

Translating German philosophy into English: The case of Martin Heidegger

Martin Arnd

University of Zagreb, Zagreb, Croatia
martarndt@web.de

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ABSTRACT

Language endangerment and language loss have become of focal interest for linguists and cultural anthropologists who bemoan the loss of linguistic diversity. The coinage of the term “linguicide” indicates the inherent problem that is related to mondialisation, universalization, and urbanization, which in itself is a highly controversial subject. The recent discoveries of Martin Heidegger’s black notebooks cast a new perspective on his work, revealing his revulsion at universalist ideologies and his antimodernism – and, most fatefully, his antisemitism: Jews who are to him the incarnation of rootlessness, distance from the soil, and thus subversion. Heidegger was born in a rural provincial German – and for many remained so, walking in the countryside, hating TV, airplanes, pop music, and processed food that all conspire to distract us from the basic wondrous nature of Being, overwhelming us with information, killing silence, and never leaving us alone, and thus keep us away from the confrontation with “das Nichts” (the Nothing), which lies on the other side of Being, that is, however, unknown to the chatter (das Gerede), which can be perceived in the newspapers, on TV and in the cities Heidegger hated to spend time in. Although he was a Nazi to the end, this does not mean that nothing can be learned from him or problems connected to his work. This library research deals with the complexity of translating this German philosopher into the English language. It draws not only on typical examples from Heidegger’s path-breaking philosophical work *Sein und Zeit* and presents attempts at translating it, but also points out their shortcomings and drawbacks. Additionally, it presents solutions to the problems that emerge from Heidegger’s idiosyncratic language. Generally speaking, it reveals the almost unbridgeable language barriers that can only be overcome at the expense of depth and authenticity. Homogenization can be seen as a way of leveling down ideas and concepts that end in language death.

Keywords: *Authenticity; Hermeneutics; Language; Rationalization; Translation*

1. Introduction

Being and Time (1927) was written in the climate of Expressionism (Wheeler, 2020). The will to change linguistic customs and to purify language dominated the European post-First World War generation whose members frequently became neologists and subverters of traditional grammar. The German language was well-suited for that purpose, as it is endowed with a peculiarly mobile syntax and with the capacity to fragment or to fuse words and word-roots almost at will, creating speech-acts of the most revolutionary kind and engaging in counter-action. Martin Heidegger (1889–1976) opened a Pandora’s Box of misclues and misunderstandings that still hamstrings his work to this day; when it comes to the needless confusion that dogs Heidegger’s philosophy (not only among analytical philosophers but among Heideggerians as well), much of the blame must be laid at Heidegger’s own doorstep, but also on some of his translators. For some eighty years Heidegger’s readers have had to endure an avalanche of confusion in trying to sort out exactly what Heidegger meant. Many of Heidegger’s works have been translated into the English language (Maly, 2000).

2. The ontological starting-point

The *Einführung in die Metaphysik* (*Introduction to Metaphysics*) was the first book by Heidegger to be translated into English, in 1959, even before *Being and Time* (1962). Here he asserted that the word “Being” is then finally just an empty word. It means nothing actual, tangible, and real. Its meaning is an unreal vapor. In the German text it reads: “*Die einzelne Tatsache, daß das Sein uns nur noch ein leeres Wort und ein verschwebender Dunst ist*” (Heidegger, 1958, p. 54). In his preface to the seventh edition of *Being and Time* Heidegger wrote: For the elucidation of this question [of Being] the reader may refer to my *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, which is appearing simultaneously with this reprinting (Raffoul & Nelson, 2013, p. 207).

Sein und Zeit (1927) first appeared in the spring of 1927 in the *Jahrbuch for Phänomenologie und phänomenologische Forschung* (Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Research) edited by Edmund Husserl in association with M. Geiger (Munich), A. Pfänder (Munich), A. Reinach (Göttingen), and M. Scheler (Berlin). The first translation of Heidegger’s path breaking and almost classical work was made in 1962 by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson who suggest convincingly “*Being and Time* is a work of many interwoven themes, where words are used in strange ways made stranger still by the shift to another language” (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962, p. 503).

