

The Semantic Evolution and Cultural Mapping of Ancient Greek Loanwords in the Field of English Philosophy

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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on core Ancient Greek loanwords in the field of English philosophy (taking "philosophy", "metaphysics", and "ethics" as examples). From an interdisciplinary perspective integrating linguistics and cultural studies, it compares and analyzes the original meanings of these loanwords in Ancient Greek and their evolved forms in modern English, exploring the paths, driving forces, and underlying cultural logic of their semantic changes. The research finds that such loanwords generally follow an evolutionary pattern of "from context-specific concreteness to abstract systematicity": "philosophy" has transformed from a dynamic activity of "the love of wisdom" into a modern "systematic discipline studying fundamental questions"; "metaphysics" has solidified from a textual ordering concept of "works after Physics" into a "philosophical branch studying the essence of existence"; and "ethics" has expanded from "the cultivation of citizens' character in city-states" to a "disciplinary field exploring moral norms and value judgments". The deep-seated driver behind the semantic evolution lies in the "modern transformation" of Ancient Greek philosophy in Western culture—its theological interpretation in the Middle Ages, rational reconstruction during the Enlightenment, and pluralistic interpretation in modern times have collectively promoted the adaptation of these loanwords to the ideological needs and disciplinary systems of different eras. This study not only reveals the value of loanwords as a carrier of "language-culture" interaction but also provides a theoretical reference for research on the connection between classical civilization and modern language from the perspective of English majors.

KEYWORDS

English philosophical loanwords; Ancient greek loanwords; Semantic evolution; Cultural mapping

1 Introduction

In the English vocabulary system, Ancient Greek loanwords serve as an invisible cultural link, connecting modern Western thought closely to Ancient Greek civilization. Though not as numerous as those in the fields of science and art, these loanwords in philosophy carry the core concepts and paradigms of Western philosophy. From philosophy to metaphysics, and from ethics to epistemology, the semantic evolution of each loanword epitomizes how Ancient Greek philosophical ideas have been interpreted, reconstructed, and transmitted across different historical periods.

This study focuses on Ancient Greek loanwords in the field of English philosophy, selecting representative core terms. By comparing their original meanings in Ancient Greek with their semantic connotations in modern English, it analyzes the paths and driving forces behind semantic evolution, thereby revealing the underlying cultural logic—how Ancient Greek philosophy, through the medium of language, has profoundly shaped the discourse system and thinking patterns of modern Western philosophy. Meanwhile, from the linguistic perspective of English majors, this study also explores how loanwords are influenced by the contextual, disciplinary, and cultural cognitive factors of their era during semantic transmission, providing a new entry point for understanding the interactive relationship between "language-philosophy-culture."

2 Analysis of the semantic evolution of core loanwords

2.1 "Philosophy": from "the activity of loving wisdom" to "a systematic discipline"

2.1.1 Original meaning in ancient greek

"Philosophy" derives from the Ancient Greek "φιλοσοφία" (philosophia), composed of "φίλος" (philos, meaning "love" or "devotion") and "σοφία" (sophia, meaning "wisdom"). Literally, it refers to "the love of wisdom." In the contexts of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, "philosophia" was not a fixed "discipline" but rather a way of life and intellectual activity centered on the pursuit of wisdom. Socrates defined a "philosopher" as "someone who knows their own ignorance and constantly seeks truth," emphasizing its nature of "exploration" and "reflection." Unlike the "σοφιστής" (sophist, who aimed to teach "practical skills"), "philosophia" pursued fundamental inquiries into the essence of the world and human existence, transcending specific utilitarian goals. For instance, in Plato's Republic, the "Allegory of the Cave" describes "philosophia" as "the ascending process from the world of opinion to the world of ideas," highlighting its essence as a "spiritual quest."

