A conversation and a letter. Heidegger, Derrida, and the (un)translatable East

Abstract: This text was born out of a curious parallelism. Both Heidegger and Derrida happened to be, at one point of their biographical and philosophical paths, before a Japanese man. Also, they both decided to write about this “encounter” (a notion that has a degree of importance in both their philosophies). In doing this, they decided to employ and invest into this alterity and availability, although differences are readily noticeable. Their respective medium choices — for Heidegger the deep, enclosed intimacy of language as Gespräch, for Derrida the travelling openness of a letter (what else?) — can be seen as a first glimpse of their final endeavors. Presenting the oncoming questions, — somehow reducible to one, “How can we communicate with the other/Other?” — through a series of crossed chapters eventually focusing on Derrida, is justified by the impression that, as in polyphony, each of the two voices/tracks [traces] reveals something hidden in the other. Laying the one upon the other lets not only perceive their dissonances and disparities, but lets emerge from their own supplementary encounter — their playing tag — a set of subtler, flavorful questions.

Keywords: Philosophy of translation; Japanese; Deconstructivism

1 Words between (that is, Dialogues)

The history of Heidegger’s encounters with “Oriental” interlocutors is quite dense (May & Parkes 1996; Saviani 1998; Buchner 1989). Most famous of these meetings is the one selected by Heidegger himself to compose in 1954 an essay in dialogical form titled A Dialogue on language. We can notice some recurrent features of these Heideggerean dialogues, as the enthusiasm and the feeling of acceptance and interest shared by both parts. Other elements, though, form a less visible pattern, weaving through different dates and contexts. Despite the apparent harmony, the opening note of the 1954 Dialogue is in fact a screeching one: the Heideggerean Inquirer (1971: 5) decides to highlight and dramatize linguistic alterity, the apparent impossibility of a real understanding:

I: If a man by virtue of his language dwells within the claim and call of Being, then we European presumably dwell in an entirely different house than Estasian man.
J: Assuming that the languages of the two are not merely different but other in nature, and radically so.

1 Here quoted from the English edition Heidegger 1971.

*Corresponding author: Lorenzo Marinucci: Sapienza University of Rome, E-mail: lorem86@gmail.com

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Elsewhere we are told that Kuki Shūzō, the prodigal Japanese philosopher whose figure the dialogue opens on, mastered German, French and English; but this very availability of the foreign language, instead of opening the possibility of contact, bounded him to inauthenticity.²

For Heidegger the house of Being is not a remouldable dwelling, nor is it asked whether it happens to possess doors and window frames. In Heidegger’s text, we do not face a linguistic barrier, an obstacle that suggests or urges to be overcome, bypassed or put under siege, no matter how partially and imperfectly. Rather, we are meeting the terms of a given philosophical discourse, might it be Aesthetics or Western metaphysics — terms in both lexical and topological sense: extremely thin border lines, that one must be trained to recognize ahead, in order to walk on its own disappearing path without ending in a foreign wood. We shall stay for a moment on this figure of impossibility, as we introduce another text, about 30 years more recent than Heidegger’s one.

2 Correspondences

The problems of translation, translatable and trespassing (or betrayal) also haunt a letter that Jacques Derrida addressed to Izutsu Toshihiko on the 10th of July, 1983 (see Derrida 1985).

The letter begins with these words:

Dear Professor Izutsu,

At our last meeting I promised you some schematic and preliminary reflections on the word “deconstruction”. What we discussed were prolegomena to a possible translation of this word into Japanese, one which would at least try to avoid, if possible, a negative determination of its significations or connotations.

Despite Derrida’s warnings the Letter is one of the texts most frequently quoted by the secondary literature attempting to make deconstruction, if not “clear and univocal”, at least more understandable. Also striking is how much of the commentators’ attention is focused on what the text offers to our eyes; analyzed as the page of a potential reader book, the Letter loses its epistolary character. Its openness, defenselessness, its availability to multiple gazes and agendas leaves it exposed to our temptation of appropriating it — even of making it, with its scant few pages, the “most extended document concerning the matter” (see Vergani 2000: 18).

The Letter’s referral to a Japanese friend, someone we would normally consider an outsider (for geographical, even before than disciplinary, reasons) in a discussion about an apparently very Western philosophical question, is ignored by the majority of the texts quoting or commenting it. When this matter is addressed, the academic profile of Izutsu is reported as if it was an afterthought, as a footnote. Bernard Stevens (2004: 31) has duly observed:

Mais qui se soucie de savoir que l’ami en question se nomme Izutsu Toshihiko et qu’il se distingue par des travaux éminents sur les spiritualités zen et islamique, écrits dans un discours consonant à l’ontologie heideggerienne?

Those caring enough to discover who he is, have a hard time dissimulating the instinctive feeling according to which a “Japanese islamologist” is some kind of oxymoron. The resistance to conceiving an islamologist further East than his subject matter, thus studying his “Middle West”, seems to imply that Orientalist discourse must exist as a Western one, might it be the effacing description of a subject identity,

² “J: The languages of the dialogue shifted everything into European.
I: Yet the dialogue tried to say the essential nature of East-Asian art and poetry.
J: [...] The language of the dialogue constantly destroyed the possibility of saying what the dialogue was about.” (Heidegger 1971: 4–5).

