

Hegel's Phenomenology

Puns

One of many fundamental differences between Kant and Hegel is the latter's language consciousness. Kant aimed at a philosophical understanding of the world. To be sure, he turns from the unknowable world of things in themselves to the world as we encounter it, the world of objects. Still, he envisions an objective account, and to that end, he wants it to be entirely independent of individual variation. One kind of variation is linguistic, and, as he said more than once, Kant undertook to purify philosophy of linguistic caprice by using terms drawn "from a dead and learned language." His writing bristles with such learned terms that are not part of the living language and hence not subject to its fluctuations; my favorites (though they sound even funnier in German) are "the subreption of hypostasized consciousness," and "the euthanasia of pure reason."

Hegel answers Kant with a philosophy of experience. Language enters as an essential mediator of experience almost from the very beginning; see par. 97 (p. 82 in the German text published by Meiner). And many of the turns of the argument (mostly in the opening chapters) depend on linguistic factors, very often puns that do not translate into English. For that reason, a description of them can help you out.

Some central terms that continue through Hegel's writing--the first well-known, the others less so--are:

1. *Aufhebung*: often translated "sublation" (but by Miller also translated numerous other ways), means elevation, preservation, and suspension, all at once. In the *Phenomenology* Hegel comments at least twice on the word, in par. 113 and in the last paragraph of the book (pp. 90 and 564 in the German).
2. *Zugrundegehen*: translated with terms such as "perish" and "destroy." It means "to be destroyed," but it also suggest "finding one's ground," and indeed Hegel not infrequently spells it as three words, to bring out the double meaning: "zu Grunde gehen." The earliest uses I have noted are in the middle of par. 60 and at the very end of par. 125 (pp. 50, 99).
3. There is a third dialectical term, *Auflösung*, which is probably as frequent as the first two, though less prominent. It means "dissolve," but is derived from "lösen," which puns just like its English equivalent, "solve." Hence in a typical passage, pars. 439-440 (pp. 314-315) Miller translates at effectively with "resolve." Elsewhere *Auflösung* can seem strictly negative, as at the end of par. 658 (p. 463), where the beautiful soul "dissolves into thin air." But it can also be linked to the better-known dialectical terms, as in the middle of par. 701 (p. 491), where the verb "auflösen" ("dissolves" in Miller) is equated with "zu Grunde gehen" ("perishes"). Given these multiple verbal echoes, perhaps even the passing of the beautiful soul should not be considered to be as fatuous as it sounds.)

Here are some other puns that are pervasive in Hegel and his contemporaries.

Wissen=knowledge (or knowing). Wissenschaft=science (scientia, from Latin scio=to know).
Bewußtsein=consciousness. Gewissen=conscience. Gewiß/Gewißheit=certain/ty.

Stimme=voice. Bestimmung=vocation (Latin vox=voice) or calling, in both the secular and the religious senses; determination. Bestimmt=determined, definite/ly. Stimmung=mood or (musical) tuning.

Gegenstand=object, but its parts mean stand opposite, and they thus echo the etymology of object (thrown athwart).

And then there is *verkehrt*=inverted, but it also can be more negative=perverted. Not a pun exactly, but multiple shading.

I'll list other puns in the order they occur.

Par. 31 (p. 28): "Das Bekannte...ist..., weil es bekannt ist, nicht erkannt." Here, Miller uses "familiar" and "cognitively understood," but the German prefixes imply a closer relationship between what is merely known and what is known in a more permanent and definitive way.

Par. 60-66 (pp. 50-54) concern philosophical expression. A key word here is "Satz." It is consistently translated "proposition." In formal contexts (e.g., Euclid) German uses "Satz" where we use "proposition." But its normal meaning is "sentence." Since Hegel criticizes formalistic philosophy, including Spinoza's imitation of geometrical form, using the formal term "proposition" in English is distinctly confusing (except in the Spinoza critique, par. 48, p. 40, where "Satz" does have to be translated "proposition"). This isn't a pun, strictly speaking, since a German reader will inevitably think of sentences, not formal propositions, where Hegel writes so much about subjects and predicates. "Der spekulative Satz" is a speculative sentence, not a proposition, and in par. 63 (p. 52), you have to replace "proposition" with "sentence" to make the utterance comprehensible: "The philosophical sentence, since it is a sentence, leads one to believe that the usual subject-predicate relation obtains." [Hegel uses italics far more abundantly than the translator, but the italics on "is" in the English here were added by the translator, straining to make an already strained translation meaningful.] There is a possible pun on a secondary meaning of "Satz," a movement in a piece of music, specifically on par. 61 (p. 51), where Hegel writes of the harmony between subject and predicate produced by a speculative sentence.