2.1.2 Semantic evolution in modern english

In modern English, the meaning of "philosophy" has gradually shifted from a "dynamic activity" to a "static discipline." According to the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), its core meaning is "the systematic study of fundamental questions concerning existence, knowledge, values, reason, mind, and language." This transformation began during the medieval Scholastic period, when scholars integrated Ancient Greek philosophy (especially Aristotle's works) with Christian theology, attempting to construct a "systematic body of knowledge." After the 17th-century Enlightenment, as natural sciences and humanities became more differentiated, "philosophy" was further established as an independent discipline, with subfields such as metaphysics, ethics, and epistemology. For example, in the English translation of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, "philosophy" explicitly refers to "the critical study of human rational capacity," rather than the "personal pursuit of wisdom" in Ancient Greek times.

2.1.3 Cultural drivers of semantic evolution

Behind this evolution lies the transformation of Western culture—from the "speculative tradition of the classical era" to "systematic medieval theology" and then to "modern disciplinary differentiation." Medieval Scholasticism required a "systematic" philosophical framework to justify theological doctrines, shifting "philosophy" from "personal exploration" to "collective knowledge construction." During the Enlightenment, the trend of "rationalism" emphasized the "classification and organization of knowledge," prompting "philosophy" to separate from natural and social sciences and become an independent discipline focusing on "fundamental questions." This semantic change is essentially an "adaptive reconstruction" of the Ancient Greek spirit of "loving wisdom" in different historical contexts—it retains the core of "pursuing truth" while endowing it with a "disciplinary form" that meets the needs of the times.

2.2 "Metaphysics": from "after physics" to "the philosophical branch studying the essence of existence"

2.2.1 Original meaning and origin in ancient greek

"Metaphysics" traces its origin to the Ancient Greek "μετάφυσικά" (metaphysika), composed of "μετά" (meta, meaning "after" or "beyond") and "φυσικά" (physika, meaning "physics" or "natural science"). This term was not originally coined by Aristotle but was named by Andronicus of Rhodes in the 1st century BCE. When organizing Aristotle's works, Andronicus placed a set of manuscripts "exploring issues beyond natural phenomena" after *Physika* (Physics), titling them "τὰ μετὰ τὰ φυσικά" (ta meta ta physika), which literally means "the works after Physics." In Aristotle's original texts, these contents primarily discuss issues transcending natural phenomena, such as "being as being," "substance," and "potentiality and actuality." Aristotle himself referred to this field as "first philosophy," distinguishing it from "second philosophy" (i.e., physics), which studies "natural phenomena."

2.2.2 Semantic consolidation and expansion in modern English

In modern English, the meaning of "metaphysics" has completely broken away from its original context of "textual ordering" and has become one of the core branches of philosophy. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, its definition is "the branch of philosophy that studies the nature and properties of reality beyond the physical or natural world, such as existence, causality, time, space, and the relationship between mind and matter." For example, in the English translation of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, "metaphysics" refers explicitly to "arguments for issues such as 'I think, therefore I am,' 'the existence of God,' and 'the reality of the material world.'" In the English translation of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, "metaphysics" is further associated with "the forgetting of 'being,'" becoming a key concept for reflecting on the tradition of Western philosophy. Additionally, the meaning of "metaphysics" has extended to everyday contexts, where it can refer to "abstract, abstruse thinking" (e.g., "His ideas about life have a touch of metaphysics"). Though deviating from its core philosophical meaning, it still retains the connotation of "transcending specific phenomena."

2.2.3 Cultural drivers of semantic evolution

The consolidation of the meaning of "metaphysics" is closely linked to the "canonization" of Aristotle's philosophy from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. Medieval Scholastic philosophers (such as Thomas Aquinas) integrated Aristotle's "first philosophy" with Christian theology, regarding "metaphysics" as a "tool for proving the existence of God and the immortality of the soul," elevating it from a "text title" to a "core philosophical field." After the Renaissance, as humanism turned its focus to "human existence," the object of "metaphysics" shifted from "divinity" to "the relationship between humans and the world," further solidifying its meaning as "the study of the essence of existence." Criticisms of

"metaphysics" in modern philosophy (e.g., logical positivism arguing that "metaphysical propositions are meaningless") have, conversely, promoted the "refinement" of its meaning—urging scholars to more clearly define the boundaries between "metaphysics," "science," and "epistemology," making it an irreplaceable field in philosophical research.

