

Inference and metarepresentation: Ancient Greek ἤ που as a constraint on higher-level explicatures



Samuel Zakowski^{*}

Ghent University, Belgium

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Abstract

In this paper, I present a relevance-theoretic approach to the Ancient Greek expression ἤ που. Earlier accounts do not offer an integrated approach to its function, but only provide a synonym or some intuitive remarks. I argue that ἤ που can be regarded as a constraint on the higher-level explicature – it instructs the hearer to regard the utterance it marks as a metarepresentation of someone else's thought process. In this way, the speaker marks utterances in which he is making assumptions about the implicated premise or the implicated conclusion which the hearer (or a third party) used as input for, or derived as output of, his inferential process. Broadly, ἤ που can be encountered in two contexts – either where the speaker is making assumptions about what the hearer (or a third party) is thinking, or where the speaker is making assumptions about what the hearer should be thinking. Finally, I propose 'surely' and 'no doubt' as the most straightforward translations for ἤ που.

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1. Introduction¹

The Ancient Greek expression ἤ που (also spelled ἤπου)² has not received much scholarly attention. Apart from some lemmata in antique and medieval *etymologica*, dictionaries and scholia, and some scattered remarks which often pre-date many modern linguistic theories, it has been disregarded by the linguistic community. This paper aims to fill this lacuna by providing a qualitative study of its semantics and function from a cognitive perspective – I will argue that an application of the framework of relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson, 1995²) leads to a more fine-grained appreciation of the subtle contributions ἤ που makes to the utterance.

^{*} Correspondence to: Blandijnberg 2, 9000 Ghent, Belgium. Tel.: +32 474731940.

E-mail address: samuel.zakowski@ugent.be.

¹ The most common abbreviations used in this paper are the following:

ACC: accusative
ART: article
DAT: dative
GEN: genitive
INT: interjection
NOM: nominative
PART: particle
REL: relative

² For the purposes of this paper, which is to analyze ἤπου's semantics and contribution to the content of the utterance, I regard ἤπου and ἤ που as synonyms.

In paragraph 2, I give a brief overview of the available accounts (such as they are) of ἡ̃ που. In the third paragraph, I present an example which demonstrates that a more rigorous account of ἡ̃ που's function should center on the role of pragmatic inference in speaker-hearer interaction. I also provide an outline of relevance theory and argue that its tenets form a solid basis from which ἡ̃ που's function can be derived. I then apply these tenets to a number of representative examples containing ἡ̃ που (Section 4). In Section 5, I attempt to find a suitable translation; in Section 6, I discuss whether ἡ̃ που's semantics are conceptual or procedural in nature. In Section 7, finally, I summarize my findings and present my conclusions.

First, however, a word on the corpus which was selected for this paper. Although ἡ̃ που does not appear often in classical, pre-classical and post-classical Ancient Greek (116 times, according to the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, including four instances in spurious or dubious works such as Plato's *Amatores*), it does occur in a wide variety of authors and genres – from Homer to Plutarch, and from Plato to Euripides, for example. The authors included in this analysis are (in chronological order) Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Lysias, Isocrates, Xenophon, Plato, Demosthenes, Theocritus, Plutarch, Lucian and Athenaeus. Athenaeus serves as the cut-off point – there are many instances of ἡ̃ που in, for example, Christian homilies (such as those of John Chrysostom), but these would lead us too far. The texts under consideration are more or less connected as regards both their content and their language, and, for the purposes of an analysis of ἡ̃ που, at least, can be considered a coherent whole.³

2. Earlier accounts

There are two tendencies which stand out from earlier accounts of ἡ̃ που. The first is that the notion of 'account' should not be regarded as a full-fledged analysis of all (or even most) of the different aspects of ἡ̃ που. Rather, the extent of these 'accounts' is that they provide a synonym for ἡ̃ που. This is what we find in, for instance, the *Etymologicum Gudianum*, a lexical encyclopedia of the 10th century AD:

- (1) ἡ̃ που, ὁντως δὲ καὶ ἀληθῶς.⁴

The scholar who compiled this part of the *Etymologicum* states that ἡ̃ που can be translated as 'really and truly'. However, this is not the only interpretation of ἡ̃ που which we encounter. Take the following entry in the *Suda*, the massive encyclopedia compiled in Byzantium in the 10th century as well:

- (2) ἡ̃ που: ἴσως, σχεδόν.⁵

This scholar argues that ἡ̃ που equates to 'maybe, perhaps' – that is, to something which is entirely different from 'really and truly'. In the *scholia* on Euripides' *Medea*, we find a different interpretation yet again:

- (3) ἡ̃ που: ἀπιστῶν τοῦτο λέγει.⁶

This is provided as commentary on verse 695, where Aegeus utters the following:

[Medea is telling King Aegeus of Jason's betrayal – he has chosen another woman over her.]

- (4) ἡ̃ που τετόλμηκ' ἔργον αἰσχιστον τόδε; (Euripides, *Medea* 695)
'Surely he has not dared such a shameful act?' (tr. Kovacs, 1994:347)

Leaving aside the fact that the text printed in the Loeb edition does not have ἡ̃ που (but, instead, οὐ̃ που, with the negative οὐ̃ ('not') also appearing in Kovacs' translation), ἡ̃ που does not mean 'really and truly' or 'maybe' in this case,

³ The authors under consideration cover a period between the 8th century BC (Homer) and the 2nd–3rd century AD (Athenaeus) – an extensive time frame, which led one of the reviewers to ask whether the language (and ἡ̃ που's function specifically) had not changed over the course of this period. My answer to this would be that all these authors (Homer excluded) wrote, or attempted to write, Classical Greek. As such, Lucian's language is very close to that of, for example, Plato, even though they are far apart from a chronological point of view (cf. Kim, 2010). The discussion below, which takes examples from as many authors as possible, will also demonstrate that there are clear parallels between the different texts.

⁴ Taken from Sturz's edition (1818:247).

⁵ Taken from Adler's edition (1931:578) of the *Suda*.

⁶ Taken from Dindorf's edition (1863:47) of the *scholia* on Euripides.

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