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Translating Gadamer and Heidegger: Translating Aristotle:
Über'setzen' and 'Über'setzen

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In his 1942-43 lecture course on Parmenides, Martin Heidegger distinguishes between two types of translation. The first he calls übersetzen, placing the emphasis on the penultimate syllable. This is the sort of translation computers can do increasingly well. When I type the word ἀλήθεια into Google Translate and select Greek (there is no Ancient Greek feature yet), the word “truth” appears in the right-hand, English-language column. I can even see that the translation has been reviewed and confirmed by other users of the neural machine translation service. Alētheia means truth. A successful translation. I may never have thought about the nature of truth or whether the word might have different valences in Greek than it does in English, but I can confidently say I know that ἀλήθεια and “truth” both point to the same thing.

But what if the differences between ἀλήθεια and “truth” were not so subtle? What if “truth” as, say, the agreement between a statement and a state of affairs had little do with ἀλήθεια or were, at best, a distant offshoot of it? If I had philological training or lexical proclivities, I might examine the word’s etymology or historical

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1 Martin Heidegger, Parmenides, ed. Manfred S. Frings, 2nd ed. (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1992), 14-20.
usages. I might learn, from the Great Scott, for example, that the word seems to be composed of an alpha privative and the verb λανθάνειν, “to escape notice” or, in its middle-passive form, “to forget.”² If I were really curious, I could follow up on Liddell and Scott’s reference to the fanciful Byzantine Greek-Greek lexicon known under its Latin title Etymologicum magnum, where the etymology of ἀλήθεια as “un-forgetting” is historiographically corroborated.³ Nevertheless, a younger Paul Friedländer might tell me to put no stock in such wild speculations. Furthermore, Aristotle may well speak of “truthing” or alētheuein in De interpretatione, but there the Stagirite also asserts that only propositions admit of truth. What would it even mean “to truth”? Aren’t we better off ignoring such linguistic idiosyncrasies, as does every published translation of De interpretatione that I have ever seen?⁴

Even if we do bear in mind the word’s verbal usage and render ἀλήθεια literally as “un-forgetting” or “un-concealment” – translations, by the way, that Friedländer later assented to⁵ – have we thereby understood it? No, Heidegger says, for it is not only the word that needs translating. We, too — and here we come to the second meaning of translation — need to be translated, carried across, into the domain in which Aristotle was thinking, at least to the extent possible. Heidegger marks this sort of translation with a shift in emphasis. Rather than übersetzen, he writes übersetzen, stressing the first syllable and hence the “over” into which we are to be “placed.”⁶ Or as we might say in Latinate English, translation (or transposition) is necessary for proper translation (or interlingual transference). What emerges upon returning to the target language may look so different from the original as to be unrecognizable to those who have failed to transpose themselves or be transposed similarly. This unrecognizability can take many forms, such as an unexpected word, a hendiadys, periphrasis, altered grammar and syntax, or even a strict adherence to grammar and syntax.

I do not want to explain here how the distinction between übersetzen and übersetzen plays out in Heidegger’s reading of ἀλήθεια in Parmenides and Aristotle. I will instead say a few things about how this distinction is at work in Heidegger’s and his student Hans-Georg Gadamer’s German translations of Metaphysics Lambda 6, as well as in my efforts

² Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, revised and augmented by Sir Henry Stuart Jones with the assistance of Roderick McKenzie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), s.v. ἀληθής.
⁴ For example, E. M. Edghill, in The Basic Works of Aristotle, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: The Modern Library, 2001), De interpretatione, ch. 4, 17a2-7: “every sentence is not a proposition [ἀποφαντικὸς]; only such are propositions as have in them either truth [τὸ ἀληθεύειν] or falsity. […] Let us therefore dismiss all other types of sentence but the proposition, for this last concerns our present inquiry, whereas the investigation of the others belongs rather to the study of rhetoric or of poetry.”
⁶ Cf. Martin Heidegger, Wegmarken, ed. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1976), 245: “This ‘translation’ ['Übersetzung,' namely, of Physics B 1 – I.A.M.] is […] not a transference of the Greek saying into the load-bearing capacity proper to our language. It does not wish to replace [ersetzen] the Greek saying but rather only to place [versetzen] [us – I.A.M.] into the latter and, as such an emplacement [Versetzung], to disappear in it.”
to translate these translations into English for the present issue of *Kronos Philosophical Journal*.

