

Etymology and conceptual metaphor: The case of ‘in vain’ in Greek and Latin

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Greek and Latin have adverbs meaning ‘in vain’, Gr. μάτην, ἐτός, Lat. *nēquīquam* and *frūstrā*, that have different etymologies. These adverbs are lexicalized forms, like Fr. *en vain*, It. *invano*, Sp. *en vano*¹, which are directly derived from the Late Latin phrase *in vānum*. An etymological study would suggest a location in space, shared by both Greek and Latin: the meaning of ‘in vain’ involves a semantic shift from concrete to abstract thought. There is a surprising analogy among Greek, Latin and Late Latin in the manner how the same concept is expressed by different lexicalized forms that involve a same mental process.

I published the etymology of μάτην (Aliffi, 1999); the research about the other words and ματίη is new.

1. Meaning and use of Gr. μάτην, ματάω and ματίη

The common Greek adverb μάτην ‘in vain’ is the adverbial accusative use of the noun μάτη; it occurs first in the Homeric hymn to Ceres; the noun μάτη occurs only in Stesichorus and in the tragedians, but the denominative verb ματάω can be found in three passages of the Iliad.

Frisk (1970, *s.v.* μάτην), Chantraine (1968-80, *s.v.* μάτην), Beekes (2010, *s.v.* μάτη) leave the etymology unexplained. Meier-Brügger (1989) thinks of a connection with the root **men-* ‘im Sinn haben’ and, in particular, with μαίνομαι within the Greek tradition, which, as all the group, would have developed a negative meaning, like Lat. *mentīri*, for instance. Such an etymology is absolutely plausible for the supposed connections and the morphologic and lexical developments

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¹ We can add Eng. *in vain*, loan word from French.

it refers to, but it is less so if we look at the semantics in the most remote passages, that we will examine in the following paragraphs.

Actually, as Frisk and Beekes rightly assert, the attempts to find a reasonable etymology for μάτην, already numerous in ancient times, clash with the difficulty to determine the exact meaning of the noun. Therefore, we must start by determining the value of the words in the oldest stages of the language, i.e. in the Homeric poems where we find ματάω. Eustachius (*Od.* 1, p. 368) maintains that it is used with reference to the horses that do not want to run, (ἐπὶ ἵππων μὴ ἐθελόντων θέειν), but the attestations of the *Iliad* show a more complex situation. The verb occurs in three passages, of which we will examine the first one in particular. Willing to engage in a battle against Aeneas, Pandarus asks Diomedes to drive the chariot in order to be able to escape more quickly and adds:

- (1) μὴ τὸ μὲν δαίσαντε ματήσετον², οὐδ' ἐθέλητον
ἐκφερέμεν πολέμοιο, τεὸν φθόγγον ποθέοντε (*Il.* 5.233-234)

Calzecchi Onesti (Omero, 1950) translates the passage in (1) as: ‘ché non *debbano esserci inutili* per la paura e ruscino / di trarci fuor dalla mischia, per brama della tua voce’; Mazon (Homère, 1937-47): ‘Je crains, sans celer, qu’ils ne prennent peur et *ne nous servent à rien* / parce qu’ils se refuseront à nous porter hors du combat, attendant en vain le son de ta voix’; Murray (Homer, 1967-78): ‘I would not that they take fight and *run wild*, and for want of thy voice be not minded to bear us forth from the battle’.

Eustachius (*Il.* II, pp. 63-4) maintains:

- (2) Ματᾶν δὲ νῦν ἐπὶ ἵππων λέγεται τὸ ματαιοπραεῖν καὶ ἀργοὺς ἴστασθαι, ἐξ οὗ καὶ ματῆν ἐν τοῖς ἐξῆς ἐπὶ ἀνθρώπων ἢ ματαιοπραγία. Διὸ καὶ ἐρμενεύων ὁ ποιητὴς νῦν τὴν λέξιν οὕτω φησὶ ματήσετον, οὐδ' ἐθέλητον / ἐκφερέμεν πολέμοιο, ὥς ταῦτόν ὄν τὸ ματᾶν καὶ τὸ ἀκίνητίζειν
‘Ματᾶν is said now about horses acting in vain and staying inactive, whence in the following verses [*scil.*: in the *Odyssey*] ματῆν is said about men. So the Poet, interpreting the expression, says: “ματήσετον, οὐδ' ἐθέλητον / ἐκφερέμεν πολέμοιο”, because ματᾶν and not to move are the same thing’.

