

## Heidegger's Philosophy of Language in *Being and Time*

Polina Sandler

**I**n *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger does not provide a substantial theory of language however, there are several parts of the text dedicated to language, and it has clear importance for the ontology of Dasein. Language is no less important for Heidegger, who gets many of his insights from literal translations of the Greek words and introduces plenty of neologisms, which are crucial for explicating his views. In this paper I will provide an account of Heidegger's discussion of language in *Being and Time* in order to argue that the truth of Heidegger's conception of Dasein depends upon the distinction he draws between discourse and language. Furthermore, I will argue that if this distinction is collapsed, his theory would deny the possibility of truth in the world. First, I will outline the difference between discourse [Rede] and language [Sprache], and show that discourse seems to be privileged above language. Then, I will describe Heidegger's theory of *logos* and his polemic against the previous philosophical tradition with regard to the notion of 'truth..' Next, I will explain Heidegger's views on cognition (understanding and interpretation), where I will identify points of ambiguity. In conclusion, by addressing Heidegger's own use of language, I will show how this ambiguity could be resolved in order to avoid the collapse of the distinction between discourse and language, and show that this distinction

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Polina Sandler is a senior philosophy concentrator at Brown University. She is interested in aesthetics and philosophy of music, but she is quite puzzled and very much trying to make sense of modern critical theory and its persistence into the field of humanities (ironically not in philosophy), looking for some "truth" beneath it. To take a break from excruciating (inter)play of differences, Polina listens to opera and studies groundbreaking productions that challenge all conventions of the genre. In the free time (or when it becomes unbearable to see another nude *Traviata*), she does belly dancing and learns Norwegian.

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plays a far more important role in *Being and Time* than Heidegger makes it seem.

For our inquiry, we should first outline how Heidegger distinguishes between discourse and language. Discourse, according to Heidegger, is a fundamental existential phenomenon, the main purpose of which is to ensure a basic understanding of the world. In contrast, language is a way in which discourse communicates or articulates itself. Language is an inherited system that Dasein encounters in the world, and which allows for the expression of Dasein's understanding. Furthermore, language is a totality of words, or at least this is the way we encounter it in the world. In light of this distinction, I will argue that language and discourse have different kinds of Being, but in some moments of Heidegger's inquiry, he conflates the two such that it is hard to tell which category is at play. I would also like to discuss the possibility that it is actually language, and not discourse, that discloses the world to us.

### I. Logos and Truth

Heidegger's first explicit discussion of discourse in *Being and Time* is when he explains his method and describes the task of phenomenology. He etymologizes the term "phenomenology," by analyzing the Greek words *phenomenon* and *logos*. Already, Heidegger dismisses the duality of the ideal and the real, which had permeated philosophical tradition since antiquity onwards. Furthermore, according to Heidegger, Dasein is inseparable from the world. Thus, Heidegger investigates Being, by focusing on Being-in-the-world (Da-sein), the fundamental feature of Dasein. Heidegger's introduction of a new kind of relation between Dasein and the World, establishes a correspondence between the ideal (what is in Dasein's consciousness) and the real (what is in the world); an act of the disclosure.

Broadly speaking, the task of phenomenology for Heidegger is to let things show themselves as they are. "Phenomenon" is the way in which a thing shows itself to us. When defining "phenomenon," Heidegger is very much opposed to the word "appearance", because it is ambiguous, suggesting that an entity is either making itself manifest or hiding itself by seeming to be something that it is not. Furthermore, *logos* is, for

## 60 Heidegger's Philosophy of Language in *Being and Time*

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Heidegger, of crucial importance as it represents his divergence from philosophical tradition. He claims that the Greek word *logos* [“word”] was mistranslated and thus misunderstood by Instead, Heidegger determines *logos* to mean *discourse* [Rede, “talk”], which is opposed to the translation of *logos* as “judgment” or “assertion.” In the philosophical tradition, these words are fundamentally synthetic because, by producing a judgment, one asserts a correspondence between two entities. For example, a relationship between “something said” and the fact about which it was said exists. Primarily, this relationship has been one of judgment, which corresponds to fact, therefore is true when the fact is true. *Discourse*, on the other hand, does not assert anything, in the traditional sense. However, in what is said it communicates what is being talked about: it shows something *as* something, i.e. as it really is. Additionally, Heidegger emphasizes the preposition “as,” because it reflects the key relation of the phenomenological inquiry. Phenomenology studies things *as* they manifest themselves to us. Heidegger calls this “as” of assertion apophantic [Greek: “making known”], not because it demarcates two different things and asserts a connection between them, but because ‘as’ establishes a unity in which what is said goes together with what it is said about. Moreover, we can make assertions only on the basis of our understanding, and not on the basis of facts. With regard to *logos*, Heidegger mentions that the Greeks actually did not have a special word for language to separate it from discourse.<sup>1</sup> Because *logos* in the sense of talking about something in the first place meant an apophantic assertion, in the sense that every speech act exhibited something or made manifest,, language and discourse have different ontological foundations..

