

# Translation and Historical Semantics in Philosophy

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*When asked about the old music movement and its search for original or historical performance, Simon Rattle, the conductor of the Berlin Philharmonic orchestra, answered that he has been influenced by this trend, as many musicians have been, and consequently cannot easily listen to older Mozart recordings – these are like speaking without grammar. The main point of the old music approach is not to use historical instruments but to figure out what is meant by musical notations, not being satisfied with what they seem to mean. The original meaning is not something one can easily reconstruct; however, one should get rid of received conformism by thinking about what it could be – this may help one to find the richness of musical language.<sup>1</sup> Commenting on his conducting of Wagner's Parsifal, Rattle said that doing this after having conducted some works by Debussy he heard new things in Wagner. While something later than Wagner was relevant to understanding him, Rattle added that Wagner's Tristan and Isolde made sense through Schubert, being like Schubert with anabolic steroids. Now, my subject is not historical semantics in music, but it is of some interest that European classical music is associated with interpretative issues similar to those of interpreting historical texts.*

## What is Historical Semantics?

Linguistic historical semantics studies the change in the meanings of words and expressions through time.<sup>2</sup> While etymological studies were popular in ancient times, as they are in modern discussions of the history of languages, linguistic historical semantics is also interested in various general aspects of diachronic variation, whether physiological, social or cognitive. A physiological explanation is offered in some studies on how adjectives related to certain sensory impressions are transferred from their earlier uses to other contexts. It is argued that touch

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1 Zeit 22 August 2002.

2 For historical semantics in linguistics, see Blank and Koch 1999.

words may metaphorically transfer to tastes (*sharp taste*), colours (*dull colour*) or sounds (*soft sounds*), but not often to sights or smells. Flavour words do not transfer back to touch words, but do transfer to smells (*sour smell*) and sounds (*sweet music*) and so on. Aristotle deals with some analogous questions in his *De sensu et sensibilibus*, chapter 5, offering physical explanations which are not those of contemporary research. Cognitive constraints are dealt with in a study on modal words which argues that agent-oriented modalities, such as ability or permission, move into epistemic modalities and not vice versa. For example, ‘must’ was first used to express obligation and received its epistemic meaning only in seventeenth-century English.<sup>3</sup>

Let us turn to historical semantics in philosophy. The study of the history of philosophy may be philological, sociological, doxographic or philosophical. By studies other than philosophical, I mean preparing text editions, philological investigations of philosophical texts, studies from the point of view of the sociology of knowledge, discussions of chronology, classificatory descriptions of the doctrines, and so on. These approaches may involve the historical semantics of philosophical terminology in the sense of linguistic historical semantics. Typical examples include the investigations of how non-philosophical terms have received technical philosophical meanings or, as for the history of Western philosophy, how Greek terms are translated into Latin or Arabic or Hebrew and how Arabic terms are translated into Latin and these into European languages, and how these complicated translation procedures affect the meanings of the terms. These approaches do not necessary involve philosophical interest in content.

Doxographic studies deal with the content of the works, but the authors are not necessarily philosophers, just as the historians of medicine or physics are often humanists. However, there is also a form of historical semantics which is associated with philosophical studies of the history of philosophy. These differ from merely doxographic studies by combining philosophical and historical reconstruction. Philosophical historical semantics not merely investigates the various uses of terms but tries to understand the philosophical reasons for these variations as well as their systematic significance.

One may wonder whether philosophical historical semantics is a history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) rather than a history of terms. In the history of philosophy, these are not far from each other, partly because philosophy itself has always been interested in explicating and analysing the meaning of terms, an early example being Aristotle’s philosophical dictionary in book V of the *Metaphysics*. I think that a philosophical concept is roughly the intended content of a theoretical

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<sup>3</sup> For the controversial modal example, see Bybee, Perkins and Pagliuca 1994; for the sensory words, see Williams 1976.

term. One of the differences between the studies of concepts and terms is that the terms may have many uses, as Aristotle often stresses, but this does not mean that concepts are non-historical entities separate from thinking minds. The intended meanings of terms which are not explicated may be constructed from the ways of using them, although not always easily, to be sure. Terms are discussed in studies of concepts, as is seen in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, a representative of German *Begriffsgeschichte*, and concepts and theories are studied in philosophically oriented studies of terms, as in the publications of the series *Lessico Intellettuale Europeo*.

