‘UNDERSTANDING’ IN GREEK AND LATIN: A COGNITIVE APPROACH TO THE ‘INTELLECT’ VOCABULARY

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Resumen. El trabajo enfoca los esquemas conceptuales subyacentes a la configuración del campo léxico del ‘intelecto’ en griego antiguo y latín. A partir del postulado central de la semántica cognitiva, según el cual las nociones abstractas se interpretan en términos concretos mediante un proceso básico de metaforización, nos proponemos identificar las metáforas en base a las cuales se han formado los verbos que denotan el acto de ‘comprender’ en las lenguas clásicas.

Palabras-clave: metáfora conceptual, ‘comprender’, griego antiguo, latín, etimología.

1. SUBJECT MATTER AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. This article is intended to set the beginning of a larger research, corresponding to a semantic-cognitive study of the expression strategies that have led to the configuration of the lexical field of the ‘intellect’ in Classical Greek and Latin: thus, we aim at analysing the possible means of expressing concepts such as ‘knowing’, ‘understanding’, ‘having an idea’, or ‘grasping a sense’. Our main interest is to detect the subjacent structure of this lexical field and evaluate the motivational factor that underlies its components: the current approach implies detecting the conceptual and structural metaphors that allow the perception and expression of such abstract meanings in Greek and Latin.

1.2. Our approach relies on the idea that natural language emerges from a conceptual system based on man’s everyday experience. This theory represents an applied form of cognitivism in linguistics, that has been extensively developed in the last few decades (Lakoff/Johnson, 1980; Blank/Koch, 1999; Geeraerts/ Cuyckens, 2007 *etc*.). Its fundamental conclusion is that understanding abstract concepts is actually based on the comparison with purely concrete and ordinary notions, which could be consequently used as source fields for the metaphors that provide the corresponding lexical expressions. In other words, the conceptual patterns or structural metaphors allow us to understand and express new experiences in terms of ordinary ones. The concept of image schema, in cognitive linguistics, “is understood as an embodied prelinguistic structure of experience that

motivates conceptual metaphor mappings, playing an important part in our understanding of the world" (Silaški/Radić Bojanić, 2012: 69). These image schemas "help to explain how our intrinsically embodied mind can at the same time be capable of abstract thought". As patterns of sensory-motor experience, image schemas play a crucial role in the emergence of meaning and in our ability to engage in abstract conceptualizations and reasoning that is grounded in our bodily relationship with our environment (*cf*. Johnson, 2005, *ap*. Silaški/Radić Bojanić, 2012). For example, concepts like 'happiness', 'time', 'intellect', 'idea', or 'love' are perceived as concrete goods or experiences and, thus, expressed by or used in metaphors whose sources lie in physical experiences: 'happiness' – rising up, 'time' – an object that flies and escapes/costs money, 'intellect' – grabbing objects (ideas), 'love' – physical force/voyage/war *etc*.

Cognitive linguists have tried to show that the number of metaphors for a certain domain is, in fact, limited, and the same strategies for designating certain elements (either abstract or concrete) could be found as parallel and independent processes in most distant languages (as shown first by Lakoff, 1987). There is, however, a predictable degree of variation, undergone by the differences in cultural and historical background among nations, which could imply a different way of perceiving certain experiences and concepts.

It could be thus interesting to find out whether these universals could also be found in an ancient civilization, such as the Greek one, which provides a wide lexicon and a refined manner of expression. Are the intellectual experiences referred to the same way as they are expressed in other languages, or did the Greeks and Romans have their particular expressions?

1.3. The work of Eve Sweetser (1992) could be considered a starting point for the study of Greek and Latin epistemic processes (as it concerns mostly the verbs of perception); the author has shown that the cognitive pattern which associates 'knowing' or 'understanding' with 'seeing' can be found not only in English, but in many other Indo-European languages, including Greek and Latin.

Following the same investigation line, Bran (2014, 2015) shows that these patterns are recurrent in the evolution from Ancient to Modern Greek, as well as from Latin to Spanish. Moreover, he explores the manner in which verbs expressing concrete actions like 'grasping', 'getting hold of', are used in the semantic domain of 'cognition' in Spanish (Bran, 2018).

We shall now take a look at the expression strategies that underly the Greek and Latin verbs of 'cognition', more precisely verbs meaning 'to understand', in order to find out whether they follow the same cognitive patterns that have been identified so far.