2.3 "Ethics": from "custom and character" to "the study of moral norms and values"

2.3.1 Original meaning in ancient greek

"Ethics" originates from the Ancient Greek "ἠθική" (ethike), derived from "ἦθος" (ethos, meaning "custom," "character," or "morals"). It was first used by Aristotle in *Nicomachean Ethics* to refer to "the study of human character and the good life." In the Ancient Greek context, the core of "ethics" was not "abstract moral rules" but rather "how to cultivate good character (aretē, i. e., 'virtue') through habit to achieve 'happiness' (eudaimonia, i. e., 'flourishing' or 'a life of fulfillment')." For example, Aristotle believed that virtues such as "courage" and "temperance" are not innate but are habits formed through "repeated practice of correct actions." The goal of "ethics" was to explore "how humans should live" to realize the common good of both the individual and the city-state. Additionally, though Plato did not use the term "ethike" in *Republic*, his discussion of "justice" (dikaiosyne)—defined as "the harmonious order of the parts of an individual's soul and each social class fulfilling its role in the city-state"—also falls within the scope of Ancient Greek "ethics," emphasizing the "unity of character and social order."

2.3.2 Semantic evolution in modern English

In modern English, the meaning of "ethics" has gradually expanded from "character cultivation" to "the systematic study of moral norms, value judgments, and behavioral principles." According to the *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*, its definition is "the branch of philosophy that studies the nature of morality, the standards of moral judgment, the distinction between right and wrong actions, and moral responsibility and obligation." This evolution is reflected in two aspects: first, the object of study has shifted from "individual character" to "universal moral principles." For example, Kant's "categorical imperative" defines "ethics" as "abiding by universal moral laws formulated by reason," rather than the "character cultivation" advocated by Aristotle. Second, its application has expanded from "personal life" to "social and professional fields," giving rise to subfields such as "business ethics" and "medical ethics." For instance, the "principle of informed consent" in medical ethics is a specific application of "ethics" in modern society. Furthermore, in everyday contexts, "ethics" is often used to refer to "moral standards" (e.g., "the ethics of journalism"), with a meaning closer to "norms" than "character."

2.3.3 Cultural drivers of semantic evolution

The semantic shift of "ethics" is closely tied to the structural transformation of Western society—from the "city-state community" to the "modern individualistic society." In Ancient Greek times, individual values were closely linked to the fate of the city-state, so the core of "ethics" was "how to become a good citizen needed by the city-state," focusing on "character and habit." In modern society, however, individual independence has increased and social structures have become more complex. "Ethics" now needs to address "moral conflicts between different individuals and groups," thus shifting toward "universal moral principles and norms." For example, "utilitarianism" and "deontology" during the Enlightenment were both intended to provide "unified standards for moral judgment" in modern pluralistic societies—a demand that drove "ethics" to shift from "virtue-oriented" to "norm-oriented." At the same time, modern disciplinary differentiation has also led "ethics" to separate from "psychology" (which studies individual behavior) and "sociology" (which studies social norms), becoming an independent field focused on "moral philosophical analysis."

3 Common patterns of semantic evolution and cultural logic

3.1 Common pattern: from "context-specific concreteness" to "abstract systematicity"

An analysis of the three core loanwords—philosophy, metaphysics, and ethics—reveals a common pattern in the semantic evolution of Ancient Greek loanwords in English philosophy: a shift from "context-specific concreteness" to "abstract systematicity." In Ancient Greek, the meanings of these terms were often closely tied to specific "life scenarios" (e.g., philosophy linked to "Socrates' questioning activities"), "textual ordering" (e.g., metaphysics linked to "manuscripts after Physics"), or "city-state needs" (e.g., ethics linked to "citizen character cultivation"), exhibiting strong "context dependence." After entering modern English, however, these terms gradually broke away from their original contexts and were abstracted into "systematic disciplinary concepts" or "universal theoretical categories," with meanings characterized by greater "logic and universality."