Heidegger is fond of the ambiguity of language and in the multiple meanings of the words he chooses. Translators can never be sure in a given case which of these meanings Heidegger wishes to prefer. Already the first page poses difficulties. Temporality (*Die Zeit*) should be interpreted as the horizon “*eines jeden Seinsverständnisses*” (for any understanding whatsoever of Being). Time is seen as the primary horizon of ontology. The translator remarks that throughout this work the word

'horizon' is used with a connotation somewhat different from that to which the English-speaking reader is likely to be accustomed. We tend to think of a horizon as something which we may widen or extend or go beyond; Heidegger, however, seems to think of it rather as something which we can neither widen nor go beyond, but which provides the limits for certain intellectual activities performed "within" it (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962, p. 19). How can we account for this difference? Did Heidegger, an expert of Greek culture, perhaps, remember the Greek meaning underlying the word 'horizon' which is ὁρίζων (to limit, then in German: Gesichtskreis is field of vision, replacing the German word *Endkreis* meaning finitor, i. e. someone who ends or limits something is a surveyor).

Heidegger is constantly using words in ways which are by no means ordinary, and a great part of his merit lies in the freshness and penetration which his very innovations reflect. He tends to discard much of the traditional philosophical terminology, substituting an elaborate vocabulary of his own, which is then ridiculed by his contemporary Karl Jaspers as "Heidegger-Gegacker" (Gadamer, 1995, p. 51). A Heidegger-dictionary (e. g., Dahlstrom's (2013) *The Heidegger Dictionary*) and a glossary of German expressions and terms (Munday) may provide the reader with a preliminary insight into Heidegger's eccentric terminology, stretching from "abblenden" meaning to dim down; "Abgrund", "abyss", "zweideutig" meaning "ambiguous". But already the translation for "Abgrund" (abyss) does not render the connotation with "Grund" (ground) and reason where the English word (Greek: ἄβυσσος) has a completely different metaphorical background.

We must bear in mind Heidegger's hermeneutical principle stated already in 1925 in his *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs* (*Preliminaries to the History of the Concept of Time*). We do not say what we see, but see what we say (Kisiel, 2002, p. 44). To give another example: "*Aufsässigkeit*" is translated as obstinacy which can be paraphrased as the quality of being unreasonably determined, especially to act in a particular way and not to change at all, despite what anyone else says (obstinacy). The etymological *Grimmsche Wörterbuch* refers to "*hostilis, repugnans, gebildet wie ahd. antsâzic, mhd. widersæzec und wie ansäsziq, landsäsziq*", establishing the context of "hostility", "rebellion" and "revolt", of "disturbance" and destruction of the easy-going contact with the world, even of mean treachery. It has a much more dramatic connotation than obstinacy.

This "*Aufsässigkeit*" culminates in the experience of the "nothing and nowhere within-the-world", a phenomenon that the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety. But short of death, I can experience a crucial failure of meaning, one that issues in what Heidegger calls "*Angst*": How should this highly existential word be translated? Is it "dread" or "anguish" to best relate to the unfocused fear, (Peters, 2014) as it was expressed by Søren Kierkegaard in 1844: Kierkegaard used the example of a man standing on the edge of a tall building or cliff. When the man looks over the edge, he experiences a focused fear of falling, but at the same time, the man feels a terrifying

impulse to throw himself intentionally off the edge. That experience is anxiety or dread because of our complete freedom to choose to either throw oneself off or to stay put.