2. VERBS MEANING 'TO UNDERSTAND'

2.1. Two of the Greek verbs that express the process of 'understanding', ὑπολαμβάνω and καταλαμβάνω (< λαμβάνω), are based on the same semantical

structure as, for instance, the English verb *to get* (*e.g.* "Do you get it?"), or German *begreiffen* or *fassen*.

These expressions rely on the conceptual metaphor described by Lakoff/ Johnson as the [container] image schema, in this particular case the mind seen as a recipient which receives information. Johnson (1987: 21) claimed that "our encounter with containment and boundedness is one of the most pervasive features of our bodily experience". There are three structural elements that form the container image schema: 'interior', 'exterior', and 'boundary'. The image of the head as a recipient is very familiar to us, we only need to recall some of the words designating this part of the body: It. *testa* and Fr. *tête* (< Lat. *testa*, designating 'a type of recipient'), or even Lat. *caput* or Eng. *head*, which rely on a PIE root meaning, on the one hand, 'hollow' and, on the other hand, 'to grasp', 'to take hold of' (*cf.*, from the same stem, Gr. κάπτω 'to swallow', Lat. *capio* 'grab')[1].

For a better understanding of the image described by these two Greek verbs, we should take a closer look at the difference between the preverbs κατα- and ὑπο-.

2.1.1 'Υπολαμβάνω is initially attested with the concrete meaning of 'taking up by getting under' (1), afterwards having transferred its acceptation in an abstract domain, related to discourse, where it undertook the sense of 'to take up what is said, interpret or understand it in a certain way' (2) (*cf.* LSJ, *s.u.*):

(1) Hdt. 1.24 τὸν δὲ δελφῖνα λέγουσι **ὑπολαβόντα** ἐξενεῖκαι ἐπὶ Ταίναρον
"it is said that a dolphin, **taking** him **on its back**, carried him ashore to Taenarus";

(2) Plat. *R.* 338d ταύτῃ **ὑπολαμβάνεις** ᾗ ἂν κακουργήσαις μάλιστα τὸν λόγον.
"You **interpret** my account in the way you can work it the most harm";

Eur. *IA* 523, ὃν μὴ σὺ φράζεις, πῶς **ὑπολάβομ'** ἂν λόγον;
"How should I **understand** an account that you don't pronounce?".

2.1.2. Καταλαμβάνω is mostly used to express the concrete idea of 'seizing, 'laying hold of', by a gesture that implies a movement from up to bottom; literally 'hold down', 'cover'(3), then 'catch', 'overtake' (4). In a figurate sense, the verb can also be used with the meaning 'to take by surprise' (5).

The meaning 'to seize with the mind, comprehend' (5) is probably still perceived as figurate by Plato, given that he is the first to use the verb with this acceptation, along with its original significate. Nonetheless, the verb has been inherited in Modern Greek – καταλαβαίνω – as the main expression for the concept 'to understand'.

(3) Plat. *Th.* 165b **καταλαβὼν** τῇ χειρὶ σοῦ τὸν ἕτερον ὀφθαλμόν
"by **covering** with the hand one of your eyes";

[1] Yet, as it clearly stands since Homer, for the Greeks it is not necessarily the head that contains the mind, but we deal in fact with another siege, the diaphragm or the heart itself.

Ar. *Lys*. 624 καταλαβεῖν τὰ χρήμαθ' ἡμῶν
"**lay hold** of our money";

(4) Hdt. 1, 63 καταλαμβάνοντες τοὺς φεύγοντας
"they **overtook** the fugitives";

(5) Men. *Pc*. 356 καταλαβεῖν τὸν μοιχὸν ἔνδον
"to **have caught** the adulterer inside";

Plat. *R*. 387e ὅταν τις αὐτὸν τοιαύτη συμφορὰ καταλάβῃ.
"when some misfortune like this **overtakes** him";

(6) Plat. *Phdr*. 250d περὶ δὲ κάλλους (…), κατειλήφαμεν αὐτὸ διὰ τῆς ἐναργεστάτης αἰσθήσεως τῶν ἡμετέρων (...).
"as for the beauty, we **apprehend** it through the clearest of our senses";

Plb. 8.2.6 πῶς δὲ τῆς ἁπάντων ἡγεμονίας καθίκοντο (…) δυσχερὲς καταλαβεῖν ἄνευ τῆς καθόλου τῶν πράξεων ἱστορίας.
"how it came to dominate the whole world (...), it would be very difficult to **understand** without a general history of the fact".