The annotator paraphrases ματάω (and ματῆν which has another etymology, in all probability, as it will be said at the end of 1.) with

² The underlining here and in the following passages is mine.

a compound ματαιοπραγεῖν (and ματαιοπραγία) that, besides being a *hapax*, is as a matter of fact tautological, but that was evidently clear, because it is formed with the adjective μάταιος of common use. Further below, Eustachius (*Il.* II, p. 64) reports another etymology (3):

- (3) Τὸ μέντοι ματῶν οἱ παλαιοὶ καὶ ἄλλως διασαφούντες ματῆσαι φασὶ τὸ ἁμαρτεῖν, ὥστε κατὰ τούτους οὐ μόνον ἵππος ματῶ, ὥς μάτην εἰς χρεῖαν ἐλθὼν, ἀλλὰ καὶ τοξότης, εἴπερ ἄφεις βέλος οὐκ εὖστοχῆσει
 ‘as regards ματῶν, the ancient annotators, explaining differently, say that ματῆσαι is equivalent to ἁμαρτεῖν [‘making mistakes’], so that, according to them, who ματῶ is not only the horse but also the archer if the arrow doesn’t hit the target’.

When Eustachius says that ματῆσαι is equivalent to ἁμαρτάνειν, he gives the impression to explain the connection with ἁμαρτάνω looking always at μάτην. Instead, it is more important to notice that, both in this connection of the old annotator and in the interpretation that he gives shortly before, “the uselessness of acting” is referred to the subject of the verb, i.e. to the horses or the archer, while modern translators talk about “uselessness of acting” with regards to the beneficiaries of the (lacked) action.

Something else is much more important: the correlation that Eustachius makes in (2) between ματῶν and the “staying inactive”, ἀργοὺς ἴστασθαι, and between ματῶν and the “not moving”, ἀκίνητιζεν. But therefore the connection immediately comes to our minds with μένω, lat. *maneo*, arm. *mnam* ‘I remain’; as a consequence of that, μάτη - whence ματάω - should be a derivative from the reduced degree **mn-* of the root **men-*. The original meaning of the word was lost because of an insufficient frequency of use and, all summed up, of an insufficient understanding, a misunderstanding of the occurrences. As regarding to the suffix -τη of μάτη, there is another important evidence: ἄτη < ἁάτη ‘damage, guilt’, connected by the etymologists with ἁάω ‘to damage’ (Frisk, 1970, *s.v.* ἄτη; Chantraine, 1968-80, *s.v.* ἁάω; Beekes, 2010, *s.vv.* ἁάω, ἄτη).

If the proposed etymology is accepted, the interpretation of the passage (1) can only be as follows (1a):

- (1a) So that the two (horses) do not remain still, fearful, and they do not want to carry us out of the combat, wishing (to hear) your voice’.

I will not discuss the two other passages of the Iliad with ματάω but I will only give the translation according to the proposed etymology. They seem *formulae* at the end of the line.

When Sarpedon kills the only mortal horse of Achilles, attached at that moment to Patroclus's chariot, the other two immortal horses remain blocked in their race by the dead trace-horse and then Automedontis – the charioteer – extracts the sword and

- (4) αἶζας ἀπέκοψε παρήγορον οὐδὲ μάτησε:
 τὼ δ' ἰθὺνθήτην (Il. 16.474-475)
 'he rushed and unbound the trace-horse, neither he stayed still / the remaining two horses drew themselves up',

or with a *hysteron proteron* 'neither he stayed still but unbound the trace-horse' or, and perhaps better, connecting it with the following line 'he unbound the trace-horse, neither he stayed still (because) the remaining horses drew themselves up' and started running again.

At the end of the chariots race, during the games in honour of Patroclus, victorious Diomedes jumps down and

- (5) κλῖνε δ' ἄρα μάστιγα ποτὶ ζυγόν· οὐδὲ μάτησεν
 ἴφθιμος Σθένελος, ἀλλ' ἐσσυμένως λάβ' ἄεθλον (Il. 23.510-511)
 '[Diomedes] put the whip on the yoke; strong Stenelus, instead, didn't stay still but immediately went to take the prize'.

