The Metα-Empathy of the Sycophantic Pseudophiles… and Other False Friends
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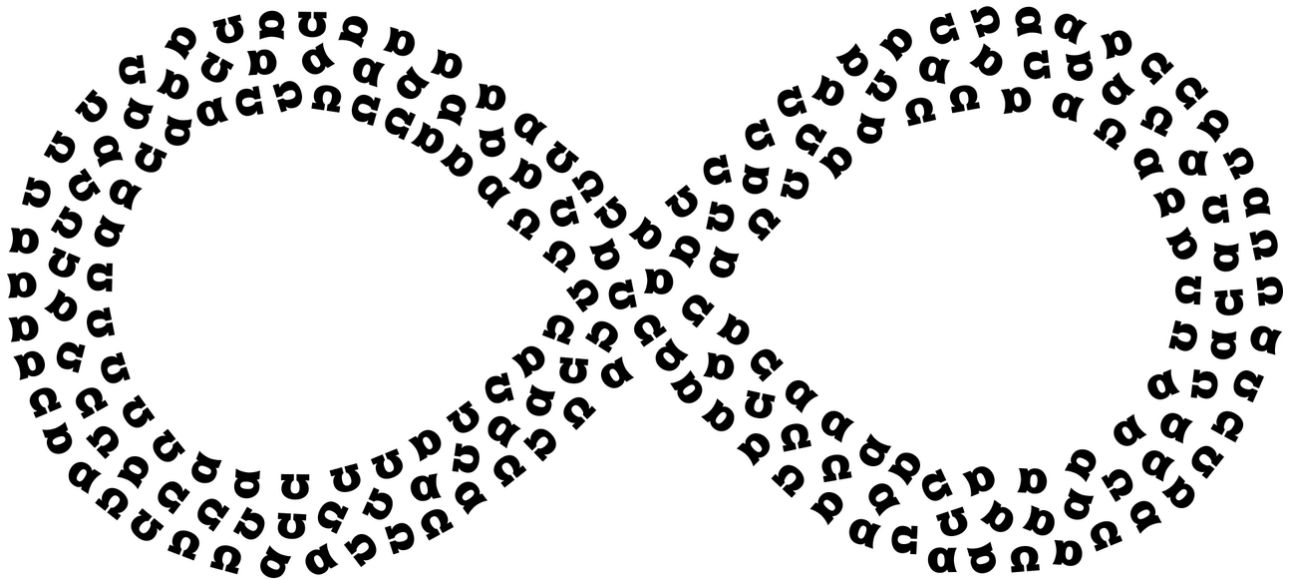
What are "false friends" in linguistics? Well, false friends are friends (no doubt about this!) you think you know well; yet, you prepare your "defenses"—just in case—only to find out that they have already stabbed you in the back… without your even noticing!

False friends—as many of you may already know firsthand, from your own fortunate or not-so-fortunate linguistic encounters—are those confusing "second-language" words that appear or sound identical (or very similar) to words in your native language; yet, these false friends have different meanings or uses. The French term, "faux amis," comes from the longer phrase, "false friends of the translator," which was coined in 1928 by French linguists Koessler and Derocquigny.[1]

Since then, "false friends" have also been called deceptive words, false cognates, treacherous twins, and *belles infidèles* (unfaithful beauties); so, it seems that this inadvertent lexical trickery stirs up a lot of emotions for people—mixed emotions.

False friends are *pseudophiles*, or Ψευδόφιλα, which comes from the Greek word ψευδής (*pseudes*), meaning "false/faux," and the Greek word φίλος (*filos*), meaning "friend." *Pseudophiles* are multinational, multicultural, and multilingual entities, and they exist among different languages worldwide. For a Greek, like me, who is reading and communicating in English, *pseudophiles* are especially important because there is a significant number of them in the English language, and they can be pretty tricky—to the point of sometimes causing desperation. Hellooo! This is *not* all Greek to me, because there are already numerous false friends between older forms of the Greek language (Ancient Greek mainly, but also Koine) and Modern Greek, resulting in a confusing and often misused triangular *pseudophilia* between Ancient Greek, Modern Greek, and English.

Let's examine this article's title, for instance. What is empathy? For a Greek, it is obvious; it *is* Greek, after all! Empathy is εμπάθεια (*empatheia*) from *en + pathos*. Well, not quite! Originally in Ancient Greek, empathy (εμπάθεια) meant "strong passion" about a person or an idea. It had neither a positive nor a negative connotation. It was neutral. The English "empathy" is, of course, not quite the same. Some scholars translated the German "*Einfühlung*," which was an attempt by German philosopher Rudolf Lotze to retain the original meaning of the Greek εμπάθεια. English traditionally prefers Greek loans for words more than German loans. So, our beloved Anglo-Saxon "empathy" of today was born. The problem for a Greek-speaking person today is that, in Modern Greek, εμπάθεια means strong *negative*—and *only* negative—passion towards some person or some ideology. Thus, it means "obsession" or, even worse, "hatred"! It has a negative connotation only. A person with "εμπάθεια" is someone who is overwhelmed by prejudice, to the point of not being able to think or judge objectively—almost the exact contrary meaning of "empathy" in English! It is amusing (or tragic, depending on the case) to run across translations of the English "empathy" into Greek as "εμπάθεια." Even if you try—now that you have read this far—to translate "empathy" from English to Greek using Google Translate, you will get the wrong εμπάθεια. By the way, the correct translation of "empathy" from English to Greek would be the word ενσυναίσθηση (*ensynesthese*).