A critique of the “monological” character of Heidegger’s dialogue and his description of Kuki’s efforts can be found in Michael Marra’s attempt of imagining a posthumous dialogue between Heidegger and Kuki himself “had Kuki written a rebuttal to Heidegger’s Dialogue, he would have probably stressed the fact that this is not a dialogue at all. It is a monologue in which, at the end, Heidegger only encounters himself” (Marra 2008: 58).
its rehabilitation or even its eventual liberation. Even if we browse the work of Said, we find out that in his system of contrapositions, there seem to be no space left for an “oriental orientalist”. This same contrast (shifted on the equally arbitrary geographical axis of North and a South that weirdly included China) was already represented and deeply suffered by the Rousseau depicted in Of Grammatology, who wished “the North/South axis [...] to place a natural frontier between different types of languages. However [...] the opposition North/South, being rational and not natural, structural and not factual, relational and not substantial, traces an axis of reference inside each language” (Derrida 1976: 217).

More often than not, Izutsu is simply announced as the Japanese translator of Derrida. We will better discuss this claim later.

Derrida's letter, as we are immediately told, springs from a promise and a plea; refers to some actual meeting that has already passed, and that no commentator felt called or required to reconstruct. But there is one more hazy detail in it. Derrida promised to Professor Izutsu “prolegomena to a possible translation of this word into Japanese”. If we read it once or twice more, the word “prolegomena” sounds suddenly odd and misplaced, like a fake coin, or a quick wink. Is here Derrida really giving preliminary suggestions to a receiving translator, explaining how to sow and water the Japanese soil to transplant a foreign seed? Not really. In the final sentences, Derrida declares that he does “not believe that translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text” (Derrida 1985: 5). Given this conclusion, how do we explain the prolegomena that we met at the beginning (or before the beginning)? What can be said before translation?

Before translation, nothing can be said; we are entangled — hardly surprising — into a still mute field of writing and transcriptions. For such an answer to acquire focus, however, we can have this speechlessness pass through another long, central pause surrounding another opposite act of translation in Heidegger’s Dialogue.

3 Listening to Silence

We should go back to the long silence in the Freiburg study. All the Dialogue revolves around this stasis, the masterfully rising tension with which the Japanese and the inquirer try to delay, differ by any means the linguistic revelation of “What is the Japanese word for Language?” (Heidegger 1971: 45). Just as the negative and unanswered question (what is the Japanese word for “deconstruction”) is the occasion of Derrida’s letter, this act of translation, and the aura of taboo surrounding it, are the central engines of Heidegger’s dialogue.

The question arises early on, but an answer is effectively delayed for almost two thirds of the conversation. Both characters in Heidegger’s dialogue want to wait, feel that this Verhaltenheit ‘retention’ is, as suggested in the Beiträge, a necessary component to any attempt at “primordial thinking”. Here Heidegger and his interlocutor keep arranging something that closely remembers the void scene of Nō theatre, where

J: [...] only a slight additional gesture on the actor’s part is required to cause mighty things to appear out of a strange stillness (Heidegger 1971: 18).

3 Curiously, while Said has broadly referred to Foucault, Derrida is almost absent from his discourse. According to Geoffrey Harpm (2005: 25), Said was in fact “actively annoyed by Derrida’s playfulness, by the incongruously delight he took in puns, homonyms and portmanteau words”.

4 This is also the (Derridean) conclusion informing a modern classic on this questions, John Sallis’s On Translation: “What would it mean not to translate? What would it mean to begin thinking beyond all translation? Or, since one will always already have begun, what would it mean to begin again, to launch one’s second sailing, beyond all translation? What would it mean to have suspended all translational operations, to have suspended them in the radical sense of having reached a point where even the traces otherwise left by such operations would finally be effaced and rendered ineffective? What would it mean, having reached such a point, to begin again thinking from that point? If such thinking were possible, if thinking could be situated beyond all translation, it would still not be capable of eluding discourse as such. (Sallis 2002: 1).

5 And, yes, this is arguably a form of differance in the Derridean sense: postponing in time, it manages to make remote, not accessible as simple presence, what is different in the sense of elsewhere.
And yet, the very silence in which they can listen to Language is a conversation in which, more than for his interlocutor’s otherness, Heidegger cares for the other Otherness opened up by the conversation itself. The ontological difference revealed by this move surely qualifies as a “mighty thing”: so mighty that it completely erases the actual, relative presence of the other person or culture.

