

Unveiling Meaning: Pragmatics, Translation, and Heidegger's Hermeneutic Labyrinth

كشف المعنى: التداولية، الترجمة، ومتاهة هايدغر التأويلية

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Received 25/02/2025 Accepted 09/08/2025

Abstract:

This article explores the intersection of pragmatics and translation through the lens of Heideggerian hermeneutics, emphasizing the dynamic interplay between intention, use, and interpretation in meaning-making. Drawing on Martin Heidegger's philosophy of language as a mode of "unconcealment" (aletheia) and hermeneutic principles, the study argues that translation is not merely a linguistic act but an ontological engagement with context and cultural situatedness. By analyzing the translator's role as a mediator of intentionality and contextual pragmatics, the article points out the challenges of preserving meaning across linguistic boundaries while referring to Heidegger's notion of Dasein (being-in-the-world). Methodologically, the study employs a hermeneutic-phenomenological framework to critique case studies of philosophical translations, underscoring the ethical and interpretive responsibilities of translators.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Translation Studies, Heideggerian Hermeneutics, Intentionality, Meaning

الملخص:

تستكشف هذه المقالة تقاطع التداولية والترجمة من خلال منظور التأويل الهايدغري، مع التركيز على التفاعل الديناميكي بين القصدية والاستخدام والتفسير في صناعة المعنى. بالاعتماد على فلسفة مارتين هايدغر للغة بوصفها وسيلة لـ "الكشف" (aletheia) والمبادئ التأويلية، ترى الدراسة أن الترجمة ليست مجرد فعل لغوي، بل هي تفاعل وجودي مع السياق والمحددات الثقافية. من خلال تحليل دور المترجم كوسيط بين القصدية والتداولية السياقية، تشير المقالة إلى التحديات المتعلقة بالحفاظ على المعنى عبر الحدود اللغوية، مع الإشارة إلى مفهوم Dasein (الوجود-في-العالم) عند هايدغر. منهجيًا، تستخدم الدراسة إطارًا تأويليًا-ظاهريًا لمراجعة دراسات حالة لترجمات فلسفية، مبرزة المسؤوليات الأخلاقية والتفسيرية للمترجمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التداولية، دراسات الترجمة، التأويل الهايدغري، القصدية، المعنى.

Introduction

This research paper has as an objective an attempt at synthesizing pragmatics, hermeneutics, and translation theory, putting in mind the ethical implications of translator subjectivity. My research paper is a rather condensed outline, I, here, merely provide a roadmap that includes key arguments. The study attempts to analyze the problem of meaning in translation and the

challenges of linguistic equivalence based on pragmatics as the study of meaning-in-context, and Heidegger's hermeneutics and his critique of representational language¹. Heidegger famously discussed language and translation as *aletheia* (unconcealment) and in reference to *Dasein* (being-in-the-world).

Translation has long been debated as a bridge between languages, yet its deeper philosophical implications—rooted in pragmatics and hermeneutics—remain underexplored. Martin Heidegger's critique of representational language and his emphasis on *Dasein* as a situated interpreter offer a radical framework for understanding translation as an act of ontological disclosure. This article synthesizes Heideggerian hermeneutics with pragmatic theories of meaning² to argue that translation is inherently interpretive, shaped by the translator's engagement with intention, context, and cultural horizons.³

Translation has traditionally been framed as a quest for equivalence—a search for linguistic mirrors that reflect the source text's meaning in the target language. Yet, as Roman Jakobson famously argued, “languages differ essentially in what they must convey, not in what they can convey”.⁴ This tension between necessity and possibility lies at the heart of pragmatics, the study of meaning as it emerges through context, intention, and use. Translators, therefore, grapple not only with lexical gaps but with the pragmatic force of utterances—a challenge magnified in literary and philosophical texts where ambiguity is intentional.

Martin Heidegger's hermeneutic philosophy radicalizes this problem by situating meaning within the ontological horizon of *Dasein* (being-in-the-world). In *Being and Time*, he rejects the notion of language as a static system of signs, instead framing it as a dynamic process of “unconcealment” (*aletheia*), where meaning is disclosed through the interpreter's situated engagement with the world. For translators, this implies that fidelity to a text extends beyond lexical accuracy; it demands an attunement to the historical, cultural, and existential contexts that shape both the source and target languages. As Heidegger writes, “To say and to speak are not the same. A man may speak, speak endlessly, and all the time say nothing. Another may remain silent, not speak at all and yet, without speaking, say a great deal”.⁵ The translator, in this view, becomes a co-participant in the “saying” of the text, navigating the interplay of presence and absence that defines all hermeneutic acts.