Turning back to the article's title, who is a *sycophant*? "A person who acts obsequiously towards someone important in order to gain advantage,"[2] in other words, a flatterer or a fawner. But this is not quite the case in Greek! Συκοφάντης (*sykofantis*), in Modern Greek, means someone who calumniates, or makes "false and defamatory statements about" someone.[3] And the noun συκοφαντία (*sykofantia*) means maliciously false statements, charges, or imputations that injure the reputation of a person. But as for the Ancient Greek meaning of sycophant, it had something to do with figs (yes, the fruit) and someone who reported a fig thief. (It's complicated!) The etymology comes from *syko* (meaning fig) and *fantis* (one who becomes apparent/obvious, reveals someone or something—but that's another story for another time… maybe).

Many such examples of *pseudophiles* exist. I will briefly mention a few of the most frequent occurrences that can result from hasty translations.

autopsy (αυτοψία/*autopsia*): Modern Greek meaning is "on-site investigation/research."

pathetic (παθητικός/*pathetikos*): Modern Greek meaning is "passive."

sympathetic (συμπαθητικός/*sympathetikos*): Modern Greek meaning is "cute, likable."

And… what about *meta*? Here, we have a very subtle and sympathetic (no pun intended!) false friend—not exactly a false friend, perhaps, but you may judge for yourself.

One recent "big news" item was, undoubtedly, the renaming of Facebook (the company, not the platform, yet) to "Meta." The public was officially informed that the name "Meta" is a reference to the Greek word meta/μετά meaning "beyond." Well... not quite—or, better said, not *only* that!

Μετά is, and has always been, a multifunctional word—ever since antiquity. Speaking strictly in grammatical terms, it is a preposition. It comes from the same Indo-European root that produced the German word, "*mit*," or the Dutch word, "*met*," meaning "with." In Ancient Greek, μετά was an adverb with the meaning "in the middle of," and it later turned into a preposition meaning "between/among." And ever since Homer's *Iliad*, the word has taken on the meaning of "together/with." In *Iliad* (book 13, verse 700), we read, "ναῦφιν ἀμυνόμενοι μετὰ Βοιωτῶν

ἐμάχοντο," which means, in English, "In defense of the ships, **together with** the Boeotians, they fought."

In Modern Greek, *meta* is, of course, still a preposition; but it is also occasionally used as an adverb or as a conjunction, declaring mainly time succession/sequence, as in μετά το μεσημέρι (after midday) or πρώτος δρόμος δεξιά μετά το φανάρι ("first road to the right after the traffic lights"). But I will spare you (and me) the agony of any further phrase translations from Greek.

Moreover, *meta* is used as an affix in a plethora of words, such as μεταβολή, μετακίνιση, μετεξέλιξη, μεθεόρτια, and many, many more.

In word composition, "μετα" is considered to be "πρωτεϊκό" (protean), since it can assume many forms (like the mythical Proteus who could transform himself) and can express many ideas, including, but not limited to, the following examples:

1. changing of an object's position (μετακινώ, μεταφυτεύω)
2. repetition (μεταπωλώ)
3. changing of state (μεταγλώττιση, μεταποίηση)
4. participation (μετέχω, μεταδίδω)
5. time sequence (μεταθανάτιος, μεταμεσονύκτιος)
6. space sequence or displacement (μετόπισθεν, μετατάρσιο)

Now, what about "meta" in the "Zuckerbergian" sense? Here, the story becomes a little funny. From Latin and younger European languages,

the Greeks received, as a linguistic counter-loan, the term "μεταφυσική" (*metaphysike*)—"metaphysics," in English. This was—believe it or not—a consequence of a simple misunderstanding! The Alexandrine scholars had cataloged 13 works by Aristotle which were produced (or so they thought) by the philosopher after his famous *Physics* (Φυσικά), his works on nature and the natural world. Φύσις (physis) means "nature." The term "μετά (τα) φυσικά," which simply meant "things that were written/copied and archived *after* Aristotle's work called *Physics*," was misunderstood and misinterpreted by Roman scholars and writers as meaning "the science that studies what is *beyond* the natural world." Quite a difference, indeed!

Misunderstood or not, following the international "muster" of metaphysics, "meta" has been turned to a useful tool in epistemology when we need or want to describe and analyze self-reference—e.g., metadata (the data regarding data), metarules (rules that describe how other rules should be used), or metatheory (a theory that examines science theories).

Personally, I am not sure how this "meta-verse" is going to evolve and affect our life in the long-term. I am not technophobic (on the contrary!), but I am a bit skeptical (another wonderful Greek *pseudophile*) regarding the growing number of private companies "intruding" into our personal universe. (But maybe I am just getting old!)

After all—as demonstrated above—one of the main meanings of "meta" is *together*!

NOTES

1. Maxime Koessler and Jules Derocquigny, *Les faux amis; ou, les trahisons du vocabulaire anglais* (Paris: Vuibert, 1928).

2. Lexico: Powered by Oxford, s.v. "sycophant," https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/sycophant.

3. Lexico: Powered by Oxford, s.v. "calumniate," https://www.lexico.com/en/definition/calumniate. Ω