This is only half of the problem in Heidegger’s text, however. If we follow its development through the analogy of the theatrical analogy, the paradoxical condition of this mighty silence is, also, the presence of the interlocutor. Only with somebody else in front of him, only inasmuch the Dialogue text is a dialogue, a script even in its graphic form, that silence can be summoned. Another text form would not have just been less effective; it would have completely missed the philosophical aim of the Dialogue. How could one evoke a pause in thought in the monologic form that modern philosophy has assumed as its default style? That means that the problem of writing is just as central here as it was in Derrida’s letter, and that questioning the fictional quality of the Dialogue itself is directly involved in the understanding of its philosophical content.

The first effect of this inquiry of Heidegger’s dialogue is surely a reinstatement of the Japanese voice taking part to it: the result is a quite violent disillusion. The Japanese of the Conversation is based upon the germanist Tezuka Tomio, who visited “Professor Heidegger” on March 1954. Tezuka too felt compelled to recollect his conversation with Heidegger in the short essay Haideggā to no ichi jikan ハイデッガーとの一時間 [One hour with Heidegger] published at the end of his own translation of the Heideggerian dialogue (Tezuka 1995). If we try to put it beside — or below, given that the Japanese text is presented as an appendix — the “original” Heideggerian text, Tezuka’s pages reminds of the peculiar fidelity of carbon paper. The Japanese account corresponds almost point by point to the philosopher’s dialogue. Still, exactly as a carbon paper copy would do, it restitutes it to us with a supplementary trace, unavoidably absent in the primary writings: pressure. Indeed, the first striking element is the energy with which Heidegger insists on that central pause, the ability with which this furrow — a farming drill, much more violent and refined than the Holzwege the text refers to — has been hidden.

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The revealing power of the foreign idiom seems here to be overturned. Heidegger’s enthusiasm for Tezuka’s account of a Japanese word for language was even excessive:

Since I am not a specialist in this area, I cannot offer a precise account […] The word kotoba may have roots in ideas of this kind. This explanation seemed to fit well with Heidegger ideas […] He said: “Very interesting […] The Japanese word for language, kotoba, can mean Ding”. There was perhaps here an element of forcing the word in a preconceived idea, but I was not in a position to contradict this interpretation. (May & Parkes 1996: 62).

Tezuka cannot refuse not just because of the typically Japanese avoidance of clear-cut refusals — but rather because he already translated the German Sprache ‘language’ with a Japanese word that is quite rarely uttered with this meaning. This preemptive adaptation shapes Tezuka’s Japanese, in more than one occasion:

When I proposed the word ‘Open’ as a possible translation for kū [空, the Japanese for Buddhist ‘emptiness’], I imagined that he, as an interpreter of Hölderlin and Rilke, would have liked it. […] Heidegger also said: “It is at such depth that East and West should dialogue”. (May & Parkes 1996: 62).

This quest for depth, depth with the axiological value of that gründlich that Heidegger never stopped to hint and aim at, when inspected ironically displays a completely different facet. In fact, the depth of the conversation is not the result of slow excavation: this earthly rhetoric is rather employed to hide the perspectival character of this depth, it being the result of a careful scenic deploy: depth as the quality of an optic space that renders a complex reality, restituting it however as an intangible, inviolable representation.

This explains the lack of interest for actual linguistic use. The word 言葉 kotoba does not usually mean ‘language’: and probably, never refers to “Language” in Heideggerian terms. Rather, it can be translated as ‘word’ — single word, element of the articulated language that Heidegger is clearly not dealing with here. Moreover, the word koto, supposed to mean ‘event’, is written (and as the difference is a written one, it stays out of the probe of Heidegger’s dialogical focus) with the character 言 ‘say’. 言 is also always used for the
concrete act of speech (its shape itself evolved from the pictogram of a mouth emitting words), the one that in the Dialogue should surrender before the “original Saying”.

In his afterword, Tezuka eventually dissociates from his interlocutor’s account, specifying:

That the visitor from Japan is a keen reader of Heidegger and is familiar with his thinking and ways of expression has nothing to do with me, but rather comes, it seems to me, partly from Heidegger’s own motives and his need to write this text. Not only are these specialist ideas and terminology alien to me, but there are also in the text certain expressions which, though not related to a specific idea, I could never have uttered if the visitor from Japan had been me. (May & Parkes 1996: 68).

But even if we can easily conclude that the Dialogue is not an accurate, or even bona fide, account of the 1954 meeting, a philosophical examination cannot refuse it for its unfaithfulness alone. We must inquire into the Inquirer until we can trace his own motives, his need to write the Dialogue. At the same time, we cannot be so sympathetic to avoid questioning whether an essentially invented Japanese language can truly be even an image of the Other, or able to disclose any kind of Openness. Can a work of ventriloquism perform this miracle? As we are stuck into this second impasse of the Heideggerian text, we get sidetracked again by the traces of the other philosopher, this time answering to Heidegger himself.

4 Restitutions (and thefts)

Is it then possible, in a philosophical dialogue — any dialogue — to restitute the voice of the other preserving its original cast through writing? In Heidegger’s dialogue, the graphical structure itself is meant to represent the perfection of a pure, direct discourse. Still, as Derrida pointed out, the same brackets that open a dialogue’s transcription are also used to hold and manipulate any quotation; the same graphical convention goes for testimony and screenplay:

Every sign, linguistic or nonlinguistic [...] can be cited, put between quotation marks; thereby it can break with every given context, and engender infinitely new contexts in an absolutely nonsaturable fashion. (Derrida 1982: 320–1).