This article, then, seeks to Reconcile Heideggerian hermeneutics with pragmatic theories of meaning to develop a holistic framework for translation studies, to analyze case studies where translators confront the limits of equivalence, particularly in rendering intentionality, implicature, and cultural situatedness. And finally, a critique of the ethical implications of translation choices through the lens of *aletheia*.

¹ See Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row.,

² For further detail See Austin, J. L. (1962). *How to do things with words*. Harvard University Press 1962; and Grice, H. P. (1975). *Logic and conversation*. In P. Cole & J. L. Morgan (Eds.), *Syntax and semantics 3: Speech acts*. Academic Press.,

³ See Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum.

⁴ Jakobson, R. On linguistic aspects of translation. In R. Brower (Ed.), *On translation*. Harvard University Press. 1959 p.236.

⁵ Heidegger, M. *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row. 1962, p. 208

1. Literature Review

Heideggerian Hermeneutics in *Being and Time* is based on the notion of language as a mode of existence. Whereq, Gadamer highlights the role of pre-understanding in interpretation.⁶ As for pragmatics and Speech Act Theory, we refer mainly to Austin's performative utterances, and Grice's conversational implicature.⁷ We also point out to the the concepts of equivalence vs. domestication/foreignization and cultural situatedness in translation Studies,⁸ trying to bridge the gap in translation as an act of practical wisdom and Hermeneutic pragmatics.

Heidegger's *Being and Time* redefined language as a "house of Being," where meaning emerges through lived experience rather than abstract signs. His critique of *Vorhandenheit* (present-at-hand) objectivity aligns with pragmatic theories prioritizing language-in-use.⁹ Gadamer expanded this into hermeneutics, asserting that understanding occurs through a "fusion of horizons" between text and interpreter.¹⁰ In translation studies, Venuti and Baker emphasize the translator's visibility and ethical agency, resonating with Heidegger's *aletheia*—truth as unconcealment.¹¹

2. Methodology

This paper integrates Heideggerian hermeneutics with philosophical and poetic traditions, offering a culturally situated analysis. This study adopts a hermeneutic-phenomenological approach, analyzing textual and translational practices through Heidegger's ontological lens. Qualitative case studies include:

1. Heidegger's own translations of pre-Socratic fragments (e.g., *physis* as "emerging-abiding sway"), illustrating his rejection of fixed meanings.
2. Translations, where pragmatic nuances (e.g., irony, ambiguity) challenge equivalence. Data is interpreted through thematic analysis, prioritizing the interplay of intentionality (author), use (source text), and interpretation (translator).

The Hermeneutic Phenomenology in Translation Studies finds its foundations in Heidegger and Gadamer. Hermeneutic phenomenology, as articulated by Heidegger and Gadamer, posits that understanding is an ontological process shaped by the interpreter's historicity. Key principles include:

1. The Hermeneutic Circle: Pre-understanding (*Vorhabe*) shapes interpretation, which in turn revises pre-understanding.¹²
2. Fusion of Horizons: Meaning emerges when the interpreter's context (*Horizont*) engages with the text's historical horizon.¹³
3. Language as Mediation: "Being that can be understood is language"¹⁴

⁶ See See Gadamer, H.-G. *Truth and method* (J. Weinsheimer& D. G. Marshall, Trans.). Continuum, 1989

⁷ See footnote 1

⁸ See Venuti, L. *The translator's invisibility: A history of translation*. Routledge, 1995 and Baker, M. *In other words: A coursebook on translation* (3rd ed.). Routledge, 2018

⁹ See Wittgenstein, L. *Philosophical investigations* (G. E. M. Anscombe, Trans.). Blackwell, 1953

¹⁰ See Gadamer, op.cit

¹¹ See Venuti (1995) and Baker (2018), footnote 8

¹² Heidegger, M. *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie& E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row. 1962, p. 194

¹³ Gadamer, H.-G. (1989). *Truth and method* op.cit, p. 306

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 474

All in all, Hermeneutic Phenomenology adopts the strategies of Foreignization (retaining mother tongue uses to mirror a language parataxis) and Domestication (reframes and inserts metaphors to bridge cultural gaps.) Adopting a hermeneutic phenomenology in translation leads the researcher to take into consideration:

1. Situated Analysis: examining how the translator's Vorhabe (pre-understanding) of metaphysics shapes their approach. Situatedness pushes the translator to acknowledge their biases (e.g., a Western translator interpreting Sufi poetry).
2. Fusion of Horizons: Mapping hermeneutic terms (e.g., Heidegger's *aletheia*) onto the target language concepts while preserving alterity.
3. Ethical Reflection: Interrogating domestication strategies that erase cultural horizons.
4. Dialogue with the Text: Engaging the source text's historical context (e.g., Heidegger's return to pre-Socratic Greek).
5. Iterative Revision: Refining translations through recursive interpretation (e.g., comparing multiple drafts of a translated).

In short, one can say that hermeneutic phenomenology positions translation as an ethical encounter with alterity, demanding humility and reflexivity.

3. Case Studies within a Heideggerian-Hermeneutic Framework

This section critiques the hermeneutic approach to the translation of famous examples of the Heideggerian literature. Heidegger's translations, especially from the Greek, contrasts it with conventional translations. Heidegger argues that his method reveals the limitations of representational language in conveying primordial Greek thought. Heidegger's reinterpretation of pre-Socratic Greek terms marks a radical departure from classical philology, reframing translation as an act of ontological excavation. Central to this project is his translation of *physis* (φύσις), traditionally rendered as "nature" (Latin: *natura*), which Heidegger recasts as "emerging-abiding sway" (*das aufgehend-verweilende Walten*) in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), thus Ontologically recasting of the concept *Physis*.

Traditional Translations: *Physis* as "Nature" In Aristotelian metaphysics, *physis* denotes the essence of things that grow or exist independently of human intervention. The Latin *natura* (from *nasci*, "to be born") solidified this interpretation, reducing *physis* to a static category of "the natural world." For example, in Aristotle's *Physics* *physis* is framed as "the principle of motion and rest", modern translators retain this framework, translating *physis* as "nature" while acknowledging its "self-blossoming emergence". Heidegger's hermeneutic intervention rejects the metaphysical baggage of "nature," arguing that *physis* encapsulates Being's dynamic self-revelation. In *Introduction to Metaphysics*, he writes: " *Physis* is the emerging sway, the self-unfolding that lingers. It is the event of the living, the very "is" of beings".¹⁵ By translating *physis* as "emerging-abiding sway," Heidegger emphasizes process over product, aligning it with

¹⁵ Heidegger, M. *Introduction to metaphysics* (G. Fried & R. Polt, Trans.). Yale University Press. 1953, p. 15

his concept of *aletheia* (unconcealment). This rendering destabilizes the subject-object dichotomy, positioning *physis* as the primordial “coming-forth-into-presence” that precedes metaphysical categorization.¹⁶

Heidegger’s translation of Friedrich Hölderlin’s line “*Naturistgöttlich*” (“Nature is divine”) exemplifies his hermeneutic priorities. While Hölderlin uses *Natur*, Heidegger insists that the poet’s *physis* evokes “the holy chaos from which all things rise”. Adopting Heidegger’s rendering the line as “The emerging sway is divine,” puts one in contrast with traditionalists who retain “nature,” prioritizing lexical familiarity over ontological nuance. Classicists may thus accuse Heidegger of “violent interpretation”, arguing that his translations impose existentialist frameworks onto pre-Socratic texts. However, Heideggerians like George Steiner defend his approach, noting that “all great translation is a form of betrayal—betrayal of the letter for the sake of the spirit”.¹⁷ Heidegger’s *physis* challenges translators to confront the historicity of language itself. By prioritizing ontological disclosure over lexical equivalence, he redefines translation as a dialogue with the “unsaid” of the text—a task that demands hermeneutic courage.