Par. 87, near the end (p. 74) is the first intimation of the way Hegel thinks about the key term "Begriff." "Begriff" means "concept," though for mysterious reasons it often gets translated "Notion" (as par. 6 and par. 84, p. 12, 71). It derives from "greifen" which means grasp or grab, as "concept" is related to "capture" and also etymologically suggests seizing. In par. 87 the participle "begriffen" is correctly translated "comprehended." The most important discussion of the term comes in pars. 564-55, pp. 401-02.

"Beispiel" (par. 92, p. 80) means "example," but etymologically suggests byplay. An example isn't the concept itself but merely a happenstance approach to it. The concept "is indifferent to what happens in it" (par. 96, p. 81), because any other example would do just as well to illustrate and lead toward it. Here and at two subsequent moments Hegel coins the verb "beiherspielen," with the particle "her" suggesting especially casual byplay: pars. 102 ("whatever happens in it"),

112 ("the source of instances"); pp. 83, 90.

"Mein" means "mine"; "Meinung" means "opinion." That what seems most mine--my immediate sensual certainty--proves unstable and hence mere opinion is the crux of the dialectic of sensual certainty. Hegel makes the pun explicit in par. 100, p. 83, and several times thereafter. A comparable pun between "Sein"="being" and "sein"="his" introduces the chapter "Observing Reason," par. 240, p. 183.

Par. 106, p. 85, puns on "Wesen"="essence" and "gewesen," the past participle of the verb "sein"="to be."

For "perception" Hegel uses the ordinary German word "Wahrnehmung." The prefix is the same as in English "aware," as in par. 119 (p. 95), where the German expression is "gewahr werden." But "wahr" is also the word meaning "true." The whole chapter on perception is inexplicable unless you can recognize Hegel playing on perception as "taking [as] true." Yet another related word is "gewähren," which means "to grant" (a petition); the noun "Gewähr" is a "pledge" or a "guarantee," and the idiom "gewähren lassen" that Hegel uses in par. 131 (p. 103) means "to let be" (translated as "lets it go its own way").

Also in par. 111, p. 89, Hegel plays on the colloquial verb "herausfallen"; it means "chance to occur but the parts suggest "fall apart," hence implying a dialectical more emphatically than the translation does, especially following "entstanden," "arisen."

136, p. 105: "Expression" translates "Äußerung," which etymologically means outering (or, for the English equivalent, uttering).

143, p. 110, plays explicitly on "Erscheinung" ("appearance" in the sense of manifestation) and "Schein" ("show," but also appearance in the sense of mere appearance, or seeming, and also suggesting shining). The double or triple meaning of "Schein" is central to German romantic aesthetics: art is a radiance rooted in the imagination rather than in reality, hence a glorious seeming. "Specious" used to have a related double meaning in English. Heidegger's aesthetics also make much of "Schein."

145, p. 111: Schluß=syllogism, but also close or closure (as in con-clusion). At the end of the paragraph, "close-linked unity" is an artificial translation of "Zusammengeschlossenensein"="being-closed-up-together.

149, p. 114: Gesetz=law comes from setzen=put, place, set, also evoking sitzen=sit. In formal logical and philosophical contexts "setzen" is translated "posit," as is the case in this paragraph.

149-50, p. 119: The explanation (Erklärung), says Hegel, is too plain (klar). "Klar," of course, means clear in the sense of light. If you think "plain as day," you'll see the point, which is that the explanation hides the mystery of the inside of things or of the supersensual world.

172, p. 138: "Gattung"=genus, which Hegel introduces here, also means sexual coupling.

"Gatte/Gattin," for instance, means (male or female) spouse. That is why Hegel closely links genus with reproduction at 266, p. 200.

187, p. 144: The two self-consciousnesses "prove themselves." The German verb is "bewähren," which, like "gewähren," comes from "wahr"=true.

196, p. 150. "having a 'mind of one's own' is self-will." In German: "Der eigne Sinn ist *Eigensinn*." (Hegel's italics: Hegel often uses italics; still, here they seem intended to call attention to the pun.) The adjective "eigen" means "own" or "self," so "der eigne Sinn" is "one's own sense of self." Just above, "it is only an empty self-centred attitude" is, in German, "so ist es nur ein eitler eigener Sinn": it is only a vain ["eitel" means vain in both senses of the English word] self-sense. And what Miller translates as "a mind of one's own" is the German compound "Eigensinn," which is the standard word for obstinacy. Self-awareness is obstinacy: the bondsman asserts his individuality despite the empty vanity (or vainness) of his aspirations.

233, p. 176: "demonstrating itself to be such." The German verb is "erweisen," related to "weise"=wise.

234, p. 177: "assertion"=Versicherung. "Sicher" means sure or certain, so there's no pun in the verb meaning "assurance." But I'm also inclined to hear an echo of "sich"=oneself.

240, p. 183: The translation here signals the pun on "Sein" and "sein"--being and that which belongs to the self="its own." This pun seems pretty inert to me. Hegel doesn't build it into his argument. It's almost as if at this stage in the book he couldn't resist the opportunity to make a pun, even if it's not really generative. Later on, at 344, p. 252, Hegel makes more of the same pun.