If we are looking at Derrida’s work to obtain a comment, a further reflection on the Dialogue, we might notice that actually there is another text by Derrida not only refers and answers, but even mocks Heidegger’s Dialogue.

Restitutions. De la vérité en pointure is not just an essay on Heidegger, but also a dialogue: or rather a “polilogue with n+1 female voices” These ostensibly disincarnate voices, often abruptly stop, crowd up, confuse themselves. Their imperfect sum is, at the same time, a mise-en-scène, an implicit criticism, and a deconstructive practice of dialogue. No phrase can be attributed, no participant identified. Some positions surely seem to recur; but still, there is no space for propriety in this dialogue about appropriation.

Indeed, this asynchronous choir deals of a “contest and a trap”. Two professors, Heidegger and the art historian Meyer Schapiro, are joined in another conversation, whose scope is restituting the pair (but, as one of Derrida’s ghosts insists: “why a pair?”) of shoes in a “famous picture” by Van Gogh to their legitimate owner. According to Heidegger, they are an old farmer’s shoes; for Schapiro, the shoes belong to Van Gogh himself, and Heidegger “is seen then, all in all, to have tried to put them on his own feet, by peasant-proxy, to put them back onto his man-of-the-soil feet, with the pathos of the ‘call of the earth,’ of the Feldweg or the Holzwege...” (Derrida 1987: 272).

Derrida’s voices keep following the dispute, until they arrive on one point in which the German philosopher suddenly seems to slip on his own interrupted path (Derrida 1987: 293):

One is not only disappointed, one sniggers. The fall in tension is too great. One follows step by step the moves of a “great thinker,” as he returns to the origin of the work of art and of truth, [...] and then suddenly, at a bend in a corridor, here we are on a guided tour, as schoolchildren or tourists [...] Giving up his usual activity [the guide] goes off to get his key while the visitors wait, slowly getting out of the coach. (There is a Japanese tourist among them, who in a moment will ask a few questions of the guide, in a stage whisper).
At the end of this apparently wicked passage, we find the slanted reference to the other Dialogue we are dealing with: we meet the Japanese again, this time as a funny cliché — a Japanese tourist, what else — hidden between parentheses. But why did Derrida feel the necessity of this small farcical insertion? We may laugh, sure. But we would not be just (neither towards Heidegger nor Derrida) if we avoided inspecting a while this image.

What is comical and yet crucial here is that Heidegger stops being just a professor and a philosopher, and assumes the role of a guide. He unarguably does — and not only here. Philosophy, described by Heidegger as Holzweg ‘forest path’, or Kehre ‘turn’, is in him always also seen as path and performance. The auditor, opposed to a “reader, must proceed along the curves of this route, adjusting his pace to them even if it means losing the critical possibility of making his own road. Heidegger is a guide because he does not involve the reader in his philosophical journey — a guide does not possesses what he explains — but rather in the discovery of an autonomous, original object: might it be the work of art as source of truth, or the untranslatable Language that grounds Dasein in the terms of its culture.

The value of what is “original” is the first target of Derrida’s sarcasm in this text. If a guide may not possess what he illustrates, he still bases his work on the notion of original. One can perfectly explain something by means of its reproduction, but the possibility of guiding presupposes the notion of authenticity. This “originality” also creates a certain confusion:

This confusion however is not the result of a certain clumsiness. We might say that if in his own writings Heidegger presents himself as a guide in the woods, it is exactly to hide how much in his work makes him resemble the second kind of guide, the museal one. Consciously or not, Heidegger’s reader accepts a passive visit to what might be called, rather than the House, a “Museum of Being”. As in a Museum, what has the value of origin is exposed to an oblivion that actually enhances its value and forbids its use. Exposed objects must be physically present, but no touching is allowed. They remain beyond a rope, a layer of glass, some empty space, an openness that reveals and makes unavailable at the same time.6

The notion of originality is thus not the result, but the presumption for the existence of museums: the hermeneutical circle between a work and an artist mutually producing each other begins to unravel when the notion of origin first becomes suspect. In fact, this circular relation can not happen at all, if the two terms can be related to one other through the much looser connections constituted by influences, copy, heteronym. For Heidegger both artist and artwork have to constitute themselves as “origin”, guarantee of what is “authentic”. If the combination of uniqueness, permanence and originality that is shared by Heidegger’s Being, Benjamin’s Aura and the possibility of an absolute attribution (be it of a canvas, a novel, or a pair of shoes8) becomes so hazy, what remains of this hypothetical Museum of Being? What does remain, of the idea and practice of a Museum, when the distance between visitor and object is broken and complicated, and we begin to play with the difference between original and copy — in linguistic terms, with the “original secondarity” of translations?

