

***Verantwortung* (Responsibility) and *Verbindlichkeit* (Commitment) in German: A Study of Lexical History and Semantic Change**

by
Rudolf Post

Anyone engaging in a discourse on ethical or philosophical questions does so by using a historically evolved language, be it Latin, English, Chinese, Thai, or German. The origins of all these naturally evolved languages harken back to prehistoric times. A major part of what constitutes today their grammatical, morphological, and lexical repertoire can be traced back many centuries if not millennia, even where this repertoire in its current form is a product of a differentiation that occurred during a historically definable period. All natural languages thus hide old notions and reflexes of a vernacular culture or world view that has long vanished.

This may be briefly illustrated on the example of two German words with close English cognates. The German word *Hammer* and its English counterpart *hammer* can be interpreted as stone-age reflexes. For in Old Norsk, *hammar* designated not only a “hitting tool” but also “a stone, rock, or cliff” (a meaning still found in place names like *Hammerfest*). A hammer was thus originally a stone used in the function of a hitting tool. Conversely, magical notions may inform the term used for the disease *Gicht* (gout). This word is related to Old High German *gi-jehan*, the meanings of which include “to pronounce, to discuss, to conjure.” This leads one to conclude that the disease was at one time interpreted as something conjured up, and the stricken people as having been hexed or jinxed.¹

All natural languages have their origin in an archaic world whose inhabitants lived in constant and close contact with nature. Languages thus reflect a world view that was rather far from the one with whose concepts we are familiar today. Elemental language signs are still almost exclusively

¹ On the above-mentioned etymologies see Friedrich Kluge, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache*. 23rd edition prepared by Elmar Seebold (Berlin etc.: de Gruyter, 1995), pp. 323 and 352.

linked to concrete experiences, and the motivation for naming is grounded in direct observations and everyday notions. In this layer, abstract terms are exceedingly rare; where they exist, they can usually be shown to be derived from a concrete perception. Thus the Latin abstract noun *actio* (action) is built from the verb *agere* (to herd, to lead). This verb in turn grows out of an Indo-European root **ag-*, with the meaning “to herd with swinging arms,”² and thus evokes the image of the shepherd driving his flock in a physically very involved way.

The differentiation of a vocabulary that will allow speakers to converse in abstract and rational ways about subject matters in philosophy, ethics, or modern-age natural sciences, is a long and ongoing process, which the following reflections will demonstrate paradigmatically in one small area. From a linguistic point of view, this process of differentiation can be regarded under different aspects. Every language sign consists of an expression plane and a content plane, and each of these two planes can be affected. On the expression plane, a word can undergo a sound change; on the content plane, it can experience a semantic change. The integration of foreign elements as well as processes of derivation and composition play central roles in the development of a vocabulary. Assuming that the lexical repertoire of an early stage in a specific language constitutes a “hereditary vocabulary,” one finds that this hereditary vocabulary can be expanded almost arbitrarily through the addition of elements from other languages (i.e., through foreign borrowing or loan words), through derivation or composition. Recourse to the above-mentioned means carries a different weight in the various individual languages. Thus German can easily build new words by stringing existing entities together, while other languages favor word combinations or paraphrases. The frequency of integration from other languages can be very different from one individual language to another. Finnish knows relatively few foreign or loan words, while German and, to an even greater extent, English have considerably enriched their vocabulary with components from Greek, Latin, or various Romance tongues.

The recent vocabulary of any natural language is a result of all the aforementioned linguistic facts and processes. A tiny section of the German vocabulary will here serve as an example with which to demonstrate some of the processes of lexical development. This section is focused on terms that cover the self-determined, voluntary, and internally motivated act of standing up for something. In today’s language, the central terms in this field are those

² Julius Pokorny, *Indogermanisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 3rd edition (Tübingen etc.: Francke, 1994), vol. 1, p. 4.

that were chosen as title words for this Festschrift, responsibility and commitment—in German: *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit*.

