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 kulturmaffia ‘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
“(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.”

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.”
In due course this has lead to the misinformation 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.

This narrative is confirmed by the entry metaphysics in The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (SEP). 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’.

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.”

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 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.

References


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


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