The first attestation of the noun μάτη, on the accusative μάτην, recurs in the Homeric hymn to Ceres, line 308, as illustrated in (6),

- (6) [...] οὐδέ τι γαῖα
 σπέρμ' ἀνίει· κρύπτειν γὰρ εὐστέφανος Δημήτηρ.
 Πολλὰ δὲ καμπύλ' ἄροτρα μάτην βόες εἰλκον ἀρούραις,
 πολλὸν δὲ κρεῖ λευκὸν ἐτώσιον ἔμπεσε γαίῃ (h. Cer. 306-309)

where the adverbial use of the accusative (of relation?) is manifest; however, the connection of μάτην with a causative verb of movement, like ἔλκω is equally manifest. The possibility of movement is denied by μάτην and, since the antonym of 'to move' is 'to stand still', the proposed etymology is confirmed from the semantic point of view. Then, it is difficult to determine whether the standing still refers to the oxen that move on with difficulty because of the hard soil, to the ploughs that cannot penetrate the earth and move it, or to the shoots that cannot come out.

In any case, the adverbial accusative denies movement and, like the verb ἔλκω, that is a semantic causative and has 'the ploughs' as object, can as well have a causative value and refer to the ploughs that do not succeed in penetrating the earth and move it,

- (6a) ‘not even (one shoot from) one seed would the earth let sprout; Crowned Demeter, in fact, was hiding it / the oxen pushed in vain (‘without causing movement’) many curved ploughs in the fields, /a lot of white barley fell in vain on the earth’.

Possibly, already in this line the accusative has conquered that adverbial value of ‘in vain’ with which it will be subsequently diffused, even though here it is still used in a context that is very close to the ones in the *Iliad*. The shift in meaning from ‘statically, motionlessly’ in association with verbs of movement, to ‘uselessly, in vain’ and then to ‘vainly, without reasons’ is so justifiable that it is not worth emphasizing it. Also, mention should be made of the other adverb ἐτώσιον in line 309, that ends by having the same value as μάτην although it seems to have a slightly different meaning. I will return to ἐτώσιον in §4.

Now, let us take a look at two examples, without any association to the idea of movement but with a shift in meaning, from ‘in vain’ to ‘vainly’: first, the passage by Herodotus where the Persian king Xerxes replies to the praises turned by the exiled Spartan king Demaratus to the bravery of the Spartans, and declares them obvious overstatements:

- (7) ὄρα μὴ μάτην κόμπος ὁ λόγος οὗτος εἰρημένος ἤ (Hdt. 7.103)
 ‘then beware lest the words you have spoken be but idle boasting’
 (transl. Godley).

Then, when in the *Choephoroes* Orestes charges Clytemnestra with having abandoned him as a child to join to Aegisthus, the mother replies:

- (8) Ἄλλ’ εἴφ’ ὁμοίως καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ σοῦ μάτας (A. Ch. 918)
 ‘Nay, but fail not to proclaim likewise the follies of that father of thou’
 (transl. H. Weir Smyth).

The passage in (8) is probably referred to Cassandra, according to the scholiast, but also perhaps to the other concubines, if not to Iphigenia. The precise value of the name is difficult to determine: certainly it has a strongly negative connotation that leads to ‘guilt, betrayals’. Clytemnestra uses it in a last, hopeless attempt to escape death.

I think that it is possible to explain the semantic shift through the fact that what is ‘in vain’ is either useless or meaningless and what is ‘meaningless’ can be either ‘stupid’ or ‘idle’, as in (7); what is meaningless can be also a ‘folly’ as in (8).

The translation of (8) gives μάτη the same meaning that ματία has in (9):

- (9) [...] ἀπέπεμπε δόμων βαρέα στενάγοντα.
 ἐνθεν δὲ προτέρω πλέομεν ἀκαχήμενοι ἦτορ.
 πείρετο δ' ἀνδρῶν θυμὸς ὑπ' εἰρεσῆς ἀλεγεινῆς
 ἡμετέρῃ ματίῃ, ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι φαίνεται πομπή (Od. 10.77-79)
 '[Aeolus] sent me forth from the house, groaning heavily. Thence we
 sailed on grieved at heart. And worn was the spirit of the men by the
 grievous rowing, because of our own folly for no longer appeared any
 breeze to bear us on our way' (transl. Murray).

