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Götzsche, Hans

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Compounds as idioms. A case study of a ‘meta-trend’

Hans Götzsche, Aalborg University, Denmark

1. Introduction

When writing a manuscript for a Festschrift, I came across some compounds in Swedish that could only be interpreted as tropes. Take the word *kulturmafia* ‘cultural mafia’. It does not seem to be found in English and is confined to Scandinavia. Apart from the Swedish spelling of *mafia*, the compound is hardly understandable without some contextual information. The meaning is ‘a group of people who are especially influential in the sphere of fine culture (literature, drama, paintings) in a society’. Whereas the word *culture* is polysemous, the word *mafia* cannot, in this context, be used in its original meaning; a fact that is well known. So, is its meaning metaphorical, and, in that case, since it has become conventionalised, is its combination with *culture* idiomatic?

Another case is the use of *meta-* in combination with, mainly, abstract expressions. The compound *metadata* is now ubiquitous because of the dissemination of electronic devices and one may find quite many, often technical, terms with a prepositioned *meta-*. Some dictionaries classify the expression *meta-* as a prefix, and considering the somehow peculiar origin of the accepted term *metaphysics* one may ask if the expansion of its use is some kind of ‘meta-trend’.

Below I will go through a few of the Swedish idiomatic compounds and then take up a number of word-formations with *meta-* in order to try to clarify whether you could call these formations compounds or not, and whether their semantics justify a classification as idioms. This paper is not what some of my colleagues in linguistics would call deep linguistics, whatever the metaphorical meaning of the word *deep* in that context, only an attempt to find out why people do peculiar things with words.

2. The research tradition

I shall not embark on the process of reviewing the research tradition on the topic, but some colleagues in linguistics have pointed to Benczes (2006); and the book may be relevant. But I shall draw your attention to the review by Melanie Bell in *English Language and Linguistics*, in which she says that “[h]owever, when one delves into the contents in more detail, there is a lack of precision and explicitness that makes for a frustrating read” (Bell 2008), and I have to agree. Instead, one might peruse the paper by Kooij (1968), which offers an overview over the theoretical and analytical intricacies presented by connecting the two phenomena, compounds and idioms.

3. A Swedish trend?

The frame of reference of this approach is the question if a metaphorical meaning can be comprised in a compound and, furthermore, if such a metaphorical meaning can be – maybe not overused ending up as a cliché but – integrated into language usage as an idiomatic expression.

In order to look into that, I checked a number of pages in Swedenborg (2001 [1986]) on new words in Swedish from the 1940s to the 1980s, not in a totally random fashion but somehow. I chose the entries beginning with the letter *m* (ibid.: 156–169) and then I looked for compounds that intuitively could be characterised as idioms.

In addition to *kulturmaffia* ‘cultural mafia’, which is spelled *-ff-* in accordance with Swedish orthography, I found the word *tjejmaffia* (lit. ‘girl mafia’). Both *kulturmaffia* and *tjejmaffia* can be seen as oxymorons since the concepts of ‘culture’ as well as ‘girl’ will not normally be associated with criminal behaviour, whereas *Mafia* ‘mafia’ will, in general, be used as a label on some group of organised criminals. While the meaning of *kulturmaffia* is the one mentioned above, the meaning of *tjejmaffia* is ‘a group of females (feminists) in the society who have an overwhelming, and unjustified, influence on what should be defined as gender’, which might not have been extracted from the compound meaning. One will need some context, in this case Swedish culture in the beginning of the 21st century, in which these themes are highly controversial. But the words are commonly used, because they have found their way into the dictionary, and to the extent words are in common usage and their semantics cannot be interpreted on the basis of their parts, I shall suggest that these compounds can be classified as idioms.

By way of illustration I shall pick up one more Swedish word: *mammutfilm* ‘mammoth film’; apparently not found in English. If I were to present my grandchildren with the word, I would expect them to answer ‘a film about mammoths’, following a procedure of semantic interpretation saying that the first word denotes a subset of the set of all films, viz. the subset dealing with the topic of mammoths. But the definition in the dictionary says that it is a film that is ‘longer than usual, has a bigger format or has many actors’. Having in mind that the word was first introduced in 1965, when these features were interesting for the audience, the semantics of *mammoth*, in Swedish, in that context seems to have become vague, and the expression *mammoth* became a prefix functioning as an intensifier.

4. The origin and usage of *meta-*

What prompted my interest in the use of *meta-* as a prefix was the manuscript on *metaphilosophy* that I had been asked to review. At the outset, I was a little puzzled by the notion since, as a philosopher of language – and as a linguist – I had always conceived of philosophy proper as an intellectual enterprise dealing with the basic notions used in the sciences, thereby seeing philosophy and the sciences as complementary to each other. As such it comprises the subjects of:

- i. metaphysics (the basic theoretical concepts, sometimes in the form of axioms),
- ii. ontology (the ideas one has about how the world is built),
- iii. epistemology (the ideas one has about how we know how the world is built), and a few other things.