A first answer comes, or rather is constituted, by the phantom interlocutors of Restitutions, and their spectral sarcasm. That is just one half of the Derridean answer, though. The first half was already contained into Izutsu’s letter. In order to acquire a meaning though, it had to be explored, translated.

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6 Entering a museum means accepting a renounce, desiring contact even knowing that one must stop and obey the forbidding to touch, move, or copy: this sense of restraint is not unlike the Verhaltenheit described in the Beiträge. Even the documentary character — as opposed to historical one — of such a museal exhibit is put between parentheses, as it needs connections, hypotheses, discourse: the presence of the exhibit is just meant to express authenticity, the Truth of it.


8 “The reattachment is so tight (absolute) that it is effaced or absolved: the painted shoes are no longer only the real and really present shoes of real and present Vincent they do not only come back to his feet: they are Vincent Van Gogh from top to toe. To shoe equals to be: you should restitute the full consequences of that” (Derrida 1987: 370).
5 Secondary translations

We may now return on the letter, on the epistolary level from which however, as we discussed of the other, complex “correspondence” between author and work of art, we never strayed too far from. Again, at the end of the letter we find written:

I do not believe that translation is a secondary and derived event in relation to an original language or text. (Derrida 1985: 5).

This is not meant to hint at the necessity of possibility of a natural or spontaneous translation, of a single origin for different languages, or the “pure language” described by Benjamin in The role of the translator. If translation is not secondary, that is not because it can aspire to a primary value, but rather because secondarity belongs to the core of our experience. To Derrida “Experience is translation” (Tours de Babel, in Derrida 1985: 203) on every level, even within our mother tongue. In Heidegger the field of language is limited by a sort of magic circle, whose outside faces us as pure exteriority — may it be noise and lack of meaning or ecstatic silence; in Derrida alterity becomes internal attrition, a resistance that may be unsurpassable, but always challenges us to deal with it nonetheless.

Language alterity has finally become what it has “always already” been: alterity in language, from inside its own axis. In such a perspective, a case of inter-linguistic translation is not more complex or radically different than an intra-linguistic one; the difficulty of saying “the same, and at the same time another” thing may be subtle, but is ineffaceable: not every solution is difficult, but every one of them is partial, temporary, the result of a negotiation. Translation and deconstruction in this sense are not even operations, or tasks (Aufgaben, as in Benjamin) but chances: possibilities configured as bets and dares, as common but not assured, always lucky retrievals. If translation does not present itself as an activity, or as a derivation from a primary text, the singular capitalized Word loses its original status. Words in translation may be more beautiful, more apt than the ones we have departed from, without settling as a new original. Another of Benjamin’s assumptions, one well rooted in good professional practice and common sense, has crumbled: the interdiction of translating an already translated text. According to Benjamin, the relationship between content and form in the original text is arranged differently than in a translation: compared to the spontaneous, organic orientation, to the natural interiority-exteriority of the former — the example is a fruit’s skin — the translated language-body is “overpowering and alien”, enveloping meaning as royal clothes would: exalting and suffocating it at the same time. To Benjamin translation, ironically, transplants the original into a more definitive linguistic realm, since it can no longer be displaced by a secondary rendering. The original can only be raised anew and at other points of time (see Benjamin 1970: 75).

Hence, if we are to recognize both in the starting and ending text of any translation process this “definitive linguistic realm”, a translation may be derived, but it is never secondary to another one. The value of “original” (whose genesis is unfailingly axiological) is no more conceivable as source, ἀρχή (archê). We must admit that a translation too can be “original”: original as completely new, as an invention or discovery of the other text.

If that is the case — and for Derrida, it surely is — the “Japanese word” asked about by Izutsu (in a question that in Heideggerean terms would have been the rather comical “what does the Japanese mean for Deconstruction?”) is not the object of a revelation, but rather a bundle of (im)possibilities. Translation is an operation that take moves not from a root, but from an encounter.

The “prolegomena” to a translation are thus always coming after the translation itself — without being simply secondary, they too are posthumous, posterior.

6 The Japanese Deconstruction

One feature of the aporetic knots pointed out by Derrida is their capacity of evading a purely formal dimension: the same relation between translation, Asiatic difference and the “original secondarity”, observed through Derrida’s texts puts us before a concrete landscape of actual dates, encounters, and
translations: a small archeology, contrasting with the self-referential quality of Heidegger's conversation.

The first find of such archeology is a very plain fact: Izutsu never translated Derrida’s work, as assumed by many foreign readers of the letter.

If the term deconstruction has really appeared “for the first time” in Of Grammatology, it suffices to look at the first Japanese translation, dated 1972, to notice how the first Japanese word for deconstruction predates by more than ten years the prolegomena for its translation. However, Izutsu never translated Derrida’s work: browsing through a complete bibliography of Derrida’s work in Japanese, not a single entry shows his name, despite all the automatic assumptions about the “Japanese friend”.