The word ματίη is a *hapax in Homer*; later it occurs in Apollonius. It is considered a metrically convenient variant of μάτη (Beekes, 2010, *s.v.* μάτη) and it is possible if we think that the favourable winds are not blowing anymore, the ship is almost still and the sailor must row hardy. Nevertheless, if we look at the plot (Aeolus' anger was caused by the foolish acts of Ulysses' companions) and at the sequence of the three words ἦτορ, θυμὸς ματίη, another interpretation becomes more probable: here ματίη means 'folly', as Murray translated. This meaning can be a semantic shift as in (8), although this shift should be a little too early, but ματίη can be another word, different from μάτη and connected with Lat. *mens, mentis* and with μαίνομαι, that belongs to the same semantic field of ματίη. There are two different i.e. roots **men-* which can be confused at least in the mind of men³.

2. Use and meaning of Lat. *nēquīquam* and *frūstrā*

The Latin terms for 'in vain' are *nēquīquam* and *frūstrā*. They would seem to be equivalent and, while each occurs 24 times in Plautus' plays, later on *nēquīquam* decays in favour of *frūstrā*. To tell the truth, Plautus uses *nēquīquam* more often than *frūstrā*, both as adverbs. Indeed, the latter occurs 15 times in idiomatic expressions, and out of these 15 times, 13 in *frūstrā sum*.

If we consider the occurrences in Plautus, we can find some difference in meaning and, above all, in usage. *Frūstrā* occurs in phrases with *esse* and *habeo*, and has the value of 'deceit, derision' that is found also in the derivatives *frūstro(r)* and *frūstrātio*; notice the sarcastic connotation in (10),

³ In LIV (2001, 435-7) we find the roots 1. **men-* 'einen Gedanken fassen' and 2. **men-* 'bleiben, warten', 3. **men-* 'emporragen'. In Pokorny (1951-1969: *s.v.* μένω) we find five roots **men-*, among which the third is **men-* 'denken, geistig erregt sein' and the fifth is **men-* 'bleiben, (sinnend) stillstehen' (= 'denken?'). Pokorny uses the question mark, Frisk (1970, *s.v.* μένω) speaks of "Versuche [...] zu identifizieren" the two roots. Actually, a polysemy already at Indo-European level seems difficult to assume, even if it is not impossible.

- (10) Egone hic me patiar frustra in matrimonio (Plaut. *Men.* 559)
 ‘shall I let myself be made a fool of in such a married life as this’ (transl. Nixon),

where the translator gives *frūstrā* a value that is similar to the semantic shift of μάταις in (8).

Nēquīquam has a meaning that is somewhat close to that one of ‘uselessly’ or, better, ‘groundless’, as in (11):

- (11) Vera dico, sed nequiquam, quondam non vis credere (Plaut. *Am.* 835)
 ‘I do say the truth, but ma it is useless because you do not want to believe me’. ‘It is the truth, but what of that, when you refuse to believe me (transl. Nixon)

Surely the two adverbs are lexicalized already in the first attestations. And I can prove that. In fact, the polysemy of *frūstrā* and its derivatives is shown by Gellius in a fragment by Ennius (12):

- (12) Nam qui lepide postulat alterum frustrari,
 quem frustratur, frustra eum dicit frustra esse;
 nam <si> qui<s> se frustrari quem frustra sentit,
 qui frustratur frustrast, si non ille est frustra
 (Enn. *Sat.* 19, apud Gell. 18.2,7)
 ‘Who tries with craft another to deceive, / deceives himself, if he says he’s deceived / whom he’d deceive. For if whom you’d deceive / perceives that he’s deceived, the deceiver ‘tis / who is deceived, the other’s not deceived’ (transl. Rolfe).

