It has been over thirty years since my high school teacher of philosophy, Professor Dino Dezzani, recommended a book from which to begin my study of philosophy: Martin Heidegger’s (1889–1976) *Unterwegs zur Sprache* (On the way to language [1959]). Evidently he was aware of my interest in literature and thought that Heidegger’s discussion of words, things, and poetic language would give some sort of direction to my naïve and youthful questions of what literature is about and what I should hope to find in it.

The impact that Heidegger’s book had on this young student was much greater than my professor could ever have imagined. I would hardly have committed myself to the study of Japan were it not for my reading of “A Dialogue on Language between a Japanese and an Inquirer,” which appears in *On the Way to Language*. The dialogue is a fictional reconstruction of an actual meeting that Heidegger had with Tezuka Tomio (1903–1983), a Japanese scholar of German literature who visited the German philosopher in Freiburg at the end of March 1954. In the dialogue the Inquirer (Heidegger) formulates a central question that, in my opinion, should be of fundamental interest to anyone seriously concerned with the study of Japan. The question is deceptively simple, at least compared with the difficulty of coming up with the answer—an answer that, as a matter of fact, the reader will not find fully formulated in the dialogue. The question is: “What is the Japanese word for ‘language’”? The Japanese visitor (Tezuka in Heidegger’s recollection) appears to have been caught off guard, as we can see from Heidegger’s parenthetical remark: “after further hesitation.” Had Heidegger posed the same question to a Frenchman or an Italian, the answer would have been immediate: “*langue*” or “*lingua*.”

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The challenge for Tezuka was definitely higher since he had a variety of words from which to choose. He could have used, for example, the expression *gengo* 言語, a combination of two Chinese characters indicating “the speech of words.” Instead, he used an ancient Japanese word derived from the native Yamato vocabulary: *kotoba* 言葉, which literally means “the foliage of speech.”

There should be little doubt that Tezuka’s choice was prompted by his desire to please Heidegger by playing the philosopher’s own game—something that Tezuka totally succeeded in doing, as Heidegger’s dialogue attests. Tezuka introduced a term that lent itself to etymological play—an enterprise very close to the heart of Heidegger,

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2 The relevant portion of the dialogue goes as follows:

I: What is the Japanese word for “language”?
J: *(After further hesitation)* It is “Koto-ba.”
I: And what does that say?
J: *Ba* means leaves, including and especially the leaves of a blossom—petals. Think of cherry blossoms or plum blossoms.
I: And what does *Koto* say?
J: This is the question most difficult to answer. But it is easier now to attempt an answer because we have ventured to explain *Iki*: the pure delight of the beckoning stillness. The breath of stillness that makes this beckoning delight come into its own in the reign under which that delight is made to come. But *Koto* always also names that which in the event gives delight, itself, that which uniquely in each unrepeatable moment comes to radiance in the fullness of its grace. (Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz [San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1971], p. 45)

Tezuka’s version of the event is as follows:

He (Heidegger) then asked me: “In Japanese there is presumably a word for language so-called: what is the original meaning of this word?”

I replied: “The word you are asking about is *kotoba*. Since I am not a specialist in this area, I cannot offer a precise account, but I think that the *koto* is connected with *koto* [meaning ‘matter’] of *kotogara* [meaning ‘event’ or ‘affair’ (*Sache*)]. The *ba* is a sound-transformation of *ha* and has connotations of ‘many’ or ‘dense,’ as with leaves (*ha*) on a tree. If this is right, then the *koto* of ‘language’ and the *koto* of ‘matter’ are two sides of the same coin: things happen and become language (*kotoba*). The word ‘kotoba’ may have its roots in ideas of this kind.”

This explanation seemed to fit well with Heidegger’s idea. Taking notes on a piece of paper that was to hand, he said: “Very interesting! In that case, Herr Tezuka, the Japanese word for ‘language,’ *kotoba*, can mean Ding [thing].”

There was perhaps an element here of forcing the word into a preconceived idea, but I was not in a position to contradict this interpretation. “Perhaps one can say that,” I replied. In my opinion it could mean thing [Ding] as well as affair [Sache]. “Isn’t that so? Have you read my essay ‘The Thing’? I wrote something there that bears upon this issue. If you read it, please let me hear your impressions.” (Reinhard May, *Heidegger’s Hidden Sources*, p. 61)