zorba surrenders to impermanence through motion. His dance absorbs joy and sorrow alike, transmuting them into a higher affirmation of life.

In the poem 'Among School Children', William Butler Yeats explores the moments of intense connection and artistry. The last lines express it well:

O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,

How can we tell the dancer from the dance? (Yeats, lines 63-64)

Yeats's lines blur the separation between art and artist. The dancer becomes the dance, which suggests a fusion of soul and form, a surrender of ego to the flow of rhythm. For Zorba, dance is a metaphor for vitality, freedom and the affirmation of life in the face of chaos and suffering. It embodies the Dionysian spirit that could liberate the self from rigid rationality. Together, these perspectives reflect a shared belief in the transformative power of dance, one that transcends technical skill and enters the land of philosophical renewal.

We can interpret Zorba's dance and sensual life as an expression of *kāma*. While Zorba's physical passions might seem impulsive or indulgent, they align surprisingly well with frameworks in Indian thought, particularly the philosophy of *kāma*. In Indian thought, *kāma* includes aesthetic pleasure, love and joy – things that Zorba passionately pursues as a form of engagement with life's pageants – it is never for distraction. He attains a presence that echoes the *tantric* view that spiritual transcendence can be achieved through the body, not in opposition.

For Zorba, the verb 'joy' is, in fact, not an emotional state; it becomes a gerundial practice 'joying'. He enacts it continually. In grammatical terms, a gerund transforms a verb into a

noun, turning movement into identity and, for Zorba, ‘joying’ becomes the subject of his life. This practice is most clearly seen through his intimate relationship with the santuri, his musical instrument. His music is not, again, a performance; it is emotional language. It is an act of self-expression, memory and healing. He says, ‘When I’m feeling down, or when I’m broke, I play the santuri and it cheers me up’ (13). Each note he plays is a syllable of his inner world, articulated through presence. Zorba lives through his senses, and his sensory life becomes a discipline of attention. It becomes a cultivated awareness of the moment and the body. This stands in sharp contrast to the narrator, whose primary mode of knowing is intellectual, abstract and distanced. While the narrator analyses life, Zorba embodies it. His joy is kinetic, unlike the narrator’s. In this sense, ‘joying’ becomes a form of embodied and verbal attention. It becomes a mode of awareness that unites action and being, sense and self. Zorba feels joy; he practises it with his body, through music, touch, food, dance and presence. He does joy and, in doing so, he is joy.

In Zorba’s world, *moksha* is through presence within life, not through withdrawal from it. Contrary to popular discourses today that equate freedom with renunciation, Zorba’s freedom emerges from full participation: an unguarded embrace of love, failure, grief and delight. His detachment is non-attachment – it is a letting go through joyful engagement, not denial.

Lots of people have been afraid of the vanity of things! I’ve overcome it. Lots reflect hard; I have no need to reflect. I don’t rejoice over the good and don’t despair over the bad. (157)

This paradoxical wisdom also becomes clearest in the novel’s final scene, when the narrator, long paralysed by intellectualism and abstraction, finally asks Zorba to teach him to dance. This gesture is more than a moment of friendship; it is a symbolic release into being – a step towards self-liberation. The narrator stops thinking about life and begins to move through it. In this moment, joy becomes more than an emotion; it becomes a practice of freedom. ‘Joying’, in Zorba’s syntax, is liberation itself, immersion in the world without clinging. This is danced *moksha*: an embodied awakening, where movement becomes wisdom and presence, release.

Zorba’s life unfolds as a sentence written in verbs, a syntax of action. His existence can only be defined by movement, attentiveness, intent, care, rhythm and presence. In Zorba, we see that dance, music, sensuality and spontaneity are a kind of philosophical grammar – modes of knowing, feeling and being that reveal a truth about how life can be lived. He does not define joy; he joys. He does not theorise liberation; he moves through it. To live well, Zorba shows us, is to surrender to the unfolding verbal consciousness in the sentence of life. In the end, living is not something to be described in abstract terms. Like dance, it must be entered, felt and performed. Zorba dances because dancing is how he meets life, which is not easy, on its own terms and, through that, how he becomes free.

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