Likewise, the Greek word for truth is “*aletheia*,” which Heidegger interprets literally as “not-concealing”. He believes that the fundamental meaning of truth is “uncovering”. Although he does not deny that truth can pertain to a judgment as a determinable value (as in truth-functional logic, for example, where one can assign truth-values to sentences), he considers this traditional concept of “truth as correspondence” to be grounded in the phenomenon of “truth as uncovering.” This allows Heidegger to claim that *logos* is something that actually does reveal truth, but truth which is defined in completely different terms than that of

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classical tradition. Heidegger's interpretation of truth is one not in a sense of correspondence, but in a sense of either covering up the thing as it is and hiding it behind something else (which amounts to us seeing seeing the things as false) or uncovering and showing the thing as it is in itself (being true). One may hereby conclude that the main ontological function of discourse is uncovering, and therefore telling the truth.

Furthermore, Heidegger defines the primary ontological function of discourse, by introducing the "hermeneutical circle," which shows that interpretation can emerge only on the basis of already existing understanding. It is the structure of this circle of interpretation that reflects the condition of Being for Dasein. He argues that the word "logos" is etymologically connected with the Greek words *legein* and *legomenon*, meaning "to exhibit" and "what is exhibited," respectively. *Legein* is a capacity of human reason, and therefore *logos* can also signify "reason" (which makes it possible to translate *logos* into Latin as *ratio* - "reason"). *Legomenon*, by definition, is something that underlies the process of addressing to whatever is exhibited, it does not exist independently of being addressed (that allows *logos* to signify the ground which causes it to say something). However, *logos* and *legomenon* cannot be equivalent because *legomenon* as the ground will always underlie the *logos*. So *logos qua legomenon* (i.e. "discourse as what is exhibited," or "speech as what is said") is a ratio, in a sense that one is related to the other, and this ratio establishes a new signification for the *logos*: the signification of the *relation* (i.e. *logos* and the thing can exist only as a relation between the two things). The ontological definition of discourse is thus threefold: *how* it discloses a thing, *what* it discloses, and the relation that it establishes between the *how* and the *what*. In other words, *logos* is defined as exhibiting something and also as exhibiting itself in this relation.

## II. Understanding and Significance

As mentioned earlier, Dasein and the world exist inseparably from each other. The world is already there when Dasein gets into it. That is why Heidegger calls this condition of being-in-the-world "fallenness" or "thrownness." Understanding is a fundamental way of getting knowledge about the world - the

“uncovering” of discourse is made possible through understanding. Dasein’s main mode of existence is Care; i.e. it is always concerned with its existence and it understands the world primarily in terms of the possibilities which it can take up, and therefore its relation to the world is fundamentally practical. Such practical activities as producing, discussing, or accomplishing something would be examples of Care. We see things in the world also in terms of possibilities, i.e. we see them as “ready-to-hand” (as equipment). When we use equipment on a regular basis, we never understand explicitly the use which has already been assigned by the world to this piece of equipment. For example, we do not make it explicit when we take a pen to write something, that the pen is the tool for writing. We use it *in order to* write something, but not *as* “something that writes.” But this assignment of the use is already present in the world in which this pen exists.

Heidegger is interested in the analysis of the phenomenon of the world - “the Worldhood of the World.” As described in the previous part, the phenomenon is related to us in a way that it is something that manifests itself, or, in Heidegger’s words, “announces itself.” The phenomenon of the world reveals itself through the “assignments and referential totalities” between the items of equipment and how they are referred to. One might think that this happens independently of Dasein. However, the only reason that these hold together is precisely Dasein’s understanding of the world. Since we encounter the world as ready-to-hand, the phenomenon of the world can only be explained in terms of our relation to it, of our being directed “towards-the-world” in taking up our possibilities. For Dasein the world exists for-the-sake-of Dasein because the primary way it understands the world is in terms of possibilities. It is important to note that discourse as well is characterized by its “aboutness,” so in disclosing the world to us it already gives us *what* in the world we should consider our possibilities, such that we understand the world existing *for* the realization of our possibilities. Our understanding assigns to the whole world this “significance,” such that it has a meaning in its totality. Therefore, the items in the world are disclosed to us as having significations or meaning.