As to *nēquīquam*, contrary to what Ernout, Meillet (1959, s.v.) maintain, it is also used after negation, in a sentence that remains negative although two *ne* follow each other, i.e. the negation and the one in *nequiquam*, as can be seen in (13) and (14):

- (13) Ne istuc nequiquam dixeris tam indignum dictum in me
 (Plaut. *Asin.* 697)
 ‘Not to have you saying such shameful things of me free of charge (transl. Nixon).
- (14) Ob istuc verbum, ne nequiquam, Scapha, tam lepide dixeris
 (Plaut. *Mo.* 252)
 ‘You shan’t make such a pretty speech for nothing’ (transl. Nixon).

The difference in meaning and usage that we have seen is based on etymology. Lat. *nēquīquam* consists of *nē* plus the ancient ablative of the neuter form of *quisquam* (Ernout-Meillet 1959: s.v. *nēquīquam*):

consequently, it means ‘from nothing, from no place’, according to that idea of “standstill” that we also find in μᾶτην.

Perhaps an example of the ancient value can be found in a fragment by Ennius quoted by Cicero (15):

- (15) Qui ipse sibi sapiens prodesse non quit, nequiquam sapit.
 ‘if the wise can be of no avail to himself, he’s wise beginning from nothing’. (Enn. Fr. Tr. [Medea] 138, apud Cic. Fam. 7.6, 2)

The other Latin adverb *frūstrā*, originally *frūstrā*, is probably the adverbial neuter accusative of a name associated with I.E. **dhreu-* ‘deceive’ and with Lat. *fraus* ‘fraud, deception’ (Ernout, Meillet, 1959, s.v. *frūstrā*; De Vaan, 2008, s.v. *fraus*). The same connections are quoted in LIV² (2001, 156⁴), without any explication of *frūstra*, as it is obvious because IE root 2. **dhreu-* ‘irreführen’ is on the ground of both *fraus* ‘Betrug, Täuschung’ and ‘vergeblich’ (LIV², 156). According to Ernout-Meillet, Plautus’ expressions *frūstrā esse* and *frūstrā habēre* mean ‘être dupe’ ‘simpleton’ and ‘duper’ ‘deceive’.

The change from *frūstrā* to *frūstrā* should be due, according to Ernout, Meillet (1959, s.v. *frūstrā*) to the analogy with the ending *-(t)rā* of adverbs of place, such as *intrā*, *extrā*, *suprā* etc. which are related to the prepositions of place *in*, *ex*, *sub*. We may also add *contrā*, which, compared to *cum*, has a more dimensional meaning, i.e. ‘opposite, in front of’, as we can see in the phrases *aliquem contrā (oculis) aspicere / intueri* (Castiglioni, Mariotti, 2007, s.v. *contrā*). If we accept this proposal, in an unforeseen way also *frūstrā* is like an adverb of place, at least at a synchronic level.

3. Developments of Latin In Vānum

Gr. μᾶτην and Lat. *nēquiquam* develop the meaning ‘in vain’ from an idea of “standstill”, whereas Lat. *frūstrā*, which has another etymology, was associated synchronically with adverbs that are however of place. The different etymologies do not only show the transit from concrete to abstract but also emphasize, for the concrete only, a common spatial value. We can add Fr. *en vain*, It. *invano*, Sp. *en vano*, that derive from

⁴ In LIV² there is not any explication of *frūstra* because it is a “Lexicon of indogermanischen Verben”. It is interesting that the I.E. root 1. **d^breug^b-* ‘trügen, täuschen’ is an “offenbar Erweiterung von 2. **d^breu-*, ‘irreführen’; the last is the root from which both *fraus* ‘Betrug, Täuschung’ and *frūstra* ‘vergeblich’ derive (LIV², 156-157).