A famous example is: *In-der-Welt-sein* (Being-in-the-world). Heidegger’s German compounds resist mechanical translation due to their ontological density. The term *In-der-Welt-sein* is often rendered as “Being-in-the-world”,¹⁸ but Heidegger himself critiques such linear phrasing: “Language is the house of Being. In its home, human beings dwell.”¹⁹ The hyphens in the German compound emphasize the inseparability of Being and world, a concept central to *Dasein*’s situatedness. Joan Stambaugh’s translation retains the hyphens (“being-in-the-world”) but sacrifices the verbal dynamism of the German *sein* (to be), which Heidegger associates with *physis* as “the emerging sway, the unfolding that abides”²⁰

Translating terms embodies the union of knowing and being. Gadamer reinforces this, stating: “To understand a text is to place oneself within the process of tradition, in which the text speaks as a partner in dialogue.”²¹ Heidegger’s *aletheia* as the “unconcealment, a lighting and clearing in which beings stand.” And we can notice that Gadamer’s hermeneutic circle applies here: “Understanding is not merely reproductive but always productive.”²²

Heidegger’s compounds resist mechanical translation due to their ontological semantic charge, and a linear phrasing risks fragmenting the unity Heidegger sought to convey. The hyphens in the German compound emphasize the inseparability of Being and world, a concept central to *Dasein*’s situatedness. A translation that doesn’t retain the hyphens (“being-in-the-world”), sacrifices the verbal dynamism of the German *sein* (to be), which Heidegger associates with *physis* as “emerging sway”

¹⁶ *ibid*, p. 16

¹⁷ Steiner, G. *Real presences*. University of Chicago Press. p. 271.

¹⁸ Heidegger, M. *Being and time* (J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, Trans.). Harper & Row, 1962, p. 78

¹⁹ Heidegger, Letter on Humanism, in: *Pathmarks* (W. McNeill, Ed.). Cambridge University Press. 1998, p. 239

²⁰ Heidegger, M. *Introduction to metaphysics* (G. Fried & R. Polt, Trans.). Yale University Press. , 1953, p. 15

²¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op.cit. p. 390

²² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op.cit. p. 296

As a hermeneutic insight, for Heidegger, language is not a tool but the “house of Being”.²³ Translators must grapple with how a syntax, obscures the holistic ontology of German compounds. As Gadamer notes, understanding requires “entering the linguistic world of the text”,²⁴ a task demanding attention to the unspoken unity embedded in Heidegger’s terms. George Steiner argues that Heidegger’s compounds demand “lexical neologisms” in translation.²⁵

This tension reflects the hermeneutic circle: every translation revises pre-understandings of Being. This is a hermeneutic challenge. The translator must mediate between a terms’ ineffability and the target audience’s horizon, employing poetic repetition to evoke the iterative hermeneutic circle—a Gadamerian process where understanding deepens through return.

Another famous example from the Heideggerian canon is Heidegger’s reinterpretations and distinction between “Earth” (Erde) as self-concealing and “World” (Welt) as unconcealing,²⁶ that reflects a tension between the enduring Earth and the fluid World: “The earth is the self-secluding, the world is the self-opening.”²⁷ Translating Heidegger’s “Earth” requires Ontological Dialogue engaging with a concept that integrates being, land, and community. We note that land is not a resource but a relative, echoing Heidegger’s critique of technicity. This case study highlights the ethical stakes of Gadamer’s “fusion of horizons.” Misappropriating terms risks epistemic violence, while respectful dialogue can unconceal shared ontological ground. Gadamer emphasizes ethical responsibility: “The hermeneutic task becomes a questioning of the thing itself, confronting the interpreter with the demand to hear the claim of the text.”²⁸

Heidegger’s notion of *aletheia* (ἀλήθεια) as “unconcealment” challenges the correspondence theory of truth, positing that truth emerges through the interplay of revealing and concealing. He writes:

“Truth is the primal conflict in which, always in some particular way, the Open is won within which everything stands and from which everything withdraws.”²⁹ In Sufi epistemology, *kashf* (كشف) refers to the “unveiling” of divine truths through spiritual intuition. Ibn Arabi (1165–1240), the Andalusian philosopher, describes *kashf* as: “A light that God casts into the heart of the servant, by which he perceives realities as they are.”³⁰ Both *aletheia* and *kashf* reject static, propositional truth in favor of dynamic disclosure. However, while Heidegger’s unconcealment is rooted in *Dasein*’s temporal finitude, *kashf* transcends human temporality through divine grace. The translator mediating between these frameworks must navigate ontological secularity (Heidegger) and theological transcendence (Ibn Arabi). Heidegger’s term *aletheia* is often rendered as *kashf* in Arabic philosophical texts. Yet *kashf* retains a theological horizon absent in

²³ Heidegger, M. *Poetry, language, thought* (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). Harper & Row. 1971, p. 135

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op.cit, p. 390

²⁵ Steiner, G. *Real presences*. University of Chicago Press. op.cit. p. 273

²⁶ Heidegger, M. (1971). *Poetry, language, thought*, op.cit. p. 42

²⁷ Heidegger, M. *The Origin of the Work of Art*, Harper & Row, 2002, p. 42

²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op.cit. p. 307

²⁹ Heidegger, *The Origin of the Work of Art*, op.cit, p. 62).

