

Joachim L. Oberst

# Heidegger on Language and Death

*The Intrinsic Connection in Human Existence*



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CONTINUUM STUDIES IN CONTINENTAL PHILOSOPHY

**'Joachim Oberst provides a profound and provocative elucidation of Heidegger's mysterious thinking about the relation between the origin of language and our experience of death. Anyone hoping to understand why so many great Judeo-Christian thinkers found themselves inspired by Heidegger's existential philosophy (and vice versa) will need to read this impressively erudite, deeply challenging, and yet resolutely edifying book.'**

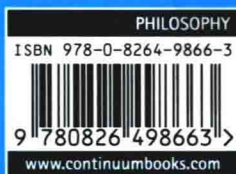
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Martin Heidegger was one of the most influential philosophers of the twentieth century. His analysis of human existence proves an inexhaustible ground for thinkers of all backgrounds who seek answers to specific questions raised by the many challenges of our times.

This book explores the intrinsic connection between two fundamentally human traits, language and death. Heidegger addresses each of these traits in depth, and hints at their intrinsic connection without ever explicitly outlining their relationship in a separate theory. In a close examination of Heidegger's collected works, and especially his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, Joachim L. Oberst reveals a Heideggerian perspective on language and death. Ultimately the author argues that the human invention of language is motivated by the drive towards immortality – language emerges from the experience of mortality as a response to it. This is a refreshing look at one of the most challenging and significant philosophers of our times.

**Joachim L. Oberst** teaches in the Program in Religious Studies and the Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures at the University of New Mexico, USA.

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# Death

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# Heidegger on Language and Death

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**To Benjamin and Emmanuel**

Being-toward-birth

Too is

Being-toward-death



## Abbreviations

- BT = *Being and Time*  
BW = *Basic Writings*  
EGT = *Early Greek Thinking*  
EM = *Einführung in die Metaphysik*  
Frg. = *Fragment*  
GA = *Gesamtausgabe*  
HCT = *History of the Concept of Time*  
IM = *Introduction to Metaphysics*  
LH = *Letter on Humanism*  
LS = *Language and Silence*  
OWA = *Origin of the Work of Art*  
PGZ = *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*  
PhG = *Phänomenologie des Geistes*  
PLT = *Poetry, Language, Thought*  
SZ = *Sein und Zeit*  
UKW = *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerks*  
US = *Unterwegs zur Sprache*  
ÜH = *Über den Humanismus*  
VA = *Vorträge und Aufsätze*  
WCT = *What is called Thinking?*  
WhD = *Was heißt Denken?*  
WM = *Was ist Metaphysik?*

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## Part One

# Death and Language



## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### Death's Impact on Existence is Language

*Speech is the twin of my vision, it is unequal to measure itself,  
It provokes me forever, it says sarcastically,  
Walt you contain enough, why don't you let it out then?*

Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself' 25

*The sound of the belched words of my voice . . . words loosed to the eddies of the wind*

Walt Whitman, 'Song of Myself' 1

#### The Bounds of Being

The thesis I advance in this study is simple: humans extend their existence linguistic-ontologically – in language as both Dasein's individual and communal foundation. I contend that Heidegger's thinking asserts language as the ontic-ontological extension of existence. In defence of this thesis I explore Heidegger's tacit premise of the death-language connection constitutive to human existence. The contention hinges on Heidegger's reliance on the truth of Parmenides: being and thinking are one and the same; their unity consists in the ontological silence and ontic expression of language. Heidegger is fully aware of the philosophic value of this unity. 'One can translate thinking no more satisfactorily than one can translate poetry. At best one can circumscribe it. As soon as one makes a literal translation everything is changed,' he says in the 1966 *Spiegel* interview. The emphasis lies on the little word 'literal' (*wörtliche*). An all too 'literal translation' forsakes the poetical spirit of thought.<sup>1</sup> The silence of thinking pours itself into ontic language where its being resides expressively. Consequently, Heidegger believes that the German 'language speaks' to him in instances of ontological revelations. Hence, when Heidegger philosophizes, he etymologizes.<sup>2</sup> His philosophy is in this ontic-ontological sense 'philo-logy',

'cet amour du mot pour lui-même', as Arion L. Kelkel puts it, the love for words for the sake of their wisdom. Kelkel qualifies *Being and Time* for this reason as 're-revolutionary'. A so-called 'rupture' (*Kehre*) occurs already here, where Heidegger's dependence on the language of the metaphysical tradition is still visible as he is breaking away from it through redefinitions and reliance on colloquial speech. In (his) language the 'reversal' (*renversement*) of the presumed relation between 'man' as the 'speaking' subject (*l'homme se posant comme parlant*) and speech as the spoken object is set into motion so that it can appear itself as the subject that speaks (*le dire de la langue*) and thus remains no longer just reduced to a piece of equipment 'in the hands of man' (*le langage n'est pas cet instrument aux mains de l'homme*).<sup>3</sup> As language itself bears the secret of its beginning and continued development, it is language that has to be questioned about the force of its evolution. For Heidegger this force, source and origin is being itself. Being immersed in the medium of language is a 'dwelling and journeying, a flowing forth and a fading away, a leaving and a returning.'<sup>4</sup> One is moving both away from and toward the source of being. Language is this ontological river of permanent homecoming. Speaking it allows one to come to terms with the meaning of being by coming home to the fountain of existence.