the phrase *in vānum*, which does not occur in Classical Latin⁵, but it was “divulgata dalla Chiesa col primo comandamento (*Non assumes nomini Dei tui in vanum*)” (Cortelazzo, Zolli, 2009, s.v.). The quoted phrase, in *Ex.* 20, 7, is the translation of οὐ λήμνη τὸ ὄνομα κυρίου τοῦ θεοῦ σου ἐπὶ ματαίῳ (*Septuaginta*, 1935, p. 120). The Latin phrase seems original and it is has to be referred to the meaning that the adjective *vānus*, -a, -um ‘leer, eitel, nichtig’ has in Latin. Etimologically, *vānus* derives probably from the root **b¹web²*- ‘verlassen, aufgeben; ablassen, aufhören’, whence the other Latin adjective *vāstus*, -a, -um ‘öde, leer, wüst’ derives too (NIL, 248-250). For *vānus* the main meaning is ‘empty’ and the meaning of the translation *in vanum* < ἐπὶ ματαίῳ⁶ lets us suppose a motion to place, but to an empty place, such as ‘(to fall) into an empty space’. Also in this case we have one original spatial metaphor.

4. Meaning of Gr. ἐτώσιον and ἐτός

Let us return to the adverb ἐτώσιον in (6):

(6) [...] οὐδέ τι γαῖα
σπέρμ’ ἀνίει· κρύπτειν γὰρ ἐϋστέφανος Δημήτηρ.
Πολλὰ δὲ καμπύλ’ ἄροτρα μάτην βόες εἴλκον ἀρούραις,
πολλὸν δὲ κρὶ λευκὸν ἐτώσιον ἔμπεσε γαίῃ (b. *Cer.* 306-9)

(6a) ‘not even (one shoot from) one seed would the earth let sprout; Crowned Demeter, in fact, was hiding it / the oxen pushed in vain (‘without causing movement’) many curved ploughs in the fields, / a lot of white barley fell in vain on the earth’.

It is the neuter with adverbial value of the adjective ἐτώσιος, associated with the adverb ἐτός ‘in vain’, that is later, attested in Aristophanes and Plato. It seems close to Alb. *but* ‘useless, empty, idle’, from I.E. **uto-*, but ἐτός does not have a good etymology, as Chantraine (1968-80, s.v. ἐτός), Frisk (1970, s.v. ἐτός) and Beekes (2010, s.v. ἐτός) assert, even if they quote two possible connections. The first one is by Brugmann and Meillet, who compared ἐτός with αὐτως ‘in vain’, from αὐτός -ή -όν ‘self’. The connection is probable from the point of view of semantics but Beekes rightly asserts that it is “formally impossible” and, actually, it is difficult to explain the relationship between α- in αὐτως and ἐ- (or

⁵ In Classical Latin we can find the adjective *vānus* -a -um.

⁶ Notice the connection of μάταιος with ματάω and μάτην.

*we-) in ἐτός. Chantraine and mainly Frisk and Beekes seem to accept the other proposal, by Ebel who connected ἐτός with skr. *svatáh*, av. *xʷatō* ‘by itself, automatically’; the meaning of ἐτός should be, according to Chantraine, ‘de soi-même’ > ‘sans raison (?)’, according to Frisk, ‘von selbst > ohne äusseren Grund?’, according to Beekes ‘of itself > ‘without an outside cause?’. Consequently, the association seems acceptable on the point of view of the form but difficult because of the meaning. Paradoxically, ἐτός should have the same meaning ‘of itself’ according to Brugmann’s and Meillet’s proposal. In any case, if we believe that there is a conceptual metaphor that associates the concept of ‘in vain’ with the ‘denied/lacked movement’, we can explain *de soi-même/von selbst/of itself* through the fact that who is withdrawn does not move into the world, a physical or mental world.

5. The semantic shift

Through the study of the passages of the Iliad with ματάω I found a connection of the Greek adverb μάτην ‘in vain’ with the Indo-European root that means ‘remain, standstill’. Even if the etymology went off well from the standpoint of the *signifiant* because it abided by the phonetic laws, it was still a conjecture from the standpoint of the *signifié*, as it often happens (Consani, 2011, p. 160). The etymological meaning of the equivalent Latin and Late Latin adverbs for ‘in vain’ strengthened the conjecture and let me find a conceptual metaphor with a shift from concrete to abstract thought (Lakoff, Johnson, 1980): the conceptual metaphor let me order the *data* into a system (Esposito, 2011). Consequently, I finally succeeded in explaining the connections of ἐτός in a satisfactory manner and in giving it an etymology. Obviously, the idea of a conceptual metaphor has to be consolidated by examples in other languages: I intend to do it as soon as possible.

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