³⁰ Ibn Arabi. *The bezels of wisdom* (R. W. J. Austin, Trans.). Paulist Press, 1980, p. 112

aletheia. This tension reflects Gadamer's assertion that:
"Understanding is always a fusion of horizons."³¹

Heideggerian Concept: Dasein (Being-there) emphasizes human existence as a situated, interpretive engagement with the world. Heidegger states: "Dasein is an entity which, in its very Being, comports itself understandingly toward that Being."³²

Arabic Translations: - al-Wujud (الوجود): Literally "existence," this term risks conflating Dasein with Aristotelian ousia (substance). - al-Hudur (الحضور): Translates to "presence," emphasizing Dasein's temporal situatedness but omitting its projective nature. Gadamerian Insight: The translator's pre-understanding of Arabic metaphysics shapes their interpretation of Dasein. Gadamer notes: "The translator's task is to find a language that speaks to the foreign text while resonating in the target horizon."³³

Heidegger's view of language as a "house of Being" aligns with poetic exploration of speech. Translating Arabic into English requires navigating ta'wil (تأويل), the practice of symbolic interpretation. For example, the term *ishq* (عشق—divine love) is often reduced to "love" in English, erasing its ontological weight. A translator may prefer employing free rendering to evoke spontaneity, while another prioritizes lexical fidelity, illustrating Gadamer's tension between "belonging" to the text and "distancing" from it. Gadamer's emphasis on dialogue (*Gespräch*) as the essence of understanding: "Understanding begins when something addresses us—this requires the fundamental suspension of our prejudices."³⁴ These case studies underscore translation as a path (*Weg*) rather than a product, as Heidegger frequently asserted

4. Analysis and Discussion

Heidegger's reinterpretation of pre-Socratic Greek terms exemplifies his hermeneutic approach to translation. This interpretive choice reflects his broader critique of Western metaphysics, which he accuses of "forgetting the question of Being" by privileging abstract categorization over lived experience. This rendering underscores language's role in disclosing the relational fabric of existence, positioning translation as an act of *poiesis* (bringing-forth) rather than mere replication

Pragmatics is a challenge. It presents translators with a labyrinth of pragmatic ambiguities. Translators must decide whether to preserve the term's legalistic undertones or emphasize its colloquial force. The translation grapples with additional layers of cultural pragmatics. A concept often infuses a text with unintended contemporary resonances. The choice to retain the literal translation may not be without risks, illustrating Venuti's argument that domestication strategies can distort the source text's historical specificity.

³¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op.cit, p. 306

³² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, op.cit, p. 32

³³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op.cit. p. 384

³⁴ Ibid. p. 299

Heidegger's assertion that "language speaks"³⁵ destabilizes the translator's authority, positioning them as a co-creator of meaning. His translation reflect hermeneutic sensitivity to context. Similarly, pragmatic acts like implicature require translators to infer unstated intentions—a process Gadamer terms "the hermeneutic circle." However, this fluidity risks ethical pitfalls, such as domestication erasing cultural alterity.

Conclusion

Translation, as a hermeneutic-pragmatic endeavor, demands balancing fidelity to authorial intent with acknowledgment of the translator's situatedness. Heidegger's philosophy urges us to view translation not as a technical task but as an ontological dialogue, where meaning is perpetually "unconcealed" through interpretive acts. Future research could explore digital translation tools through this lens, questioning their capacity to navigate pragmatic and cultural nuances.

We conclude that translating demands negotiating between the "said" and the "unsaid". While no translation fully captures the language pragmatics, hermeneutic awareness of cultural horizons mitigates semantic loss. Translation is an ontological, not merely linguistic, act. And a pragmatic meaning requires contextual thrownness (Heidegger's *Geworfenheit*). This must have implications for translation practice. Translators trained in hermeneutic sensitivity and ethics may encourage them to preserve cultural alterity.

³⁵ Heidegger, M. Poetry, language, thought (A. Hofstadter, Trans.). Harper & Row. 1971, p. 189

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