But what, then, is *metaphilosophy*? At face value it is contemplations about philosophy itself. We will come back to that under the label *self-reference* below. Instead we will search for the origin of the word *meta(-)*. Most of us know the word *metaphysics*, and from the context of linguistics we know, e.g. *metacognition* and *metalinguistic awareness*, and if we check the website *English Language & Usage Stack Exchange*, at the webpage

(https://english.stackexchange.com/questions/245403/how-did-meta-come-to-mean-self-referential?utm_medium=organic&utm_source=google_rich_qa&utm_campaign=google_rich_qa), we find the definition (referring to *Oxford*, i.e. *English Oxford Dictionaries*):

“(Of a creative work) referring to itself or to the conventions of its genre; self-referential: *the enterprise is inherently ‘meta’, since it doesn’t review movies, for example, it reviews the reviewers who review movies*”.

But the origin section of the entry redirects [here] and there’s no apparent link with *self-reference*. It means that there is no further information on *self-reference* so we try instead *Etymonline* that has an entry on *meta-* (<https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=meta->), but not on *meta* as a single word. There are 24 sub-entries with *meta-* but not all will be perceived as combinations of a prefix and a base in Modern Standard English.

At this point, it is evident that *meta-* and *self-reference* depart because the notion of *self-reference* may not be an essential part of the meaning of *meta-* for the reason that not many substitutions of *meta-* with *self-referential* will bring about meaningful expressions. The background seems to be that *self-reference* and *self-referential* are mainly used in formal logic and mathematics about a case when an expression refers to itself.

Personally, as a logician, I am not especially happy with this theoretical concept since only humans can refer to themselves by means of words, and words cannot, by nature, refer to themselves; and I would like philosophers and other scholars to find another term about recursive systems. As a linguist and, hypothetically, trying to be rude I might even say that it is a typical instance of the way philosophers misunderstand reflexive pronouns.

In contrast with this, *meta-* can actually be traced back in history in a way explaining how constructions like *metamathematics*, *metacommunication*, *meta-analysis* (*metanalysis**), *metapolitics*, *metaphrastic*, *metamorphize*, *metaphor*, *metathesis*, *metamorphism*, or *metamorphosis* have come up. In the context of the language sciences it is interesting that the term with the asterisk, *metanalysis*, has the *Etymonline* note:

“*1914, from meta- “transcending, overarching, dealing with the most fundamental matters of” + analysis. Coined by Danish philologist Otto Jespersen.”

(<https://www.etymonline.com/word/metanalysis>)

But the maybe surprising information is that the word *metaphysics* in its current use is based on a mistake that goes back to the bibliographic ordering of Aristotle’s work:

[...] from Greek *ta meta ta physika* “*the (works) after the Physics*,” title of the 13 treatises which traditionally were arranged after those on physics and natural sciences in Aristotle’s writings. The name was given c.70 B.C.E. by Andronicus of Rhodes, and was a reference to the customary ordering of the books, but it was misinterpreted by Latin writers as meaning “*the science of what is beyond the physical*.”

(<https://www.etymonline.com/word/metaphysics>)

In due course this has led to the

[...] misinterpretation of metaphysics as “science of that which transcends the physical.” This has led to a prodigious erroneous extension in modern usage, with *meta-* affixed to the names of other sciences and disciplines, especially in the academic jargon of literary criticism.

(https://www.etymonline.com/word/meta-#etymonline_v_14705)

This narrative is confirmed by the entry *metaphysics* in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (SEP).¹ One may wonder why *meta-* is frequent in modern technical languages, and one of the usual suspects may be Tarski who had a problem with specific truth conditions, so he suggested that (according to SEP):

*If the language under discussion (the object language) is L, then the definition should be given in another language known as the metalanguage, call it M. The metalanguage should contain a copy of the object language (so that anything one can say in L can be said in M too), and M should also be able to talk about the sentences of L and their syntax. Finally Tarski allowed M to contain notions from set theory, and a 1-ary predicate symbol True with the intended reading ‘is a true sentence of L’.*²

In formal logic this seems fair enough but, facilitated by what may be called *real-life language users*, the expression *meta-* appears to have spread in an out-of-control fashion, as is demonstrated by the *Wikipedia* entry:

“Meta (from the Greek preposition and prefix *meta-* (μετά-) meaning “after”, or “beyond”) is a prefix used in English to indicate a concept which is an abstraction behind another concept, used to complete or add to the latter.”

(<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meta>)

It is hard to know what is meant by “an abstraction behind” but maybe it is the understanding, so to speak, behind the word *metadata*, i.e. ‘information about data’, even though both *abstraction* and *behind* for about must be seen as tropes. So, from the technical use by, e.g. Tarski the next step of entering the open market of language use is an opaque semantics, leading to the state in which any use of the expression is contextual. When a word has reached that status no one is able to interpret its meaning until one knows its specific context of use. Then the word is on the free market, meaning that anyone is authorised to use it in his/her own sense.