Heidegger is fully aware of the mysterious nature of language. In the third part of a three lecture series on 'The Nature of Language' given at the University of Freiburg on 4 and 18 December, 1957 and on 7 February 1958, he concludes that 'mortals are those who are able to experience death as death. Animals are unable to do this. 'Neither can animals speak.' This observation leads him then to ascertain that '[although] the essential relation (*Wesensverhältnis*) between death and language flashes up before us, . . . [the essence of this relation] is still unthought.' Heidegger suspects that these flashes which expose the relation in question 'can . . . give us a hint towards the way in which the nature of language draws us into its concern (*uns zu sich be-langt*) and so keeps and holds us near it (*bei sich verhält*), in case death belongs together with what reaches out to us and touches us (*was uns be-langt*).'<sup>5</sup> Heidegger takes his suspicion that language and death belong intrinsically together seriously. The nature of this intrinsic connection is not fully explored. So much, however, is clear: their unity constitutes the essence of being human. To unravel this connection both as an essential feature of human existence and as a tenet silently at work in Heidegger's thinking is the task of this project.

## Word and Deed

Heidegger is of course not the first to evoke the connection. Epitaphs, eulogies, hymns of praise and other forms of commemoration rely on it. The attempt to reach out at immortality is an age-old human act with linguistic impact.

The simplest examples illustrate the point. Carved on a tombstone more than 100 years old, the following words read in the original German:

Was unsre Mutter uns gewesen  
sagt nicht dieser Leichenstein.  
Doch Mit-und Nachwelt sollen lessen  
daß wir ewig Dank ihr weihn.<sup>6</sup>

Not only death, but particular events of remarkable excellence also find lasting imprints in language. In a demonstrative fashion, this is expressed in the following Greek saying:

Ου τοι λειψανα των αγαθων ανδρων  
αφαιρεται χρονος α δ'αρετα  
και θανουσι λαμπει.<sup>7</sup>

The outstanding deeds of the good men  
time cannot and does not erase. Their lasting virtues  
continue to shine forth even when they die.

Time does not undo accomplishments. Death is not the end, but the inception of history. Tradition counteracts forgetfulness. It keeps the presence of the past in the mind of language. Human history is grounded in the existential foundation of language. The following Greek proverb makes exactly this point: 'Καλλιστον εφοδιον τοι γηραι η παιδεια.'<sup>8</sup> (The best way into high age is disciplined instruction, strict formation through education.) The formation of the human nature through education promises old age, not just individually, but, more importantly, historically. Humans inherit from their ancestors a life-promising legacy both for their personal future and for future generations. In the knowledge of the tradition, the lived experience of generations survives. Individual experience is a treasure cultivated by means of linguistic preservation. The recognition of personal limitations looks for possibilities of continued existence. It finds them in the culture of a tradition. Community transcends the bounds of individuality. The medium of this transcendence is language. In and as language, self-knowledge asserts its time- and death-transcending power: *ipsa scientia potestas est.*<sup>9</sup> Self-knowledge is might – the might of wisdom. Wisdom acts linguistically to remain accessible. This insight is captured in the Greek proverb 'Η σοφιας πηγη δια βιβλιων ρει.' (The fountain of wisdom flows through letters.) It needs to be read in the context of its complement 'Το γραμμα αποκτεινει το δε πνευμα ζωοποιει.' (The letter dies, but spirit revives it.)<sup>10</sup> Tradition (δια βιβλιων) is alive in the stream of wisdom (σοφιας πηγη . . . ρει), which consists in the linguistic activity of the spirit (πνευμα). When the calls of wisdom remain unheeded, when its written testimony

(το γραμμα-τα βιβλια) is not acted upon, its appeals are silenced to the muteness of dead letters (αποκτείνεται). Then we speak and repeat only words without ethical and intellectual substance. However, as soon as the appeals, couched in the sounds of these letters, are met with the curious eye and the attentive ear of the questioning mind (πνευμα), they revive the spirit of their origin (πηγη) and speak with the resurrective power of the original source (ζωοποιεί). Such overcoming is possible because of the mysterious relation at work between language and death. It is a relation of dependence and redemption. How so, we can learn from an old Germanic tale. The *Beowulf* poem<sup>11</sup> originates in this relation. It is in fact motivated by it. Not only is it aware of the poetic condition of linguistic creation but it also plays with this notion poetically.<sup>12</sup>

