Meet the 'noble cousins' on the family tree of words

IN A WORD

BY KAI VON FINTEL

False friends (*faux amis*) are a staple of Linguistics 101: pairs of words from two languages that seem identical or related but have different meanings. For example, the English *gift* has positive connotations, but its false friend *Gift* ("poison" in German) means something else. Some of us might be confused to find *poisson* ("fish") on a French menu, even though it has nothing to do with poisons. Words like these are often closely related in intriguing ways.

Over the past few years, I have had the privilege of teaching at a linguistics summer school in Greece, a special place for me as a linguist and philosopher. The site of the summer school, Crete, is home to one of the earliest civilizations, that of the Minoans, whose script continues to defy decipherment. During a stopover in Athens, I was awed when visiting Lykeon, where Aristotle taught. As a sign there says, "It is difficult to appreciate, from the scant archaeological remains on this site, that this spot is one of the most significant places in the history of mankind." Indeed.

Back to words: One of my colleagues pointed out that everyday Greek uses words that have what might be called "noble cousins" in English.

On a highway, you will see the sign *éxodos* ("exit"), while its English cousin *exodus* is a more elevated expression with often biblical connotations.

When your sink is not draining, who are you going to call? The *ydraulikós* ("plumber") and not, as you might have thought, a fancy scientific expert in "hydraulics."

In the supermarket while searching the dairy section, you might see bottles of milk labeled *gála* and containers of cream called *kréma gálaktos*. These are the cousins of the English words *galaxy* and *galactic*. Galaxy is what we call the Milky Way!

When people in Greece make a deal or reach an agreement, they achieve a *symphonía*. Seeing eye to eye is a "symphony," which is a beautiful thought.

And when it's time to travel home, you look for a *metaphorá pros aerodrómio*, transportation to the airport. In English, "metaphors" transport meanings but don't do the mundane work of moving goods or people.

English has borrowed an impressive number of words. Scientific language in particular is based on terms from Greek and Latin. By becoming scientific, these words acquired the patina of elevated discourse. But their origins were often more mundane, and in fact, modern Greek still shows the humble everyday uses of quite a few such words.

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