This seems to have happened to the prefix *meta-* in the word *meta trend*. When I made a search at *Google* for *metatrend*, *Google* asked: “did you mean: meta trend?” The search result for *meta trend* was about 102.000.000 results (0,32 seconds) hits. Well, 102M! So one could say that *meta* had disseminated a little since Aristotle’s work had been mishandled some two thousand years ago. The top hit by *Google* (28/08/18) was:

¹ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/metaphysics/>

² <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/tarski-truth/>

5 meta-trends underlying almost all of modern marketing

The fast-paced evolution of marketing is a sea of trends, from attribution models to the Zero Moment of Truth. So many trends, in fact, that it can be hard to keep track of them all. A meta-trend runs deeper, powering more specific trends, like a tidal force that drives waves to the shore.

(<https://chiefmartec.com/2012/10/5-meta-trends-underlying-almost-all-of-modern-marketing/>)

It is hard to know what the meaning of *meta-trend* is and the only thing one can say for sure is that somebody may think that it sounds good. It may also be concluded that:

1. the expression *meta* has become the victim of a ‘metatrend’, viz. to attach a prefix to some word one is especially fond of and thereby using the prefix as an intensifier, and
2. the language users who do this have no idea whatsoever about the meaning of this expression.

Consequently this is idiomatic word formation based on ignorance. Contrary to the opinions of some of my colleagues in linguistics the term has been carefully chosen. The expression has, *per se*, no pejorative meaning, even though it is often used about people who deliberately ignore acknowledged information in a derogatory way, what I would prefer to call *disregard*, but if ignorance is just the state of being unaware of information it does not entail a negative attitude. One may contemplate the fallacy of *ignoratio elenchi* in classical logic (see Walton 2008: 100 et passim), i.e. drawing a conclusion from what is not known. This is just a label of the characteristics of the inference.

But one thing is marketing. Has *meta-* a mission among the academic subjects? Let us take a look at *metamodernism*. In Vermeulen et al. (2010) the authors introduce the word *metamodernism* and propose it as a substitute for *postmodernism*:

We will call this structure of feeling metamodernism. According to the Greek-English Lexicon the prefix “meta” refers to such notions as “with”, “between”, and “beyond”. We will use these connotations of “meta” in a similar, yet not indiscriminate fashion. For we contend that metamodernism should be situated epistemologically with (post) modernism, ontologically between (post) modernism, and historically beyond (post) modernism.

Vermeulen et al. (2010: 2)

If we ignore the reference to a *Lexicon* translation – which may be fair enough – the use of all three translations combined with two philosophical disciplines and an historical label offers a less than transparent guide to the meaning of the concept *metamodernism*. The phrase is almost poetic, but a cynical empiricist may ask how something can be “epistemologically with” something, how something can be “ontologically between” some entities, and how something can be “historically beyond” something. In a philosophical and scientific context it does not make sense. Maybe not because of ignorance – they have checked the lexicon – but because of disregard. The authors have not taken into account that the word has a history, and historical usage, that might have been appropriately taken as a frame of reference when choosing the word.

Is *meta-*, then, an instance of *determinologization* as suggested by a colleague? If we compare it with *digital* it is a well-known story that it has been in use since the late Middle Ages, but only in certain contexts. It is, for instance, not found in *Svenska Akademiens*

Ordbok, the first volume of which was published in 1898 and which has by now arrived at the letter *v*. Only when the digital computer was invented the word appeared to be an appropriate technical term; which is no longer outside computer science. Any electronic device and its use is labelled *digital*, but the semantics of the word is not void. Contrary to this, the expression *meta-* has never been a technical term in its own right, only as a prefix of some kind, for instance in formal logic, mathematics and linguistics. Like some specific expressions that have become discourse markers (or particles), for instance *well* – also in prefix-expressions like *well-bred* – the expression *meta-* has lost any meaning outside special domains, and, in the end, may re-enter colloquial speech, like in the hypothetical: **it is just so meta!*, so I would not call it “determinologisation”.

5. Conclusion

Idiomatic expressions are sometimes complicated, like the metaphors they originate from. And to the extent the constituent parts of metaphors cannot be interpreted based on their original meanings and the combination is accepted as conventional usage they may end up as idioms. When contracted they may also end up as compounds, as has been illustrated above. In the case of *meta-* one thing is the etymology of the word, another thing is its meanings in technical contexts. But, anyhow, its use in these technical contexts has increased the opacity of its semantics to the effect that it has become an intensifier like *mega-*. As mentioned above, one may speculate if it will proceed further and be used as a discourse marker, functioning the same way as *you know* in *it – was you – know rather nasty*. Hopefully we will never know; because of ignorance.

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Hans Götzsche
CFL AAU Center for Linguistics, Aalborg University
Rendsburggade 14, 9000 Aalborg
www.cfl.hum.aau.dk/
Denmark
Phone: +45-9940 9058
Fax: +45-9815 9434
goetzsche@id.aau.dk

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