The mere fact that one has the possibility and freedom to do something, even the most terrifying of possibilities, triggers immense feelings of dread. Kierkegaard called this our “dizziness of freedom” (Braungart). Here a complete collapse of meaning in the very midst of my life lets me see the absurdity, the utter groundlessness, of my engagement with meaning. In this condition, says Heidegger, one may sense an invitation or summons “the call of conscience” to understand and accept the groundlessness of oneself and thus to assume authorship of one’s own life. To take that decision is to “double” one’s ex-sistence: already structurally thrown open (*erschlossen*), I take it over and become resolutely thrown-open (*entschlossen*).

The utter insignificance which makes itself known in the “nothing and nowhere”, does not signify that the world is absent, but tells us that entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this insignificance of what is with-in-the-world, the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962, p. 232).

The individual feels “*unheimlich*” – another highly connotative word should it be translated as “forlorn” connected with the German(ic) word “*verloren*” meaning “lost” or not better as “uncanny” (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962, p. 233) – or as “not being at home” (Heim in German). Many connotations and connections in the German text are lost when translating Heidegger, however scrupulous the translation may be. The loss will grow with the distance between the German language and the language into which the text is translated into (i.e. a translation into Dutch is closer to the original than English, and English closer than a translation into Chinese....). The German word “*unheimlich*” is the antonym to words that denote “*Haus*” (home), “*Wohnort*” (residence) and “*Heimat*” (homeland, native, home country): In the experience of Nothingness, familiarity and the teleological structure of everyday life collapse (Schrader & Buzon, 2017). Is not the German word best suited to characterize this experience of estrangement – comparable to the Greek experience of becoming a ζένος? How can language be spoken in a way more than just banalising hearsay? In *Being and Time* Heidegger demands from philosophy the preservation of:

The force of the elemental words in which Dasein expresses itself, and to keep the common understanding from leveling them off to that unintelligibility which functions in turn as a source of pseudo-problems (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962, p. 220).

What happens if Heidegger’s aim is not understanding, but experiencing which requires the suspension of conventions of common logic and unexamined grammar in

order to begin all over again? Later Heidegger called his early work *Sein und Zeit* “ein kaum vernehmbares *Versprechen*” (a scarcely audible promise), but in German “*Versprechen*” signifies both “promise” and “error of speech”: Would it then not be the best way to publish all of Heidegger’s works bilingually? Heidegger underscores that words and language are not just shells [*Hülsen*] into which things are packed for spoken and written intercourse. In the word, in language, things first come to be and are words matter. Heidegger suffered from the “*allgemeine sprachvernutzung*” (abuse of language) (Heidegger, 1958, 2:54). Idle talk and mass communication follow the trace of inauthenticity, making up the Brave New World of Journalism. Most of his words retain as much as possible of their root meanings in their Greek, Latin, or old origins.

3. The linguistic maze

As we saw, in a genuine mood of anxiety, not only is one aware of the finitude of human existence: it is claimed that the totality of beings sinks into nothing (Shariatnia, 2015). The only thing that remains and overwhelms us while the beings slip away is this “nothing”. Anxiety reveals nothing. For Heidegger *Angst* (anxiety) discloses that the world that makes the handiness of things possible is itself “nothing”: Everything within the world becomes utterly insignificant. “*Dasein*” realizes that she is not at home while pursuing her projects, that she is “nowhere” and that her commitment is a flight from authenticity. Heidegger spoke about “pseudo-problems”. This term was also used by the logical positivist Rudolf Carnap (1931: *Überwindung der Metaphysik durch logische Analyse der Sprache* (*The Elimination of Metaphysics Through Logical Analysis of Language*) in his uncompromising attack on Heidegger’s philosophy and language as, e.g. formulated in Heidegger’s interpretation of “*Nichts*” (Nothing-ness) in *Was ist Metaphysik* (What is Metaphysics?).

Erforscht werden soll das Seiende nur und sonst – *nichts*, das Seiende allein und weiter – *nichts*; das Seiende einzig und darüber hinaus – *nichts*. Wie steht es um dieses Nichts? – Gibt es das Nichts nur, weil es das Nicht, d.h. die Verneinung gibt? [...] Das Nichts ist ursprünglicher als das Nicht und die Verneinung. – – Wo suchen wir das Nichts? – – Wie finden wir das Nichts? – – Wir kennen das Nichts. – – Die Angst offenbart das Nichts. – – Wovor und warum wir uns ängsteten, war ‚eigentlich‘ – nichts. In der Tat. Das Nichts selbst.