6.1 The 1972 versions

The actual translator of the 1972 Japanese version was Adachi Kazuhiro, a French studies scholar from Tokyo University. But even if we were still tempted to finally drop a curtain and make a solemn, central announcement of a word, of the Word — as in the Conversation — we must acknowledge that it is not possible anymore. Rather, it never was. A reason for this expectable anticlimax is explained in the letter itself:

I do not think, for all these reasons, that it is a good word [...] it has definitely been of service in a highly determined situation. In order to know what has been imposed upon it in a chain of possible substitutions, despite its essential imperfection, this “highly determined situation” will need to be analyzed and deconstructed. This is difficult and I am not going to do it here. (Derrida, 1985: 4).

Derrida wrote these lines in the Eighties, when the word deconstruction already imposed itself academically. Ten years before, the situation was dramatically different: when the term deconstruction appeared for the first time, it was without its keyword status and the (logocentric) surplus of meaning that got ironically attached to it through the years. As such, deconstruction is both present and absent: physically contained in the text, but also soluble and replaceable, lacking the prestige of the established nominal form.

Once confronted with a foreign language such as Japanese, this already shifting presence could not become any more stable. The visual autonomy and the internal relations of Japanese writing system make much harder to consider the “word” as a basic unity, as writing already exposes it as fragmentary, opened up in an etymological articulation that does not rely only on sound, but also (or even mainly) on graphical structure.

In the Adachi version, there is not one translation-equivalent for ‘deconstruction’. Rather, different “deconstructions” are conveyed in different ways; sometimes, the word changes its form even in the same paragraph. We may find terms, but not a “word” — nothing that we may consider more or less adherent, under the aegis of the fruit metaphor that we read in Benjamin. Adachi’s work was not reconstructing a single core of meaning, but moving through a series of significance shifts, by means of a net of characters.

Adachi mainly uses two Japanese composed nouns: 破壊 hakai and 解体 kaitai. Hakai, which often simply means ‘destruction’, would seem “closer perhaps to Nietzschean ‘demolition’ than to the Heideggerian...

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10 Available online at: http://www.geocities.jp/agrippa0510/ (viewed on 11/03/2015).
11 It is far from uncommon hearing criticism of descriptions that stress the graphical quality of semantemes in the East-Asian cultural sphere; languages written through sinograms would have often been distorted through the lens of the “ideographic myth” (for a most vocal critic, see DeFrancis 1984, according to whom the sinogram writing system “is not a brilliant ideographic script; it is a poor phonetic script”). But even if the point might be well addressed for that which concerns the case of Chinese languages, examining Japanese in the context of Derrida’s own observations on secondarity, writing and translation, some of the inherent limits of the “poor phonetic script” approach become evident: the cross-linguistic adoption of kanji has brought the Japanese to use a writing system divorced from their own langue (a stately gown rather than the fruit skin, in Benjamin’s terms). And yet, Japanese kanji are surely a particular instance of sinograms, so much that cultured Japanese still have a completely written access to Chinese classics and premodern Japanese sinogram-scripts (kanbun) without any Chinese linguistic competence. Japanese sinograms are essentially written, even more than Chinese ones, but can influence and rearrange spoken language undeterminedly, if only through their ability to create neologisms.
interpretation” that Derrida describes in the letter. But the Japanese *hakai* may refer not only to an external demolition: it also applies to internal subversion, even vandalism. Both characters, if taken singularly, may be used to express two verbal forms each (as often is the case with Japanese): the former expresses an object-oriented destruction, but the latter refers to a dysfunction that has its origin and its effect within a same structure.\(^{12}\) Compared to 頭壊 hakai, 解体 kaitai seems to lack the violence of the former: it points to dismantlement, a mechanical decomposition and analysis: 解, as a verb (toku) means ‘untie’, ‘resolve’, ‘remove’ or ‘unravel’. 体 tai simply means ‘body’. A sense of dissection, of organic understanding through a certain violence, can be recognized also in the first character 解, itself a graphic compound of 角 ‘horn’, 刀 ‘blade’ and 牛 ‘ox’. Here too, comprehension and analysis are on the same scene of butchery — as in the Platonic Phaedrus (XXI, 265E) or Zhuangzi (Chap. III).

This interplay of four characters, compared to the apparent autonomy of one word, is already — properly — dissemination. This semantic, “even syntactic” openness is by itself an example of what is described in the Letter:

> I would say that the difficulty of defining and therefore also of translating the word “deconstruction” stems from the fact that all the predicates, all the defining concepts, all the lexical significations, and even the syntactic articulations, which seem at one moment to lend themselves to this definition or to that translation, are also deconstructed or deconstructible, directly or otherwise, etc. (Derrida 1985: 3).

The impossibility of a stable definition for deconstruction only becomes more evident when one realizes that the word *deconstruction* not only does not get “lost in translation”, but rather is “found in it”. That is, it keeps proceeding as a series of marks and remarks, enrichments and désenclenchements. Such a translation is not anymore the task of an external and independent translator — it is rather entangled in its route, without being anchored to a inter- or extra-linguistic starting point. Nor can it be considered concluded, arriving to its target-language. Adachi’s terms cannot offer themselves as substitutes of an original, and none of them has a final value.