## The Enlightenment Model of Interpretation

In the history of ancient aesthetics, some writers have used the 'pathetic fallacy' as an explanatory category. This is exemplified by Theocritus' saying that wild animals mourned at Daphnis' death, by paintings which show trees or mountains expressing the emotional gestures of people and so on. Poets and artists fallaciously attributed human sentiments to animals and other things of nature (see Fowler 1989, 104-9). In historical explanations of this kind it is assumed that the poets and other artists mistakenly extrapolated from human emotional experiences to similar states in other beings. To speak about fallacies in texts of this kind is in line with the Enlightenment conception of intellectual history, in which historical documents are seen as expressions of the lower stages of the development of human cognitive capacities. We may learn from them how insufficient conceptual tools and mistaken beliefs influenced habits of thinking and how certain questions puzzled people before the progress of rational thinking produced adequate solutions.

The Enlightenment model is often applied by the historians of science and is quite familiar among the historians of philosophy. Its adherents are not merely critical. They may be impressed by some historical achievements which in their opinion anticipated the more advanced contemporary views. Sometimes they pick up the valuable parts of the classics and rewrite them 'in modern language'. It is assumed that we can easily see what is important and what is rubbish in historical texts. Bertrand Russell's *A History of Western Philosophy* is an example of this approach, the usual criticism of which is that historical texts are read and evaluated as if they were answers to the philosophical questions which the interpreters happen to have in mind. This is seldom the case. The meaning and significance of a text in its historical context may have been very different from the impression it makes on a reader of our times. The purely rational reconstruction is said to dismiss the basic interpretative task which is historical reconstruction without anachronism. Let us consider anachronism for a while, since it is one of the key methodological issues in the history of philosophy and historical semantics in philosophy (Knuuttila 2006, 93-95).

## Reconsidering Anachronism

An often-quoted principle pertaining to this topic, formulated by Quentin Skinner in 1969, is that one should not maintain that a historical person said or did something that he or she would not accept as a correct description of what he or she meant or intended. Serious studies of the works of past masters should reconstruct them as answers to questions that were actual or possible in their historical contexts. The historical meaning is understood by considering the texts in relation to the intellectual or social institutions of their time.<sup>4</sup>

This view is defended in a slightly modified form by Richard Rorty, Alasdair MacIntyre, Quentin Skinner and some others in a collection of essays which was published in 1984 under the title *Philosophy in History*. Rorty's contribution deals with the reconstruction of historical meanings and the evaluation of their significance. He refers to hermeneutic philosophy as a model for explaining these activities, but does not comment on questioning the division between merely historical interpretation and systematic interpretation in Gadamer's hermeneutic philosophy. Gadamer does not maintain that the distinction just mentioned is useless. His point is that these approaches are not independent of each other but are dialectically related. What is called an objective historical study of the original meaning is in fact always conditioned by the interpretative situation. Since all studies of historical texts are interplays between interpretative presuppositions and texts, it is better to be conscious of this fact and not to pretend that historical meanings as such are revealed. According to Gadamer, avoiding anachronism can be characterized as an attempt to refrain from reading our ideas into texts. The purpose of reconstructing the historical horizon of philosophical texts is to make room for ideas different from ours. We succeed better in this attempt the more conscious we are of our own modes of thinking. Instead of two separate levels of interpretation, it is more proper to speak about different moments of one process of interpreting and understanding (Gadamer 1965, 250-5, 342-4, 366, 374-5).

This has something to do with the question of whether systematic philosophy and the history of philosophy belong together or should live separate lives. The authors who reject the sharp division between philosophy and its history as disciplines are often sympathetic to the dialectical conception of the levels of interpretation, although not necessarily in Gadamer's sense. Those who separate philosophy and its history don't see why systematic philosophy should be interested in history (see Kusch 1995, 17-23; Peckhaus 2000). It is understandable that the former group regards philosophy, whether past or present, as a historical and temporal institution, while the latter separates the historical dimension from the intellectual core. There is, however, no reason to believe that contemporary philosophy is

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4 Skinner 1969, 28; reprinted in Tully (ed. 1988), 48.

historically less contingent than past philosophy; the false opposite belief is best avoided by the inclusive conception of philosophy and its history.