Being is to be studied – and nothing else, being alone and nothing else; only being und beyond that – *nothing*. What is the matter with *Nothing*? Is it only, because there is the Nothing, that is: the negation....The nothingness is more primordial than the Nothing and the negation. –Where do we seek the nothingness? – Where do we find the nothingness? --- We know the nothingness. – Anxiety reveals the nothingness. – What we are afraid of was virtually nothing. Indeed, the nothingness itself. My own translation.

The *Nichts* is not *nihil*. Nothingness is not negation of Being. The very word teaches us that: *no-thing-ness* signifies a presentness, an existential "thereness" which is not naively enclosed in or circumscribed by any particular extant, specific object. To Carnap (Sarkar, 1992) who was followed by the Oxfordian Logical Positivist A. J. Ayer such a sentence is the final proof of Heidegger's vacuity, consisting of non-sensical sentences comparable to "Caesar is a prime number". Heidegger is simply duped by grammatical fallacies (e.g. thinking that "nothing" is an entity as it can be used as a noun). His sentence has the same grammatical form as the sentence "The rain rains" – a sentence which Carnap, or at least his translator, regarded as a "meaningful sentence of ordinary language". In Carnap's view, Heidegger offends the logical standards of language and produces pseudo-problems (*Scheinprobleme*).

Heidegger treats the indefinite pronoun "nothing" as a noun, as the "name or description of an entity". He implies, and later affirms, the existence of the nothing, when the "existence of this entity would be denied in its very definition". If all this were not enough, the sentence is, according to Carnap, meaningless, since it is neither analytic, nor contradictory, nor empirical. It is metaphysics, and metaphysics seriously damages our spiritual health in Carnap's view. Whereas Carnap wanted to rationalize, Heidegger's aim was to intensify. That is why Heidegger drew on specific resources of the German language, not avoiding connotations. While Carnap wanted to make language in philosophy as clear and unambiguous as possible, Heidegger wanted to restore language to its expressive power.

Heidegger's technical lexicon can be quite confusing, because he gives common words uncommon meanings. Whereas Carnap (and the other logical positivists) is easy to translate, Heidegger is rather difficult to translate, if not altogether impossible. This confrontation between Heidegger and Carnap has sometimes been objectified into a *continental-analytic divide in philosophy* with the British philosophers criticizing their continental colleagues for their self-indulgent use of language and their lack of clarity, which was seen as due to the continentals' lack of contact with real scientists. This philosophical division correlated in the positivists' mind with cultural and political obscurantism. Ryle is said to have said, "when the Nazis came to power, Heidegger showed that he was a shit, from the heels up, and a shit from the heels up cannot do good philosophy, Heidegger is even called a "bullshitter" (Cohen, 2013, p. 22).

Heidegger collaborated with National Socialism and used the prestige and some of the vocabulary of his philosophical thought to support Hitler and his murderous. Heidegger was willing to undermine and to break the power of reason that closes off the experiences made with the nothing-ness and being-ness. Heidegger raised a plea for the use of language in such a way that it will reveal Being rather than conceal it. A word as such never gives direct guarantee as to whether it is an essential word or a counterfeit. So the philosopher's task is to speak in such a way that authentic experience is communicated that, since it draws on the highly connotative German language, makes it often "untranslatable". The problem starts off with the title: Should "*Sein*" really be

translated as “Being” or rather not as “Being-ness” in order to stress the “ontological difference” between “Sein” and “seined”? Being (*Sein*) has not the character of some possible entity.