Even more so, if we think that today, the “Japanese word for deconstruction” is a different one. One more time, just as we might think that we arrived at the end of a route towards the word, we must look not closer but elsewhere, admitting that its own meaning can be the result of some alien, accessory element: for instance, the simple “de” as a negative (or “denegative”) prefix.

### 6.2 The de- in Derrida

Before examining — it is no longer possible to think in the terms of Heideggerean climatic “revealing” — this other Japanese term, the second(ary) word for deconstruction, we should ponder what does the *de*- in deconstruction exactly stand for.

Negation, in a history of philosophy conceived as one of recurring linguistic usages, has mostly been approached — with notable but infrequent exceptions — in a semi-algebraic perspective. On the contrary, Japanese and Chinese each possess several different negations, or negation modalities. Japanese’s richness is mostly found in semantics, while Chinese also shows different morphology patterns.

A good example from the latter could be the character 没 mei ‘to sink’, used as negative particle instead of the general negation 不 去 before (1) past verbs and (2) the existential/possessive verb 有 yǒu. Negation, which in European thought is usually seen in its adverbial facet, here affects the verb temporally (one of its fundamental values), or denotes the different semantics of absence: “what is not there”, “what is gone, has sunken away”\(^{13}\).

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\(^{12}\) 撕ぶる yaburu, that normally mean ‘to tear, to rend’, may also be used for ‘to break a promise’, or even ‘jailbreak’. 壊す kowasu, the very straightforward ‘to break’, sometimes lends itself to ‘wasting away, spoil’, or ‘sabotage’. One can also, very reflexively, ‘ruin his health’ (体を壊す karada wo kowasu).

\(^{13}\) The same character is also used — in Japanese — for dates of death. Rather than the perfect reversibility of algebraic notation, we may find in this semantic usage the acknowledgement of a certain “irreversibility”. Oddly enough, time and death are two of the best examples, according to Heidegger, of the inadequacies of a metaphysical description.
Japanese case is different: we do not have Chinese’s morphological usage of characters, but the ideographic resource is broadly used for “negative” suffixes. Characters 不, 非, 欠, and 無 are most common, but there are many more.¹⁴ Such richness is not specifically Japanese, as negative suffixes are quite complex in European languages too; however, their graphic independence allows them to be recognized in their relational and yet autonomous nature. No one of them is a merely logical construct: they are also etymologically transparent, still keeping a hint of their verbal status (like the aforementioned 没). Even if they are just employed as modifiers, each one of them conveys its own specific meaning. “Negative” in their case just implies “relational”, not referable to an objectified and isolated “thing”.

This is by no means a specific trait of some “Eastern negation”. Rather, what we find in Chinese and Japanese cultures is a special concern for this negative-relational aspect of language and being. It is surely evident in much Buddhist thought — which was ironically bound to be perceived as “nihilistic” in Europe. As Buddhist tradition translated itself in Chinese and Japanese, a great care was put into crafting a language apt to reflect its insights on common experience and discursive thought, tapping resources from the new languages it met. The most famous example of such a Buddhist de-negation is the kōan 無 Mu, also one of the basic notions in the construction of a modern Japanese philosophy attempted by Nishida Kitarō.

In the 13th century kōan collection titled Mumonkan [The Gateless Gate], the first episode reported by the author Mumon Eikai (Ch. Wumen Hui-kai) we read:


Mumon’s own comment is:

Arouse your entire body... summon up a spirit of great doubt and concentrate on this word “Mu.” Carry it continuously day and night. Do not form a nihilistic conception of vacancy, or a relative conception of “has” or “has not.” It will be just as if you swallow a red-hot iron ball, which you cannot spit out even if you try.¹⁵

Answering “Mu”, Joshu does not refuse the question, declaring a neutral state, a formal defect in the proposition, or its “alogical character”. If we look at the 無 character, we can see that its radical is “fire”. This is why the commentary does not describe a logical confutation, but a process of internal combustion. If we follow this suggestion, and concentrate for a while on the necessity of accepting inside our own subjectivity something able to empty it, a “red-hot iron ball” that destroys the question starting from the bowels of the questioner himself; we are before something who radically differs from the formal interpretation that was typical, up to Nietzsche, of European thought about negation.

¹⁴ a) While a graphical etymology only partially covers a very diverse array of usages, and not necessarily conveys their specificity of morphemes, it might be interesting to note that: 不 fu is one of the most common negative prefixes, and the phonematic element of 否, formal ‘negation’. It usually does not interact with the meaning of the subsequent term, being close to the logical facet of negation. Its graphic etymology is disputed, but might be (1) a bird flying away (2) a weed that has been dug up.
b) 非 hi is an axiological negation; it signifies something amiss, wrong, faulted. It is the phonematic element of 悲 ‘sadness’, and part of compounds names such as 非行 ‘delinquency’. Etymologically, it showed a pair of outward-facing (broken) wings.
c) 欠 ketsu is also used as a verb on its own, kakeru/kaku, with the meaning of ‘lacking’, ‘being broken’. Its original shape was meant to show a hunched, defeated human shape.
d) The character 無 mu ‘nothing’ has played quite a distinctive role in Daoist and Buddhist tradition, and expresses a more complex denial, an internal emptying. Curiously enough, in its origin it did not constitute a single pictogram, as in the other cases, but rather corresponded to a phonetically used isolated part of a more complex pictogram representing a dancer. A use of this character in Zen tradition is discussed further. (Sources: Kanjigen Gakken 2003, Chinese etymology database http://www.chineseetymology.urg/).