Thus, as verbs expressing the process of understanding, the two lexemes describe slightly different ways of acquiring the information: in the case of ὑπολαμβάνω, the implied movement starts from beneath, suggesting a slight grasping of the idea from its grounds[2], whereas κατα- defines a whole embracement of the subject matter, from all its sides (*cf. comprehendere* §2.2.4). From this point of view, the mind is not a passive container, but it is the moving entity towards the information that is to be found outside of it.

2.1.3. A similar cognitive structure underlies the acceptation of the verb ἀποδέχομαι 'accept, admit' (7), a prefixed form of δέχομαι 'receive'. In its cognitive meaning, ἀποδέχομαι is not fully lexicalized, being used as a still transparent metaphor in Plato (8) (*cf*. DGR):

(7) Ar. *Ec*. 712 ἀποδέχωμαι τὰ (...) χρήματα
"**receive** the goods";

(8) Plat. *R*. 511d ἱκανώτατα (...) ἀπεδέξω
"you **have understood** in the most appropriate way".

This time, it is not the mind the element that moves, the "capturer" or the "hunter" that springs to catch a certain idea floating freely outside, but it is the passive receiver, inside of which the idea is being assimilated.

[2] This could release a similar image to Eng. *understand*, unless, as suggested by OED, *under-* should be interpreted as its Latin cognate *inter-*.

2.1.4. A parallel cognitive structure underlies the verb ἐνθυμέομαι (where θυμός, equivalent to the mind, is the recipient), which literally meant 'to lay to heart', 'ponder (in one's soul)', hence 'think deeply':

(9) Thuc. 2.40 κρίνομέν γε ἢ ἐνθυμούμεθα ὀρθῶς τὰ πράγματα
"we decide or we ponder correctly the facts";

(10) Dem. *Prooem*. 10.1 εἴ τι χρήσιμον ἐντεθύμηνται
"if they have in mind something useful".

2.1.5. The same conceptual metaphor of the container can be identified in idiomatic phrases expressing intellectual processes such as ἔννοιαν ἐμποιεῖν 'put an idea into one's head' (Isoc. 5.150), ἔννοιαν ἐμπίπτειν τινί, literally 'to fall an idea into one's head' (Xen. 3.1.13), or εἰσέρχεσθαί τινι 'to come into one's mind' (11). In all three cases, the preverbs (ἐν-, εἰσ-) enclose the image of the mind as a container.

(11) Plat. *Tht*. 147c κινδυνεύεις ἐρωτᾶν οἷον καὶ αὐτοῖς ἡμῖν ἔναγχος **εἰσῆλθε**
"you are probably asking the sort of thing that also **came into our mind** just now".

These still transparent metaphors can represent a support not only for the image schema related to the mind as a container, but also for that of the ideas as independent objects that are to be found freely outside of one's mind – therefore we can hypothesize that Plato's theory of the original Idea is based on this prelinguistic image.

2.1.6. The verbs ἔπειμι 'to come into one's head, occur to one' (12) and ἐπέρχομαι, 'id.' (13) can be used to refer to intellectual processes due to the same conceptual metaphor:

(12) Dem. 21.185 ἂν τοίνυν ὑμῖν **ἐπίῃ** σκοπεῖν
"if it **occurs** to you to look closer";

(13) Plat. *Grg*. 485e ἐμοὶ τοιαῦτ' ἄττα **ἐπέρχεται** πρὸς σὲ λέγειν
"it **occurred** to me to tell you such things".

2.1.7. Viewed from another perspective, focusing on the exterior and on the boundary, the container image schema seems to appear as well in the common verb ἐπίσταμαι, literally 'to stand upon'. This time, the idea of 'knowledge' generates the image of an enclosed group of skills over which you mark your "domination" or "triumph". Although, from this perspective, one does not "contain" the information, the image schema is not structurally different, as the underlying idea is still that of 'possession'. The only variable element is the position of the agent: instead of getting hold of the knowledge, the agent is standing upon it – which supposes a similar perception of knowledge as a concrete, clustered mass of pieces

of information. The verb was originally used for practical knowledge (14), afterwards extending its use as a general cognitive verb (15):

(14) *Il*. 5.60 χερσὶν **ἐπίστατο** δαίδαλα πάντα τεύχειν
"he **had the skill** in his hands to create all kinds of works of art";

Il. 16. 142 οἷος **ἐπίστατο** πῆλαι Ἀχιλλεὺς … μελίην
"Achilles **knew** how to sway his spear";

(15) NT *Mc.* 14.68 Οὔτε οἶδα οὔτε **ἐπίσταμαι** σὺ τί λέγεις
"I don't know, neither **understand** what you are saying".