The current usage of these two terms is documented in language dictionaries. In contradistinction to field-specific dictionaries or reference works for philosophical terms, language dictionaries are purely descriptive. They are not meant to explain how a particular word must be understood, how it should be used, or how it is defined. Instead they show (usually by means of sample sentences) how and in which contexts a word is actually used within a community of native speakers. Language dictionaries are thus not normative. For my investigations into current German usage I rely on what is today the most comprehensive dictionary of the German language, the ten-volume *Duden* dictionary.³ In it, the entry for the word *Verantwortung* runs for 44 lines and is split into three fields of meaning, with the most comprehensive first group itself encompassing two subgroups. The structure in the entry for *Verantwortung* is as follows:

- 1 a obligation (linked to a particular task or position) to make sure that, within certain limits, everything runs smoothly and has the best possible outcome, that whatever is necessary and right to do is being done, and that damage is avoided wherever possible
- b <without plural> obligation to stand up and answer for something that happened
- 2 <without plural> sense or awareness of one's obligations
- 3 (obsolete, but still used regionally) justification

The outline chosen by the dictionary editors as well as the descriptions of various meanings could certainly be criticized. Above all, tautological explanations such as the one under 1 b (*Verantwortung*/responsibility = “obligation to [...] answer for something that happened”) or under 2 (*Verantwortung*/responsibility = “sense or awareness of one's obligations”) are not really helpful to dictionary users. Yet this criticism is mitigated by the fact that each point is followed by examples that specify what is meant, e.g., *er trägt die alleinige Verantwortung für den Unfall* (he alone is responsible for the accident) or *ein Mensch ohne jede Verantwortung* (a person without any sense of responsibility).

³ *Duden. Das große Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache in zehn Bänden* (Duden: The comprehensive dictionary of the German language in ten volumes), 3rd, completely revised and expanded edition, published by the scientific council of the Duden editorial department, vol. 9 (Mannheim: Duden-Verlag, 1999).

In the effort to understand the structure of the dictionary entry, one notes that it is apparently based on various criteria. In the description under point 1, *Verantwortung* is being considered as an action, with the explanations given under (a) describing actions expected in the present or the future, and those under (b) evoking reactions to past actions. Under point 2, by contrast, *Verantwortung* is considered not as an action but as an inner, character-based disposition. The third point, marked with the comment “obsolete, but still used regionally,” finally aims at circumscribing the legal aspect. *Verantwortung* in today’s German usage thus has three aspects: a pragmatic and organizational aspect, a socio-ethical aspect, and a juridical aspect.

The structure of the entry for *Verbindlichkeit* (commitment) in the *Duden* presents itself as follows:

- 1 <without plural>
 - a friendly, amiable constitution; courtesy
 - b binding character, liability
- 2 a friendly, amiable utterance, action, or way of speaking
 - b <usually plural> obligation
 - c <plural> (finan.) debts

Without addressing the particulars of this entry’s structure, which seem primarily to follow grammatical lines (the question whether or not a particular usage allows or requires the plural), we can once again distinguish different aspects, namely one that concerns questions of action and communication (amiable constitution, courteous behavior), a socio-ethical aspect (the binding character of a norm, to fulfill one’s liabilities), and a mercantile-juridical aspect (debts).

Were one to trace the spectrum of meanings for the words *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit* a few centuries back, one would notice that its scope was much narrower, largely restricted to the concrete legal area. In Kaspar Stieler’s German dictionary of 1691 one finds the following entry: “*Verantwortung: apologia, defensio.*”⁴ And Johann Christoph Adelung’s dictionary, published ten years later, informs its readers that *Verantwortung* was once used “von einer gerichtlichen Schutzschrift, Vertheidigung oder Defension” (in documents of safe-conduct or in a defense).⁵ But Adelung also mentions among his examples the usage “*Thue es auf meine Verantwortung*” (do it on

⁴ Kaspar Stieler, *Der Teutschen Sprache Stammbaum und Fortwachs oder Teutscher Sprachschatz* (Nürnberg: Johann Hofmann, 1691), column 2581.