My task, as translator of Gadamer and Heidegger translating Aristotle, was less to carry the latter’s Greek over into English as smoothly as possible (which would, after all, efface the German) than it was to reproduce the uniqueness of their respective renderings. My task was less to transpose myself than to expose the singularity of their German. I needed to be as literal as possible, even, especially in the case of translating Heidegger, at the expense of awkward or improper English. I wanted to include the Greek and the German, so that readers with knowledge of these languages could see what I was doing. To read Gadamer and Heidegger translating Aristotle requires a double transposition, either into their German and then into Aristotle’s Greek or into Aristotle’s Greek and then into their German. I wanted, in my translation of the translations, to reduce, as much as possible (which is not to say that it is possible as such), the need for a third transposition – namely, of readers of the English into the space in which I was engaged in translating.

Take, for example, *Metaphysics* 1071b13-14: ἐνδέχεται γὰρ τὸ δύναμιν ἔχον μὴ ἐνέργειαν. Gadamer renders this fairly straightforwardly – he übersetzt or translates it – as “denn es kann ja das, was nur die Möglichkeit dazu hat, auch nicht tätig sein,” which I gave as “for that which only has the possibility for it [namely, moving or bringing about – I.A.M.] is indeed also able not to be active.” Heidegger, however, speaks here, not of activity for ἐνέργεια, but of movedness, and he interpolates the language of ontology. His rendering is the product of Übersetzung or (self-)translation: “Denn was so ist, daß es bewegen, ausrichtend auf etwas zugehen kann, braucht ja nicht seinen Seinsinn in der Bewegtheit zu haben.” It was important to follow Heidegger’s lead, even if I was tempted, by Aristotle’s Greek and a long tradition of interpreting it, to include the language of activity and actuality. I translated it as “For that which is in such a way that it can move and go toward something in a directing manner need not, indeed, have its ontological meaning in movedness.”

The question of how to translate Heidegger’s understanding of ἐνέργεια was not yet solved for me, however. Indeed, one of the few moments in which I felt that I needed to be translated or transposed into the space in which Heidegger was thinking was with regard to the word Zeitigung, which Heidegger distinctively uses to render ἐνέργεια in later passages. As a reader of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, my first inclination was to render the word simply as “temporalization,” anticipating the way in which time temporalizes itself in ecstatic temporality. However, Zeitigung also calls to mind both ripening and the time it takes to reach maturity. Earlier in his 1922 lecture course on Aristotle, Heidegger gives Vollzug (“accomplishing,” “carrying out,” “enactment”) as a synonym. Energeia would be a state of maturation that brings other things to maturation. But if I went only

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7 After the composition of this essay, presented in October 2021 at an online seminar organized by *Kronos Philosophical Journal*, I added Josh Hayes as co-translator of Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s translations of Aristotle.


with “maturation,” the connection to time would largely be obscured. The best solution, it seemed to me, was to follow earlier translators and deploy the hendiadys “temporal unfolding,” whose transitivity is usefully ambiguous.

There is much more to say, of course; for example, about how πάθος is rendered by Heidegger as “a how,” ein Wie, and by Gadamer as “a something,” ein Etwas; about how τα εἴδη become not “forms” but in Gadamer Ideen or “ideas” and in Heidegger die “worauf” der bewegten Dinge, “the ‘on the basis of which’s [the plural of “on the basis of which” – I.A.M.] of moved things”; or about Heidegger’s frequent preservation of grammar and syntax despite his creativity at the lexical level. But I will stop here, hoping to have conveyed – and thereby translated, in a way – some of the difficulties attending not only the task of translating Gadamer and Heidegger translating Aristotle but also the peculiar task of translating translations in general.