## Revising the Simple Anachronism Rule

Authors who believe in some sort of incommensurability between different cultures and traditions are inclined to think that non-anachronistic historical reconstructions of past meanings should be understood as partial descriptions of alien forms of thinking and that this reconstruction takes place through learning an entirely new conceptual system from the inside.<sup>5</sup> I think that this is methodologically inconsistent, since speaking about alien meanings presupposes some sort of systematic comparison. I am more sympathetic to Gadamer's view that the distinction between non-anachronistic and anachronistic interpretation does not overlap with the distinction between purely historical and purely philosophical interpretation of a historical text. This can be straightforwardly seen by looking at how the concepts and terms are studied in the history of philosophy. A simple example is to consider philosophical terms, such as 'intuition', 'irony', 'sympathy' or 'experiment' in early modern English works. It is obvious that in many cases these terms are not used in the same way as they are used nowadays, but it is also true that noticing this implies comparison with contemporary usage. The difference with respect to the later use of the words was beyond the purview of those authors, of course, but it is an essential part of the philosophically informed conception of how the terms were used by early modern authors. To mention an older example, 'intentio' in the influential Latin translation of Avicenna's psychology is a property of the object of an attitude, not something in the mind of the subject. Not realizing this has devastating effects in the history of intentionality. This difference should certainly be mentioned when speaking about Avicenna's conception of intention, although it was not mentioned by Avicenna himself.

These examples show that in identifying historical philosophical views it is legitimate and even imperative to pay attention to what is and what is not found in historical texts. If it is simply thought that anachronism is best avoided by not relating historical texts to what is historically later, the results may be absurd. How can we study Plato's philosophy of love, for example, without having any philosophical ideas of love? One could similarly ask about Aristotle's concept of induction, Chrysippus' concept of emotion, Abelard's concept of identity, Descartes's concept of the mind and so on.

Let us think about this dynamics of the historical studies of concepts by means of an extremely simplified example. Investigations of Plato's concept of love are

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<sup>5</sup> A classical source of this approach is Winch 1958; see also Winch 1964.

initiated by a more or less conscious preliminary conception of love which the authors use to read the texts in which Plato uses terms rendered by 'love'. Suppose that the initial model includes the elements A, B, and C, one of these perhaps the so-called Platonic love of the belles-lettres. It may be seen that while A and B occur in Plato in these contexts, he does not discuss C at all. Instead he combines A and B with D, which does not occur in our initial model. This is how the kernel of the historical concept of Plato's notion of love could be formed. In spite of reference to what is not found in Plato, it is not anachronistically maintained that there is something in Plato's works which they do not involve. It is possible, of course, that historical concepts do not have any elements in common with established contemporary views, but translation and understanding presuppose that there is some common ground.

Stating that some later ways of thinking are not used in a historical text involves no serious anachronism problems; on the contrary, this may be important in avoiding anachronism. When it is realized, for example, that Aristotle did not operate with the distinction between logical and physical necessities and possibilities in the way philosophers have done since late medieval times, this helps us to understand some of his arguments better and to avoid anachronistic misconstructions based on what we regard as a natural way of thinking. Similarly, in discussing the concept of tolerance in Locke or Tindal, it is informative to mention that it did not include freedom from religion and, more generally, when there are similarities between historical texts and contemporary ideas, it is worth considering which elements of the later views may be included in earlier work and which are not.<sup>6</sup> Even when there are similar elements, the talk about historical development additionally demands a genetic connection.

On the basis of these modest remarks, I suggest that avoiding anachronism in historical semantics in philosophy should not exclude negative references to later ideas. It is enough to keep to the common sense idea that one should not maintain that a historical author says something which he or she does not say. Relating a historical text to various philosophical ideas and stating what is not found in it is not anachronistic and can be of considerable interpretative help. Even though I mentioned Gadamer's view of the history of philosophy with a certain sympathy, the position I have argued for is closer to that of Skinner than of Gadamer, even though it goes beyond Skinner's original position. I think that the hermeneutical idea of serious philosophical interpretation as a circle in which the horizons of the text and the interpreter are fused in a new understanding of the subject cannot

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<sup>6</sup> *Prima facie* similar views can have quite different meanings depending on how they are influenced by general presuppositions and related to surrounding. This is the main point in Hintikka's criticism of the unit ideas in A.O. Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being*; see Hintikka 1976.

be the basic model for historical studies.<sup>7</sup> The majority of historical texts are not uplifting in this manner. This is not problematic if the philosophical interest is taken to be directed to the plurality of alternative approaches in understanding things and developing analytical tools in history as well as to the light shed by the past thought on the contingencies of the interpreters' cognitive culture. Seeing the historical views clearly has primacy over commenting on them in the history of philosophy. Avoiding anachronism in the way described above makes this approach philosophical even without evaluation.