⁵ Johann Christoph Adelung, *Grammatisch-kritisches Wörterbuch der Hochdeutschen Mundart* (Leipzig: Breitkopf, 1801), vol. 4, column 988.

my responsibility) and “Jemanden zur Verantwortung ziehen” (to hold someone responsible). Prior to the 17th century, all evidence for the word *Verantwortung* stems from the legal sphere and supports the sense of “justification in court, defense, accountability.” In Luther’s Bible translation of 1545, the term *Verantwortung* appears several times,⁶ always as a translation of the Hebrew term *tochachat* or the Greek term *apologia*, both of which are used in the sense of “justification, defense.” Thus Luther has Job say: “Höret doch meine *Verantwortung* und merket auf die Sache, die ich rede” (literally: Do hear my justification and listen to the facts I am stating).⁷ What is meant here is a vindication, a proof presented before a judge. The very earliest evidence for the term *Verantwortung* stems from the second half of the 15th century.⁸

Verbindlichkeit is a little older; it is attestable in German usage already at the end of the 14th century.⁹ In these early texts, *Verbindlichkeit* is exclusively employed as a word in legal discourse and can be regarded as a translation of the Latin term *obligatio*. *Verbindlichkeit* is used to describe the *binding* nature of contracts and laws as well as the obligations resulting from these. At the end of the 15th century, the word is already found in merchant language to denote financial obligations such as debts.

As Adelung’s dictionary documents, the end of the 18th century witnessed a shift from the purely juridical sphere to the area of morality and of social interactions. Adelung describes *Verbindlichkeit* as

der Zustand, da man sich in der moralischen Nothwendigkeit zu einer Handlung befindet, sie rühre nun von einem Gesetze, oder von einem freiwilligen Versprechen, oder endlich auch von empfangenen Gefälligkeiten und Wohlthaten her¹⁰

(the state in which one feels the moral necessity for an action, be it stipulated by a law or a voluntary promise or finally even by favors and benefactions one has received).

Both terms, *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit*, are thus documented in the German language only since the 15th century, and both stem from the sphere of legal discourse. From this concrete area of legal language presupposing two parties (accuser and accused, judge and delinquent, debtee and debtor, contract partners 1 and 2) and from the core meaning of “justifica-

⁶ Cf., e.g., Job 13:6; Acts 22:1; 1 Phil 17:2, Tim 4:16, and 1 Pet 3:15.

⁷ Job 13:6.

⁸ Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch* (Leipzig: S. Hirzel, 1886), vol. 12/1, column 81.

⁹ Grimm 1886, vol. 12/1, column 122.

¹⁰ Adelung 1801, vol. 4, column 997.

tion, defense” and “legally binding obligation” respectively, usage gradually shifts to the more general and abstract sphere. In the case of *Verantwortung*, the path leads through theology (responsibility before God) into the area of philosophy and ethics. In the process, one of the parties is moved from the sphere of a concrete face-to-face into that of a transcendental relationship (as in responsibility before God), from the sphere of general social relationships (responsibility before one’s community and its social norms) into that of impersonal or individual obligations (responsibility vis-à-vis nature and Creation, responsibility toward oneself). As a result, the term *Verantwortung* occupies from the 19th century onward a central position in philosophy, ethics, the social and the natural sciences, while continuing to exist in its original juridical context.

Having ascertained that *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit* originated in the German language only a few centuries ago, language historians are left with two questions: (1) what are the purely etymological sources of our two terms, and (2) what words were used in earlier times to denote that which we now mean by *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit*?

From the perspective of German word formation, *Verantwortung* is a *nomen actionis*, an “action noun,” derived from the verbal basis *verantworten* by means of the highly productive German suffix *-ung*. In its forms as *verantworten*, *-worten*, *-werten*, or *-wirten*, this verb is documented already for Middle High German (ca. 1150-1350) as an extension of *antworten* with the prefix *ver-*, which signals the aspect of completion and fulfilment, in the sense of “to answer fully or completely.” Exactly the same can also be gleaned from its usage in Middle High German, where it was employed primarily with the meaning of “to answer, to respond, to reply.”¹¹ The usage prevalent today in the sense of “to justify (oneself), to bear the consequences of an action” only appears in a marginal position in those times.

In the case of *Verbindlichkeit*, which is derived by means of the suffix *-keit* from the adjective *verbindlich*, the situation is a little different since the adjective itself is not documented in Middle High German texts. It only emerges at about the same time as its derivative *Verbindlichkeit*. As already suggested, both the adjective and the noun may have arisen as deliberate legal analogs to the Latin words *obligatus* and *obligatio* respectively.