Modern research focuses on the phenomenological method applied by Heidegger, which means that the question after Being is identical with the question, what it means to be and not concerned with mind-independent entity. Being is not something “out there”, but phenomenologically correlated with “Dasein” (Wolfson, 2019). He always philosophizes within a phenomenological view of things as *ad hominem* (κατὰ τὸν λόγον) – that is, in correlation with human concerns and interests. Heidegger holds to the strictly phenomenological position that the “in-itself-ness” of such things is not located somehow “within” those things when taken as separate from human interests. Rather, the in-itself-ness of a tool is precisely its status as usable *in relation to* the intentions of the person who is using it. For Heidegger, *Sein* in all its forms is always written under phenomenological erasure – that is, under the aegis of a phenomenological reduction of things to their meaningfulness to man.

Is capitalization (Being) enough? “*Sein*” is distinguished from “*Seiendem*” (beings) such as physical objects or that entire collection of things that constitute the physical universe. The substantive “*das Seiende*” is derived from the participle “*seined*” and means literally ‘that which is’; “*ein Seiendes*” means “something which is”. There is much to be said for translating “*Seiendes*” by the noun “being” or “beings” (for it is often used in a collective sense). We feel, however, that it is smoother and less confusing to write “entity” or “entities” (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962, p. 21). Certainly, “being-ness” sounds awkward to an English ear, but it is more in accordance with Heidegger’s ontology, whereas “Being”, as Gilbert Ryle 1929 translated fatefully, suggests a reified substance, a hyper-entity, some sort of eternal presentness or *Vorhandensein*, “out there”. Ryle who introduced Wittgenstein in Oxford also made the mistake of viewing the Heideggerian term “in” as a preposition for a spatial universe, thus missing the meaning of the verb “*innan*” as used by Heidegger which is the German equivalent to (Latin) “*habitare*”, “*diligere*”, meaning “to be acquainted and familiar with” (Groth, 2017, p. 30) and thereby to make sense of things one encounters. All too often Anglophone scholars leave Heidegger’s technical terms untranslated (e.g., *Dasein*, *Ereignis*, *Geschick*), or else resort to a “Deutschlish” discourse—half German, half English. Other scholars insist on repeating Heidegger’s technical language over and over again—pristine, unchanged, and very under-interpreted. To write in German about Heidegger’s German is arduous enough. To do so in English, a language natively hostile to certain orders of abstruseness and metaphoric abstraction, is well-nigh impossible.

4. Linguistic monism

Is Heidegger only accessible to Germans? Is the proper translation of “*Sorge*”, the descendant of “*Bekümmierung*” (anxious concern), as the ontological structure of existence really “care”, as many translators suggest? Heidegger puts the word in

inverted commas to remind the reader that the customary meaning is not intended. “Burdach calls attention to a double meaning of the term “cura” according to which it signifies not only “anxious exertion” but also “carefulness” and “devotedness” [Sorgfalt, Hingabe] (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962, p. 243).

Denoting the primary relation to the world, Heidegger chose “Sorge” as the appropriate word, avoiding e.g. the indifferent-sounding word “Interesse”. I am structurally a matter of minding (*Besorgen, Fürsorge*), of being concerned about whoever and whatever comes into my ken. In my everyday ex-sistence I do not perceive things as objects standing over against me. Rather, I am involved and concerned with them. I mind people and things *as meaningful* in different ways. The “object” of minding is the meant, and the meant is always meaningful. “Dasein” is in essence hermeneutical, as the primary character of encountering the world is meaningful. Why are we condemned to making sense of things?

The living thing is *always at-the-point-of-death: zum Ende, zum Tode* (Being-at-the-point-of-death), which forces us to structure the world meaning-fully. But the Heideggerian term “Sorge” implies in accordance with the etymological findings of the *Grimmsches Wörterbuch* in addition to “taking care of” the meaning of “sorrow” (worrying about something), since the knowledge of death permanently possess us humans. Heidegger’s preference for “Sorge” over “interest” grounded in the reign of the God Saturn, God of time that decides over the Dasein’s existence. It is not only an uplifting project (*Entwurf*), but also “*geworfen*” (being thrown), making it being drawn downwards into melancholy. To overcome the language barriers a German-English glossary for the more important expressions is suggested, and sometimes new terms have to be coined to correspond to Heidegger's.