In his discussions of the *Beowulf* poem, Robert Creed points out that the poetic devices used in the poem consist of various forms of sound patterning, alliteration, assonance, rhyme,<sup>13</sup> and rhythm.<sup>14</sup> Both the oral technology of 'memorable speech', which relies on those poetic devices, as Creed continues to emphasize, and the alphabetic or 'chirographic'<sup>15</sup> technology of 'translating [such] speech into visible signs' aim at preserving the cultural and historical heritage of a community. In the recollection of this, its heritage, a society continues to flourish simply because such a society 'considers [its legacy] worth preserving'. The preservation through recollection occurs in both cases, the oral and alphabetical technology, by 'transmitting it [information (namely, indigenous knowledge and practice)] from the individual to the community, and this – in the case of the *Beowulf* poem as well as in the earlier case of the Homeric epic poems – at first through the transmission of memorable information 'in spoken language directly to at least one other member of the community'. Such preservation naturally results in the heritage of a tradition which is, as 'the ability to speak', as language itself, consequently deeply 'community-centered'.<sup>16</sup>

Tradition draws its legacy from the heritage of individual and communal achievements, which further and solidify the cultural and religious state of a society. This is one of the major themes the *Beowulf* poem celebrates with the collocation of two monosyllabic words, *dom* (fame) and *death*, which either appear as simplex nouns or occur as stressed monosyllables in compounds and as stems of words within the proximity of the same line. Creed points at the five most significant lines, in which the association occurs by force of alliteration.<sup>17</sup> The two words alliterate on what the singer and the listeners perceive as the same sound, on 'D'. This is the formal nature of the relationship between *dom* and *death*. More important, however is the semantic nature. '[D]om and death resonate with each other',<sup>18</sup> says Creed, namely philosophically, on an 'idea that links *dom* with *death*'.<sup>19</sup> To note with the composer(s) of the poem that '*dom* and *death* have much to do with each other'<sup>20</sup> is to refer to this idea as the recognition of a relationship that is intrinsically at work between language and death. The *Beowulf* poem does not only give explicit, terminological and syntactical,



testimony to the recognition of this idea but it is also at the same time its ultimate execution. This execution occurs with the help of what Creed calls 'ideal structures', the most notable of which he identifies as that composed of *dom* and *death*.<sup>21</sup>

The ideal structure of *dom* and *death* does not only encapsulate, portray and propagate an ideal that is vivid in Beowulf's Germanic society, as Creed states.<sup>22</sup> Its ideal is universal to the human species. It permeates any human society. Since '*death* is better than any deed without *dom* (l. 2890),' it is imperative 'to work *dom*, or else *death* will annihilate one (l. 1491),' which is why *dom* must come before *death* for a social being' that wants to be remembered by its community (l. 1388). Creed points out that the syntax of the last verse stated "mimes" its meaning'.<sup>23</sup> The implications of this syntactic-semantic mimesis are of existential-ontological importance. The mimesis emphasizes the universal importance of its message. It reveals with its emphasis the urge of an existential imperative that is couched in the inextricable and idealistic bond between *dom* and *death*.<sup>24</sup>

More fundamentally, however, the existential imperative is existentially rooted in the ontological relation between language and death. *Dom* supersedes *death*. The supersession occurs with the transition of a *doing*, an action, in *dom*. The transition takes place 'in spoken language, particularly in the language spoken by poets' who manage to fix *deeds done* in words.<sup>25</sup> Such a poetic creation is an act of linguistic preservation. It opens the door to a communalized, personal, and ontological survival through the commemorating force of speech. 'Memorable speech' immortalizes. It calls into existence what was formerly *doomed* to be forgotten. This is the meaning of *dom*.<sup>26</sup> *Dom* is a linguistic action that recalls particular events. The recollection is of existential-ontological dimension. It throws into existence what would normally disappear in forgetful nothingness. The idea that language overcomes death and that this overcoming constitutes the existential-ontological link between language and death is the unspoken theme that permeates Heidegger's existential philosophy. Hence he too, like *Beowulf*, operates with the notion of the hero.

The hero is and lays the foundation for future recollection. 'Recollection' is to be understood as a constructive 'retrieve' of the possibilities of past events, as Stambaugh translates Heidegger's 'Wiederholung', and not as a simple 'repetition', as Macquarrie and Robinson render the term (SZ, pp. 385f.), which runs the risk of suggesting what Heidegger rejects, namely a mere, anachronistic copying of the past that would prevent the possibilities it bears for the future from being actualized under the new conditions of a specific present. 'Authentic retrieve' as recollection discloses past possibilities as *new* possibilities. Rigid, atavistic repetition does the opposite. It forgoes such possibilities. Heidegger calls this kind of inauthentic retrieve a 'bringing-back of "what is past"' (*Wiederbringen*) and as the 'recurrence' (*wiederkehren*) of 'what was once real'. Both are impossible attempts that affect language itself and condition the possibility of