In this sense, Germ. *verstehen* seems to reflect the same perception of knowledge (*ver* – 'in front of', *cf*. O. Eng. *forstanden*).

2.2. This conceptual metaphor is not limited to the Greek linguistic area, but is also apparent in the Latin lexicon encompassing the 'cognitive' domain. The same image schema of the mind as container seems to be the overarching principle that led to the creation of many verbs expressing intellectual processes in Latin.

2.2.1. One of these verbs is *concipio* [*con-* + *capio*], that originally meant 'to take in, absorb, catch' (16), which extended to the abstract meaning of 'perceiving', 'grasping by means of the senses' (17), to finally achieve the general acceptation 'to form an idea, imagine' (18).

(16) Lucr. 6.503 *(nubila)* ***concipiunt*** *(...) marinum umorem*
"(the clouds) **absorb** the sea moisture";

Cic. *de Orat*. 2.190 *materies (...) quae (...) ignem* ***concipere*** *possit*
"the wood that can **catch** fire";

(17) Sen. *Phoen*. 224 *ego ullos aure* ***concipio*** *sonos?*
"do I **perceive** by the ear any sounds?";

(18) Cic. *Div*. 2.81 *quid mirum (...) si (...) inbecilli animi superstitiosa ista* ***concipiant***
"what wonder if the weak minds should imagine these superstitious things";

Sen. *Ben*. 5.2.1 *longe (...) aliud est quam mente* ***concipis***
"it is completely different what you **conceive** in your mind".

2.2.2. Another composed form of *capio*, *percipio* [*per* + *capio*], literally meant 'to acquire (full) possession of' (19), hence 'to take in or grasp with the mind' (20); it actually resulted into Rom. *a pricepe* 'to understand'.

(19) Caes. *Civ*. 2.32.6 *cum uestri offici praemia* ***percipere*** *debeatis*
"when you are about to obtain the reward of your services";

(20) Cic. *Fam*. 7.19 *nullam artem litteris sine interprete* ***percipi*** *posse*
"no art can be **learnt** out of books without someone to explain it".

2.2.3. Actually, the simple verb *capio* 'to take into the hand', 'take hold of' (21), can also be metaphorically used with the meaning 'to grasp mentally', 'comprehend' (22); its evolution towards Italian gave this acceptation the status of main meaning (It. *capire* 'understand'):

(21) Pl. *Mos*. 265 ***cape*** *igitur speculum*
"so **grab** the mirror";

(22) Cic. *N.D*. 2.140 *ut deorum* ***cognitionem*** *caelum intuentes* ***capere*** *possent*
"in order to be able to **acquire knowledge** of the gods by looking at the sky"[3].

2.2.4. *Comprehendere*, which initially meant 'to grab (from all sides)' (23), had a remarkable evolution in the Romance languages, where it acquired one of the main positions in the 'cognition' field, being an essential verb for the concept of 'understanding'[4]. It could already be used in this metaphorical acceptation in Latin, meaning, more precisely, 'to group mentally, apprehend' (24):

(23) Sen. *Con*. 2.1.13 *infantibus (placent) quae tangi* ***comprendique*** *manibus aut sinu possunt*
"little children like the things that can be touched and seized in the hands or arms";

(24) Cic. *de Orat*. 3.21 *si haec maior esse ratio uidetur, quam ut hominum possit sensu aut cogitatione* ***comprehendi***
"if this account seems to be greater than can be comprehended by human senses or thought".

2.3. Outside Greek and Latin, we can conjecture the same cognitive pattern in Rom. *gând* 'thought'[5], traditionally considered to be borrowed from Hungarian. Yet, we can equally assume as basis for this verb a proto-Indo-European stem **ghend-* 'grab', present, for instance, in Eng. *hand* / Germ. *Hand*, lat. *pre**hend**o* (Pokorny, *s.u.*). This image is not limited to the Indo-European languages, but it appears as well in Hung. *felfog*, 'to understand', where *fog* literally means 'to grab', and in Turkish *kavramak* 'grab' and 'understand'. Thus, this conceptual metaphor interpreting the abstract process of understanding and thinking in terms of 'grabbing' appears to be a common cognitive pattern to be found in many different languages.

[3] We can still recognize in this phrase the original, concrete meaning of *capere*.
[4] Its Romanian descendant *a cuprinde* still preserves its concrete meaning 'to grab from all sides', 'contain'.
[5] This hypothesis belongs to our late professor Dan Sluşanschi, orally transmitted to us during classes, unfortunately – as far as we know – never published.