442, p. 316, conscience is "Gewissen" and "Spirit that is certain of itself" is "der seiner selbst gewisse Geist." And at 444, p. 266, one might (or might not) hear "actual existence," reality, "Wirklichkeit," echoing "work"="Werk."

349, p. 256. The topic here is "das Reich der Sittlichkeit," translated as "the realm of the ethical life." At the end of the same paragraph, the word "Sitte" is translated as "custom." There is no pun here, but a word, roughly corresponding to the Greek "ethos" and the Latin plural "mores," that has no good English equivalent. "Sitte" refers to custom in the active, socially engaged sense--things one habitually does for the community. A different word, "Brauch," designates the kind of usages that are handed down without any evident rational purpose. "Sittlichkeit" thus verges on manners; the participle "gesittet" comes close to what the British call "well-bred." Self-conscious, rational principles of behavior are discussed later on under the rubric of "Moralität," "morality."

366, p. 266. The topic is "Lust," which means both "pleasure" and "desire." At the end, in this paragraph, in an almost gratuitous pun, Hegel twice speaks of "Verlust," an unrelated word that means "loss."

This subsection and the following two allude to unnamed literary examples. "Pleasure and Necessity" comments on the dilemma of Faust commanding yet subject to Mephistopheles. Karl Moor, the Robin-Hood-like hero of Schiller's revolutionary first play *The Robbers*, is the figure who relies on the law of the heart but succumbs to self-conceit. And virtue confronting the way of the world is Don Quixote.

390, p. 280. "Edify, but raise no edifice"--a good translation for "erbauen, aber nichts aufbauen."

392, p. 281. "The in-itself of virtue is merely an aspect." Here there's a pun which, unlike the last one, has no etymological basis, just a play on words: "Das Ansich der Tugend [ist] nur eine Ansicht."

402, p. 289: "work," "reality" are "Werk," "Wirklichkeit," both related to the verb "wirken"=to work, be effective. Same association, with more resonance, at 444, p. 317.

442, p. 316: "conscience," "certain"="Gewissen," "gewiß." This association becomes crucial at 633, p. 446.

512, p. 365. "Preis"="praise." Lurking somewhere in the background is "Preis"="price."

517, p. 368. Here and elsewhere "Empörung" is translated "rebellion." It derives from "empor"="above." It can refer to a material uprising, but more typically to a psychological condition, "indignation," as, here, "the feeling..of extreme Empörung." In 519, p. 369, where the translation reads, "in place of rebellion appears arrogance," the latter noun in German is "Übermut," beginning with the preposition meaning "over." The natural reading is therefore that one psychological state, angry high spirits, is replaced by a different psychological state, confident high spirits. The entire paragraph plays on psychological highness and lowness, including "submission"="Unterwerfung" (from the word for "under"), "abyss," "bottomless depth," "superficiality"="Oberfläche."

557, p. 397. An off-color pun here. "Attributed" is "beigelegt." "Union" is "Beilager," which is a closely related form of the same root and actually refers to sleeping with someone, copulation. One of Hegel's guffaws.

616, p. 434. "Verstellung," the title of this section, means both displacement and dissembling. The translation often uses both words to capture the double meaning.

652, p. 458. "Perceives" here is "Vernehmen," a related but different form from the early "Wahrnehmung," and specifically referring to hearing. The prefix has two meanings: most often a mistake, less often (but still commonly) an intensification. "Verhören," for instance, regularly means to mishear, while the noun "Verhör" is a judicial hearing. Both meanings of the prefix could potentially be understood in the background here.

653 (p. 459): "Assurance" ("Versicherung") derives from "sicher" (certain) and is associated semantically with "self-certainty" ("Gewißheit"). Between the two nouns in the German,

however, comes "Fürsichsein" ("being-for-itself"), whose core, "sich," is punningly echoed by "Versicherung."

759, p. 528, has two gratuitous puns in close succession. "Its being revealed obviously consists..."="Sein Offenbarsein besteht offenbar..." And in the next sentence, "Being" and "essentially" are "Wesen" and "wesentlich."

807-8, p. 563. "of free, contingent happening" is "des freien, zufälligen Geschehens." The same root, externalized and converted into knowledge, becomes, in the next paragraph, "Geschichte"="History."

808, p. 564. At the very end, Hegel employs a common German pun on memory. German has two words for memory. One is "Gedächtnis," which comes from "denken" ("to think") and which can be cultural as well as personal; the other is "Erinnerung," which is exclusively individual. Here Hegel uses the latter and hyphenates it to emphasize its root (as he also does less prominently earlier, near the end of par. 753, p. 524). He writes "Er-Innerung." The translator puts two nouns for Hegel's one: "recollection" and "inwardizing." The "revelation" that ensues is, in German, "Offenbarung," whose parts suggest "open" and "baring." And "Geschehen" (happening) mutates into "Geschichte" (happening).