Heidegger’s use of the word “significance” (or “meaning”) is ambiguous: it can either denote “signifying some-

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thing” [Bedeutung] or “having importance” [Bedeutsamkeit] *for* us. These two meanings of “significance” imitate a similar word-play to that of the two meanings of *logos*. It can also be seen in terms of the hermeneutical circle: our understanding gives significance to all items in the world, but how significant they are is also dependent on our fundamental relatedness to the world as “thrownness.” Heidegger mentions in his discussion of *significance* that “the Being of words and of language” is founded upon these significations.<sup>II</sup> By this he means the connection between understanding and discourse is a way in which they both constitute the foundations of language. Since both understanding and discourse are equiprimordial (i.e. equally prior,) with relation to Dasein, and ensure the possibility of disclosure, then language should have a different “founded” type of Being. I shall return to this point later in more detail.

### III. Interpretation and Assertion

We understand the world in terms of our possibilities. However, understanding usually happens implicitly, because we are existentially not “knowers,” but “doers.” Since we are already thrown into the world and see things as they are, we do not think whether, for instance, the pen is a tool for writing in order to write something, we simply write with it. However, when a tool we are using, the pen, breaks, we suddenly realize the ‘toolness’ of this pen, and start seeing it *as* a tool for writing. In this moment, when we see something *as* something, our understanding becomes explicit and switches into the mode of interpretation.

Interpretation happens through the hermeneutic “*as*.” We are asserting something that has already been disclosed to us about this thing: its preconception. Moreover, we receive this preconception as a disclosure through discourse. Yet Heidegger argues that entities within-the-world have meaning [Sinn; it could be better to say “make sense,” in order to capture the connection preserved in German with another meaning of the word, “reason”] only when they have been discovered by us.<sup>III</sup> Meaning is articulated through our understanding and does not belong to the entities as a property, but to Dasein itself (“...only Dasein can be meaningful or meaningless”).<sup>IV</sup> If we remember that one of the significations of discourse was the capacity of the human mind to

make sense or to understand, we can see that sense becomes one of the existentialia of Dasein. We notice again the structure of the hermeneutical circle: things obtain meaning because Dasein, being thrown into the world, endows them with meaning. In this instance, Heidegger does not mention words and does not inquire whether they have meaning. Therefore, language (as a totality of words) seems to be excluded from giving sense or making sense of things. It does not bear meaning (contrary to discourse, which discloses it through the act of understanding) and meaning is acquired and revealed on some more primordial level.

By analyzing assertion as a particular kind of interpretation, Heidegger clearly distinguishes assertion from *logos* to disassociate himself from the classical tradition, where they were merged and assertion was the primary 'locus' of truth. Because he has established the meaning of truth as disclosure (contrary to truth as correspondence); truth cannot be contained in the assertion itself, which is grounded in understanding and therefore has a derivative nature.

Assertion, unlike understanding, is a 'vocal' phenomenon, because assertion primarily articulates. Heidegger mentions three dimensions of an assertion: it points out, it predicates, and it communicates. In "pointing-out," the assertion does not first assert and then judges whether what has been said is true or false of the object, but rather *points out* at this object as it is and not as a part of the sentence which refers to this object. Therefore, it preserves the possibility of truth as disclosure. An example of *predication*, "the ball is heavy," asserts a "heaviness" only after the heaviness has been experienced. i.e. It was disclosed to us, so we have to take a step back from our practical considerations caused by "heaviness," interpreting what we have felt and settling it into a statement. *Communication* is sharing our relatedness to the world (Being-in-the-world) with others, i.e. asserting that we are here and we have had such-and-such a disclosure.

It is most important to note Heidegger's discussion of the existential-hermeneutical 'as' (or of theoretical judgments). He describes the process of the transformation of our understanding which shifts our understanding of things from being ready-to-hand to present-at-hand. When we want to talk about something in terms of its presence in the world (but not in terms of our pos-

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sibilities), we want to separate it from the equipmental totality of the world in which we live. Thus, in order to perform theoretical tasks, we assert things independently of our concerns about them.

#### IV. Language

*Logos* as a philosophical category (i.e. through the hermeneutical ‘as’), becomes present-at-hand and manifests itself as an entity (it stops working as an ontological foundation, but is being questioned as one). As mentioned earlier, Heidegger took a Greek word *logos* and distinguished its two meanings: discourse and language. Previously, he was “exhibiting” *logos* as a phenomenon, letting it “speak” on its own, or disclose itself. Now that he takes up the hermeneutic approach, or the approach of interpretation, Heidegger sees *logos* only as a totality of words, that is to say, language.