2.4. Another image schema that underlies verbs of 'cognition' is that of deconstruction against reconstruction. The subject matter or the idea is conceived as an independent object that has to be – if not grasped –, cut and de-composed in pieces in order to be assimilated (either by re-composing it or not).

2.4.1. Συνίημι, whose first meaning is 'to bring or set together' (25) corresponds, in its abstract acceptation (26) to the image present in λόγος, 'the rational mind', that "collects", "puts together" the arguments (as derived from λέγω 'to collect, gather', hence 'to count', *cf*. Beekes, I, 841).

(25) *Il*. 1.8. Τίς τάρ σφωε θεῶν ἔριδι **ξυνέηκε** μάχεσθαι;
"What god **brought** them **together** to fight with such a fury?";
(26) *Il*. 15.442 Ὣς φάθ', ὃ δὲ **ξυνέηκε**
"so he spoke, and the other one **took it all in**".

2.4.2. Συννοέω, based on νοῦς, is supported by the image of re-composing, putting together, assembling inside the container which is νοῦς.

(27) Plat. *Tht*. 164a καὶ ἐγώ, νὴ τὸν Δία, ὑποπτεύω, οὐ μὴν ἱκανῶς γε **συννοῶ**·
"I suspect the same thing, by Zeus, but I can't **put it all together** adequately".

2.5.1. The same conceptual metaphor can be detected in Lat. *cogito* [*co-agito*]: understanding, thus, can also be seen as the result of certain inside movements, of relating and putting together a certain number of separate ideas and pieces of information; it was actually still interpreted in this key by classical writers (28):

(28) Varr., *L.L*. 6, 43 cogitare *a* cogendo *dictum; mens plura in unum cogit, unde eligere possit.*
"*cogitare* comes from *cogere*; the mind brings together more [ideas] in one [place], from where it can choose".

2.5.2. Cognitively related to this association could be Lat. *intellegere*, a composed form of *inter-* and *legere* 'to gather'. However, this verb is interpreted either as reflecting the idea of 'putting together the collected pieces of information' (OLD), either as based on the image of 'choosing between (various pieces of information)', 'discriminating' (Ernout/Meillet, *s.u*. *lego*). In this latter case, the overarching image schema would be that of deconstruction and reconstruction.

2.6. Going back to λόγος, we have to mention that the etymological dictionaries do not explain its semantic evolution, not going any farther than recalling its original meaning of λέγω 'collect' (the stem *leg-* is the same as in *intellego*, cf. Ernout/Meillet, Chantraine, Beekes). Λόγος – in a certain way equivalent to Lat. *ratio* – is the result of the mind's processes. From this point of view, the mind is perceived as rationality, as capacity to put in order the immaterial elements that are the ideas, the facts.

(29) Arstt. *Ph*. 252a. 13 τάξις δὲ πᾶσα **λόγος**
"order always means **ratio**".

Only afterwards does the mind structure these rational thoughts into speech, discourse, and it is from here that the noun evolved towards the meaning 'word'. For an illustration of the relationship between ratio/reason and speech, see Rom. *rost*, which underwent the opposite semantic evolution: Lat. *rostrum* 'peak'/'mouth' → 'speech' → 'sense, reason'.

If we were to explain the evolution from 'discourse' to 'word', we would only have to think of the Romance words designating the 'word', having experienced a parallel semantic evolution (Lat. *parabola* > It. *parola*, Fr. *parole*, etc; Lat. *conuentum* 'meeting' and 'speech held in a meeting' > Rom. *cuvânt* 'word').

As for the conceptual metaphor that underlies the meaning 'to speak' of λέγειν, we can detect the same pattern in Germ. *sagen*, Eng. *say*, which are related to Lat. *sequor*, thus having a concrete original meaning of 'putting one after another (ideas/arguments/words)', or even lat. *sermo* 'conversation, text', derived from *sero* 'to string, to thread'.

3. CONCLUSIONS

We have tried to outline the structural metaphors underlying the Greek and Latin verbs meaning 'to understand'. The analysis has put into light that the most frequent image schema in this semantic domain is that of the mind as a container. Nonetheless, our lexical inventory also reveals the image schema of deconstruction and reconstruction as rather frequently underlying the semantic structure of the verbs meaning 'to understand'.

By analysing the Greek and Latin folk understanding of epistemic processes, we could take a step towards a better evaluation of the ancient cognitive mechanisms and motivational profile, along with the influence of this type of conceptualizations in the construal of the philosophical system.

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