6.3 *Datsukōchiku*

Introducing what nowadays has become the “Japanese word for Deconstruction” with a *kōan* is thus not completely inappropriate: studying its formation is not a philological detail. It belongs to a broader reflection from which we should not expect a formal solution, but rather a different awareness, if not a full-fledged “awakening”, to the Derridean effort. It offers us something on which we can conclude and yet leave open our route.

If Adachi restituted the French term reflecting it through a net of verbal meanings, this second “deconstruction” revolves around the negative particle. Instead of the whole, significant word, it plays on its supplement; something that alters the word’s meaning, turns it over, meshes in it without never really belonging to its form.

At the moment, the Japanese word used to translate the Derridean *deconstruction* sounds, or rather reads, 脱構築 *datsukōchiku*. 構築 *kōchiku* simply means ‘construction’, ‘structure’, a quite straightforward version of the French. The brilliant, surprising part of this translation approach is concentrated in the 脱 character: *datsu*. Asked about the term’s formation, Nishiyama Yūji (he himself one of Derrida’s translators), pointed to Takahashi Nobuaki, one of the chief localizators of Derrida’s thought in Japan during the seventies. But the character 脫 appears pretty often also in Adachi’s *Of Grammatology*, and increases its frequency in later works.16

脱 *datsu* may be employed with at least four different connotations; in each one its value varies, being referred to different models and objects, describing similar but not homogeneous actions:

1. As a negative suffix, it has a value of ‘extraction’, ‘subtraction’. As in 脱イオン水 ‘de-mineralized water’; or 脫工業化社会 ‘post-industrial’ (that is, ‘de-industrialized’) society.
3. It can also be employed in combination with other *kanji*, in ideographic compounds whose meaning results from their interaction. Examples are 逸脱 *itsudatsu* ‘deviation’, 洒脱 *shadatsu* , for both ‘witty’ and ‘unconstrained’. The notion of ‘liberation’ recurs in strictly Buddhist terms as 解脱 *gedatsu* ‘liberation (from Samsara)’, or 脱落 *datsuraku* for ‘mission’, ‘retirement’, ‘forsaking’ as in the “dropping off of mind/body” described by Dōgen with the locution 心身脱落 *shinjin-datsuraku*.17
4. Lastly, as a verbal base 脫げる/脱ぐ, verbal couple with meanings like ‘strip’, ‘undress’, ‘take off’ — mostly clothes (or even skin, in a serpent’s case).

The situational value of *kanji* denies the possibility of one meaning. We find different pronunciations, different degrees of activity and passivity, different usages and meanings. How many of these are present in the 脱構築 *datsukōchiku*’s 脫? Its prefix position would imply (1), the chemical subtraction. And yet, it is not hard to recognize in Derridean deconstruction each one of the four: in addition to chemical or mechanical decomposition (1), we can recognize the peculiar status of an action that is contemporarily active and passive (2–4), the affinity with basic notions of Derrida’s vocabulary, like *deviation* and *slanted*, or even a surprising referral to irony in a thick cluster of metaphysical terms (3).

I personally think that the most striking item in this list is the suggested link between deconstruction and “liberation” and “liberty” (not necessarily in Buddhist terms). In Derrida’s work this association is seldom spelled out, but the Japanese suggests a liberation from constriction or weight (rather than architectural dismantlement). The risk of considering this retirement as an escape from responsibility, an accuse that has been levered ad nauseam against Derrida’s work can moreover be dismissed if we compare the constant application and practice required by Buddhist “liberation” and Derrida’s equally strenuous engagement with his target texts.

“Deconstruction”, before being a word, is a strategy of meaning, an attempt of signification that includes — by statute — the impossibility of expressing itself through a single project, scheme, or an exhaustive

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theory exempting it from relating to different models and contexts. Deconstruction forces to a plurality of models, forces to consider the Japanese term as a new richness, rather than an unfaithful derivate, and at the same time allows us to aspire to a brand new kind of fidelity and translation attempts, that do not target a single meaning, but an open net of affinities.

All the meanings in 脫 are related to the things Derrida "intended to say"; but each one of them is, like the original word, differed, inserted in an interplay of absences.

No one of them corresponds to French deconstruction, in a geometrical sense. But we can say that they correspond with it, opening to an epistolary mode, to a reciprocal exposure of dynamics of thought that are surely different — and as such, “internal” — and yet accept, and are able, to include within themselves their own borders, as the possibility, the chance of others.

References