## Philosophical Translation

Anachronistic translations of historical philosophical texts are easily recognized through their non-traditional technical vocabulary. In Western philosophy, these problems are more usual in translated quotations from Greek or Latin works than in the translations of the whole works. Some people try to avoid anachronism by not using technical philosophical terms at all, for example, the terms derived from late ancient or medieval Latin translations in translating Greek texts, but the results are curious rather than useful. People may want to take a look at a translation of Aristotle's *Categories* in order to check how the categories of substance, quantity or quality are described – it is frustrating if the words are not found in the translation. Good translations make use of traditional philosophical terms, if available, assuming that readers know that Western philosophical terminology is associated with historical layers and that the words signifying concepts have a history and the concepts signified by words are not unchanging. This is part of the life in historical traditions. As long as there is an understandable historical link between the contemporary uses of philosophical terms and their traditional uses, as for example the category terms, the names of many mental faculties and other Latin-based words, these terms can mostly be used in translations without great difficulty, although explanatory notes are sometimes useful. If there are no such historical connections, it may be better to avoid contemporary systematic terminology because of its anachronistic connotations. Various potential connotations of this kind are of course involved even in pretty standard traditional translations and may mislead quick readers.

Philosophical translations are facilitated by the concept-seeking nature of philosophical texts. Sometimes a translator must consider whether a term is used as a technical term for one concept or whether it is used in many ways in a historical text. In the first case, all occurrences should be translated in the same way if historical accuracy is intended, even if the result may not be very elegant. It is possible that there is no good contemporary equivalent term, but

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. Gadamer 1965, 284-290. For understanding without any kind of acceptance of shared beliefs, see also Brandom 2000.

the problem is often exaggerated. Skinner writes that since Machiavelli uses the words ‘virtù’ and ‘virtuosi’ in a traditional Christian sense as well as of talented but vicious men, commentators have generally come to the conclusion that ‘virtù’ has no determinate meaning at all. Skinner remarks that if there is no equivalent term in English, it does not mean that there is some confusion in the texts. To suppose otherwise is a genuinely ‘whig’ fallacy (Skinner 1988, 252-3). While agreeing with this, I wonder whether this particular translation is a big problem – people reading Aristotle’s ethics are habituated to reading about the virtues of good human beings, good horses, good knives, and so on. Why not here?

Sometimes a less influential historical concept does not correspond very well to customary terminology and is systematically important in the text. These cases are similar to those in translating philosophical works from other cultural traditions into European languages. If the original technical term is a concrete word which has received a philosophical meaning, translators usually translate this word as such and the reader is supposed to see the meaning from the use. This is not very problematic and can be explained in notes. It is more cumbersome if there is no good corresponding word for the concrete term. According to Skinner’s non-philosophical example, there is no equivalent English word for the Latin ‘imber’, although one can understand how it is used (ibid. 251-2). Things are further complicated if such a problematic concrete term is meant to be applied to a philosophical concept. These cases are not very usual.

The questions associated with translating philosophical texts are partly the same as those of historical philosophical semantics. Similar considerations are needed in translating texts and in conceptual research on them, the difference being that translations should not be reports of these considerations. Because of the similarity of the background work, translators of old philosophical works are tempted to include explanations in the text. Inasmuch as the purpose is to make a text accessible in a relatively anachronistic manner, this is not welcome. Translation and commentary are, after all, two different things – this is the difficult but fascinating problem of philosophical translation.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Some relevant studies have appeared after the seminar (2005), for example, Sami Syrjämäki: *Sins of a Historian. Perspectives to the problem of anachronism* (PhD thesis in Philosophy, University of Tampere, 2011).



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