A lexicon may include the various senses and contexts in which terms appear as well as a substantial number of descriptive quotations. For example, if the reader wishes to understand Heidegger's doctrine of intentionality or his doctrine of transcendence, or the relationship between the two, he or she will most readily reach this goal by pursuing the indications in the Lexicon. The translator Joan Stambaugh from 1996 (State University of New York) uses “the thrownness of this (i.e. the *Daseins*) being” for “*Geworfenheit*” (Macquarrie & Robinson, 1962, p. 25), but shies away from using the very uncommon, but more Heideggerian phrase “Being-Thrown-into-Nothingness” to denote the arbitrary or inscrutable nature of the “Dasein” as a state of thrown-ness in the present with all its frustrations, sufferings, and demands that one does not choose. The very fact of one's own existence is a manifestation of thrown-ness (*Geworfenheit*); a kind of alienation that human beings struggle against. *Sein und Zeit* attracted many youths and adolescents on account of its resistance to the banality of daily life and the suggestion of a non-daily life which was associated with “authenticity” that Heidegger’s evoked by using the word “*eigentlich*” which in the German language is in itself highly ambiguous, covering aspects of “really” or “on its part”, or something like “genuinely” or “authentically” would be more appropriate.

It is not always possible to tell which meaning Heidegger has in mind. Though concerned with a seemingly abstract notion, the book pretends to deal with the “most concrete” which appeared attractive and appeals to the longing for a critical change. This break with the present is also reflected in Heidegger’s unconventional and seemingly eccentric language. From Heidegger’s view language is not just a tool to transport information, but a magically gifted capacity for creativity and innovative breaks with the conventional usages of words based on an expressive, but eccentric language, full of untranslatable, etymological allusions. How can it be avoided that a translation is merely the distortion of the original? One approach is to get at what he was trying to articulate, and then to express that in an answerable style. Translators:

- invent glossaries
- insert German expressions in square brackets on the occasions of their first appearance or on that of their official definition
- use bracketed expressions to call attention to departures from our usual conventions
- bring out etymological connections which might otherwise be overlooked
- introduce footnotes of our own
- discuss some of the more important terms on the occasion of their first appearance
- feel compelled to make numerous concessions to the reader at the expense of making Heidegger less Heideggerian.

These “solutions” reveal the complexity of translating Heidegger. Intelligibility is given priority to authenticity at the expense of rendering Heidegger Heideggerian.

5. Conclusion

The above article raises questions of ultimate philosophical relevance. What is the nature and status of translation? The need for translation is a mark of Cain, a sign of the fallenness of Man, a witness to man’s exile from *harmonia mundi*, a mark of his fallenness. The imprecision of translation reveals the division of mankind. Language is a sign of human alienation, as it raises barriers, as becomes clear through the dispute between Carnap and Heidegger. Is language the road to truth if it is splintered into multiple tongues? Who knows which tongue reveals the cosmic Word and Truth, though Heidegger gave priority to Greek and German? What is the function of translation? Is it not the attempt to liberate the language imprisoned in a work in his re-creation of that work and thus break through decayed barriers of his own language (Walter Benjamin)? A translation must retain a vital strangeness and “otherness” and enrich the target language by allowing the source language to penetrate and modify it so that no language can presume to be the only road to truth. Is language, however, the only access to truth or is not the suspension of speaking and talking the gate to meaning? According to Angelus Silesis the deaf and dumb are nearest of all living men

to the lost vulgate of Eden. But, before becoming too self-complacent, one should consider the possibility that Heidegger adopts Kabbalistic modes of speaking (Groth, 2017). There is still much left to make Heidegger intelligible and translatable.

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