Language is a totality of words that can exist for us either as a tool, or as something present-at-hand. For example, when we use language to communicate, it is encountered as ready-to-hand (so we treat it practically), but when we engage with a philological analysis of a text, we look at the words in the text as at present-at-hand, not from a practical perspective. Heidegger writes that language has a different being from that of the discourse, because language is grounded in the Being of discourse, and discourse is equiprimordial with understanding: together they are the existentialia of Dasein. Heidegger regards language as an existential category, where discourse and Dasein “meet” each other. He claims that language is a “worldly” being of discourse, precisely for the reason that it is the only way Dasein could understand discourse. Discourse expresses itself through language, and but the former can also potentially be covered-up by the latter, and this is most likely to happen precisely when discourse is being interpreted. However, even if discourse gets “disguised” or “veiled,” it remains a basic structure; it exists as an existentialia of Dasein, and only waits to be uncovered. Eventually, one might still see language as creating a “gap” between Dasein and discourse, but it still can seem unclear why Heidegger needs so that this “gap” existed. He could eliminate the difference between discourse and language and still claim that Dasein can misinterpret the *logos* and that is how the covering-up of the truth from Dasein happens.



Language is primarily the instrument of interpretation, because it communicates. Expression is one of the characteristics of assertion, as an assertion must be “spoken” out. Consequently, without language we would not be able to make assertions of the existential-hermeneutic kind. Also only through language can we express the hermeneutic shift from the ready-to-hand to the present-at-hand, i.e. we can bracket the word from its context and place it into a different one. When we take a word, we see the form of this word (i.e. letters or sounds that comprise it), while at the same time we understand its meaning. For example, when we look at the word “dog,” we understand that what it stands for is “an animal that barks.” On the other hand, we could look at the word “dog” as an example of “a word,” and it would be irrelevant to us which word from the totality of words is written, a “dog,” a “cat,” or anything else, because what it stands for is merely “a word”. In this sense in the “dog” words manifest themselves as a totality.

This analysis strikingly resembles the schema of the “hermeneutical circle.” This circle can be accessible and described only through the means of language that is by definition interpretive. Any word can stand for the hermeneutical circle, because it is the “how” (its sounds and letters) and the “what” (its meaning), and also establishes the relation between the two by its definition (in virtue of being a word). This is how Heidegger creates a relation with respect to the *logos*.

In hermeneutical analysis, the Being of *logos* manifests itself only as an assertion. However, this should not happen when we talk about *logos* in the meaning of discourse, because discourse can either disclose or conceal, it cannot interpret. It cannot include two possibilities of disclosure simultaneously (i.e. to show its form and its content at the same time, since it is impossible to perceive both at the same time), because otherwise it would be impossible to tell the truth. Truth can be either disclosed or not disclosed: when it is, then it should stand alone. Discourse as a phenomenon wants to communicate to us through the apophantic “as.” The “as” that establishes a unity, a fundamental relation of already being there and seeing things “as” they are between the Dasein and the world. While the hermeneutical “as” separates the two by being able to shift between the ready-to-hand and the pre-

sent-at-hand. Heidegger needs this distinction, because he is engaging in a phenomenological inquiry which, by definition, has “demonstrative precision.” It exhibits Being as it is, without covering it up, or, in other words, he wants to get a *true* (even in the sense of “truth as disclosure”) analysis of Being. If he conveyed all his analyses on the basis of language, he would be left with the “truth” claims that can always potentially be misinterpreted.

#### V. Conclusion

In this paper, I have attempted to show that for Heidegger’s purposes the distinction between the logos as discourse and logos as language is crucial. Without it, his analysis could never claim to be true. However, the main tool of his account is language and the hermeneutical “as,” justifying his conclusions. Eventually, the hermeneutical circle, being a circle of interpretation, shows that it is not discourse, but language which underlies Dasein’s understanding. Therefore one can further argue that language is the primordial mode of Dasein’s thrownness into the world. Language, however, being the main tool of any interpretation, may cast doubt on the possibility of the truth of this interpretation, unless it is grounded in discourse, which allows this possibility.

### Notes

<sup>I</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquire and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008), 209.

<sup>II</sup> *Ibid.*, 121

<sup>III</sup> *Ibid.*, 193

<sup>IV</sup> *Ibid.*, 193

<sup>V</sup> *Ibid.*, 60

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### References

Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Translated by John Macquire and Edward Robinson. New York: Harper Perennial Modern Thought, 2008.