For example, philosophy evolved from "an individual's love of wisdom" to "a discipline studying fundamental questions"; metaphysics from "a text title" to "a branch studying the essence of existence"; and ethics from "character cultivation" to "the study of moral norms." This process is essentially the "decontextualization and recontextualization of concepts": first, stripping away the original specific contexts, then placing the concepts in modern disciplinary systems and cultural contexts to endow them with new connotations and functions.

3.2 Cultural logic: the "modern transformation" of ancient greek philosophy

Behind the semantic evolution of loanwords lies the cultural logic of the "modern transformation" of Ancient Greek philosophy in Western culture. As the source of Western thought, the core spirit of Ancient Greek philosophy (e.g., the pursuit of truth, the emphasis on reason, and the reflection on human existence) has been continuously "reinterpreted" across different historical periods. The semantic evolution of loanwords serves as the linguistic carrier of this "interpretive process."

3.2.1 Theological transformation in the middle ages

During the Middle Ages, Christian theology became the core of Western culture, and Ancient Greek philosophy was interpreted within a theological framework. For example, metaphysics was used to prove "the existence of God," and ethics to explain "Christian virtues (e.g., faith, hope, and charity)." This imbued the loanwords with "theological overtones," laying the foundation for their subsequent "systematization."

Rational Transformation During the Enlightenment

During the Enlightenment, "reason" replaced "theology" as the cultural core, and the "rational spirit" in Ancient Greek philosophy (e.g., Socrates' "questioning" and Aristotle's "logic") was reactivated. The meanings of loanwords thus shifted toward "rational analysis": philosophy became "a discipline of rational exploration," ethics "moral norms formulated by reason," and metaphysics "rational reflection on the essence of existence." This transformation drove the semantic shift of loanwords toward "abstraction and scientification."

3.2.2 Pluralistic transformation in modern times

In modern philosophy, interpretations of Ancient Greek philosophy have become diversified (e.g., existentialism's emphasis on "Socrates' reflection on existence" and postmodernism's criticism of "Plato's theory of ideas"). The meanings of loanwords have accordingly expanded, retaining their core connotations while accommodating new theoretical perspectives. For example, metaphysics now refers not only to "traditional ontological research" but also to reflections on "the metaphysical tradition of Western philosophy," demonstrating the "openness and adaptability" of the semantic meanings of loanwords.

4 Conclusions and implications

By analyzing the semantic evolution of three core Ancient Greek loanwords—philosophy, metaphysics, and ethics—in the field of English philosophy, this study reveals the important value of loanwords as a carrier of "language-culture" interaction. The evolution of these loanwords from "context-specific concreteness" to "abstract systematicity" not only reflects the development laws of the English vocabulary system but also records the "modern transformation" of Ancient Greek philosophy in Western culture—from a "speculative activity in the classical era" to a "medieval theological tool" and then to a "modern independent discipline." The core spirit of Ancient Greek philosophy, through the medium of language, has continuously adapted to the needs of the times and shaped the discourse system of modern Western philosophy.

For English majors, this study offers two key implications: first, loanword research can serve as an interdisciplinary entry point for "linguistics and cultural studies," enabling in-depth understanding of the cultural logic behind language through semantic evolution analysis. Second, as "genetic fragments of Western culture," Ancient Greek loanwords help clarify the origin of the English language and Western thought, providing theoretical support for cross-cultural communication and cultural research.

Future research could further expand the scope of loanwords (e.g., including terms such as epistemology and ontology) or compare English translations of specific philosophical texts to explore the impact of translation on the semantic evolution of loanwords, thereby more comprehensively presenting the cultural mapping of Ancient Greek philosophical loanwords in English.

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