The only extended engagement with Asian philosophy in Heidegger's published works is the “Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer” of 1954 (published in On the Way to Language), and although this work has been mentioned in one or two of the preceding essays, a few words more about it may be in place. The original title is significant: “Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden.” The assonance between the words Gespräch and Sprache intimates a close connection between the conversation and its concern. More important is that the conversation is not über but “von der Sprache”: the von is ambiguous and suggests that the conversation is as much (or more) from or by language as it is about it. The interlocutors strive to avoid speaking about language, trying rather to let the conversation be led by and issue from out of the essential being of language itself (vom Wesen der Sprache her).

The tone of “the questioner”—sounds like Heidegger himself, on the track of Being—is from the beginning not overly optimistic. If language is “the house of Being,” then European and East Asian thinkers presumably dwell in very different houses, and “a dialogue from house to house thus remains almost impossible.”1 Heidegger has pondered the being of language as deeply as any other thinker, and yet he has his questioner admit near the beginning: “I do not yet see whether what I am trying to think as the essence of language is also adequate to the nature of East Asian language . . .” (G 94, E 8). This expressed concern distinguishes Heidegger’s reflections on the nature of language from those of his predecessors, deepening his discourse away from the tradition of taking into account only the Indo-European languages.

Later in the conversation the questioner reiterates that “for East Asian and European peoples the essential being of language (das Sprachwesen)
remains something completely different.” He then asks his guest: “What does the Japanese world understand by language? Asked even more cautiously: Do you have in your language a word for what we call language? If not, how do you experience what with us is called language?” (G 113, E 23). The stage directions here prescribe a long silence during which the Japanese reflects upon the questions. If he says no, there is no such word, he may not be able to think about language as we understand it. Eventually he replies that there is indeed such a Japanese word—but without saying what it is. The suspense is maintained until close to the end of the dialogue: the conversation veers off on a detour of over twenty pages before coming back to the point.

The word in question turns out—to the disappointment of some, perhaps, who may have been expecting something more exotic—to be the usual Japanese word for language: *kotoba*. The second of the two characters which comprise this word, *ba*, means “leaves,” or “petals.” There is an interesting temporal element to this character, which may have intrigued Heidegger, in that one of its components is *se*, which means “world, generation, age, era.” But it is the *koto*, according to the Japanese guest, that is the difficult thing to determine—although the task is made easier by the conversers’ having already spent a great deal of time and effort pondering the term *iki*. They eventually agree to render *iki*—in patently Heideggerian language—as “the pure delight of the calling stillness,” and the Japanese suggests that *koto* can then be characterized as “that which itself gives delight, which uniquely in each unrepeatable moment comes to shine in the fulness of its grace” (G 142, E 45).

Shortly thereafter, the guest calls *koto* the source of the interplay between *iro* and *kū*. These are the Japanese readings of the Sanskrit *rūpa* and *śāntyātā*. These are the Buddhist terms for beings, or existents (what Heidegger would call *das Seiende*), and nothing, or emptiness (*das Nichts*). *Kotoba* as language would thus be “the leaves/petals that stem from koto [understood as the source of beings and nothingness].” The questioner is delighted with this, calling it “a wondrous word, inexhaustible by thinking,” adding that it means something other than do our Western, “metaphysical” names for language (G 144, E 47). This delight is echoed in a lecture from four years later, in which Heidegger meditates at some length on a stanza of a hymn in which Hölderlin calls language “the flower of the mouth,” and remarks that “In language the earth blossoms towards the bloom of the sky” (G 206, E 99). *Kotoba* can also be understood as “the flower of the mouth,” since it shares with its counterparts in European languages a reference to the mouth and speech. Read pictographically, the character for *koto* shows a mouth with sound issuing from it, and the Chinese-based reading of it is *gēn*, meaning “speech.”

On the Western side, our word “language” and its cognates in the Romance languages come from the Latin *lingua*, meaning “tongue,” the Greek *glōssa* means “tongue” as well as “language,” and the German *Sprache* comes from *sprechen*, “to speak.”

However, something strange is happening here: there seems to be a step missing, some premise suppressed. There is no inherent connection between *iki* and *koto*, and the interlocutors have not established one. How do they get from the speaking mouth to the source from which arise existents and emptiness? How does the Japanese *koto* avoid being subverted by metaphysics—which dichotomizes language into two components, a sensible (spoken or written word) and a suprasensible (meaning)—the way our Western tongues are? It cannot be simply because *ba* denotes tangible issues in the form of petals and leaves rather than some suprasensible, ideal meaning. One speaks in Japanese of *koto no ha* as well as of *kotoba*, and some etymologies suggest that the *ha* was originally a different character, *hashi* (Chinese reading: *tan*), a remarkable graph meaning both end and origin—edge or border—beginning and end. So language would be the ending origins, or original edges, first blooms from the source of beings and nothing.

There is something behind the *koto* that is the link. It is a central idea in Confucian thought that to speak is tantamount to *to do*, that saying is action in the fullest sense. This, like many other Confucian ideas, carries over to the Japanese tradition and manifests in the fact that *koto* meaning “speech” was originally the same word—*in manyōgana*, the ancient phonetic use of Chinese characters—as *koto* (Chinese reading: *ji*), meaning “matter” in the sense of “affair” or “circumstance”—a nonsubstantial “thing” spoken by language. With this meaning in mind we can appreciate the questioner’s frequently expressed delight at the idea of language’s being the petals that blossom from the source of beings and nothing. *Koto* can now be understood as *die Sache des Denkens*—a frequent location in the later Heidegger, and one that is difficult to translate. Perhaps “the matter of thinking” in the sense of “topic,” “subject,” or “theme” will do—as long as one does not understand “matter” in the purely physical sense. Language as *koto* would then be that “thing” which calls for thinking, the matter at hand as one plies the craft of thought, and from which words (cor)respondingly issue as spontaneously as the petals of a flower unfold.

If the flowers unfold somewhat differently in the East and the West, perfect translation from one language to the other will not always be possible. However, the difficulty of translation obtains also within each individual tradition: just as certain ideas in Plato stubbornly defy translation and have to be read in the original Greek, so there may be ideas in ancient Asian philosophies which cannot be adequately expressed even in
the corresponding modern languages—let alone in languages of the Indo-
European family. But the impossibility of complete translation does not
necessarily rule out communication altogether—especially if both sides
learn the other's language. Because the Western and East Asian houses of
Being are set apart does not mean that dialogue is as close to impossible
as Heidegger's questioner fears. Houses stand on ground, just as leaves
and petals stem from roots in the earth. And one can, with time and
effort, come to feel at home in another house.

Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, Unterwegs zur Sprache (Pfullingen: Neske, 1959), p. 90;
1971), p. 5. The translations of Heidegger's German are my own, and I shall
refer to the German original and the English translation by the abbreviations G
and E respectively, followed by the page number.

2. Die Sache has been an important idea in modern German philosophy—and
especially in phenomenology, Hegel uses it to denote the proper object of philos-
ophy as Wissenschaft in the Preface to The Phenomenology of Spirit, and it is the
watchword of Husserl's famous call: "Zu den Sachen selbst!" The importance of
the term for Heidegger is evidenced by the title of one of the last works he pub-
lished: Zur Sache des Denkens.