The expansion of the German vocabulary with the aid of foreign models, which was in many ways necessary to prepare this vernacular language for theological, philosophical, and general scientific subject matters, began with

¹¹ Matthias Lexer, *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch*, Leipzig: Hirzel, 1878, vol. 3, column 69.

Old High German, when monks working toward a Christianization of the Nordic lands sought to make biblical and theological texts accessible to the Germanic peoples. In this context, indigenous linguistic material was used to fashion new terms after the corresponding foreign prototypes. Evocative examples include the turn from Latin *con-scientia* (English *conscience*) to Old High German *gi-wissani* (modern German *Gewissen*) or *com-passio* (English *compassion*) to Middle High German *mite-liden* (modern German *Mitleid*). Such formations are known as calques.¹²

Conversely, *verantworten* does not seem to owe its existence to modeling after a foreign prototype, as the word relates to *Antwort*, an old Germanic form that is itself a composite—*ant-wurti* in Old High German. The prefix *ant-*, Germanic **anda-* (derived from the same root as Greek *anti-* and Latin *ante-*) denotes “against” or “counter to.” An *Antwort* is thus literally a counterword. Although the words *Antwort* and *(ver)antworten* can thus be shown to be genuinely German creations, their shift in meaning from “to respond, reply” to “to justify, feel responsible, take on responsibility,” which occurred at the beginning of the modern era, took place under the influence of the similarly built Latin terms used in administrative and legal contexts, *respondere*, *responsio*, and *responsibilitas*. One can speak here of a borrowed meaning. In contradistinction to the English language, German words were thus influenced by the Latin language but integrated these content-related influences, expressing them by means of indigenous linguistic components. This goes to show that the humanistic vocabulary of the European languages was strongly determined by developments in Latin usage, even where, as in the case of *Verantwortung* und *Verbindlichkeit*, this would not seem obvious at first glance.

What has been said so far shows that in readying itself for the task of expressing abstract notions, the body of the German language has undergone a historic process of increasing differentiation and specification. It remains for us to ask whether notions such as the ones that are nowadays described by the words *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit* had not existed in the lands where Germanic languages were spoken already in earlier times, and if so, how people referred to them.

A partial aspect of the field that is covered today by the terms *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit* was previously accounted for by the Old High German word *sculta*, Middle High German *schulde*. The word *sculta* derives from the Old High German verb *scullan* (compare English *shall*) and

¹² A calque (pronounced [kælk]) or loan translation is a word or phrase borrowed from another language by literal, “word-for-word” or “root-for-root” translation.

describes “what somebody owes, an obligation,” or more precisely, “the totality of circumstances for which a person stands up as initiator or originator” (encompassing internal and external circumstances such as awareness, obligation, repentance, consequences, indemnification, etc.).¹³ Unlike its New High German analog *Schuld*, whose meaning narrowly describes only the consequences of negative actions, *schulde* is thus basically value-neutral. This signification is retained in the first component of the now obsolete title for a rank in courts, *Schult-heiß*, originally a person who determined what was owed (services and duties, to be executed or paid).

Other words corresponding with the field of meaning examined here are Old and Middle High German *phliht* as well as the derived verb *verphlihten*, with reflexes in New High German *verpflichten* and *Verpflichtung*. The root of these words is the Old High German verb *phlegan* with the meaning “to stand up for something.” The word *phliht* therefore denotes that “for which one stands up; provision, custody,” while *verphlihten* in Middle High German usage has the sense of “setting binding commonalities,” “agreeing on a common denominator and adhering to it.”¹⁴ New High German *Verpflichtung*, by contrast, has taken on a nuance of an externally imposed necessity.

An internal, moral aspect related to *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit* is expressed in Old High German *triuwa*, Middle High German *triuwe*, which correspond to New High German *Treue*. In old texts, this word circumscribes a self-imposed relationship of moral dutifulness that expresses itself in reliability, constancy, honesty, and good intentions. It shares with our term *Verbindlichkeit* the aspect of obligation while emphasizing the impetus of constancy and self-determination.

This brief historic survey shows that even older layers of the German language shed light on aspects of ethical behavior and morality that are today associated with the terms *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit*. It also demonstrates that language is subjected to constant evolution and that the terms used and their respective content can and must be honed, specified, and deepened in an ongoing dialogical process. This is also true for *Verantwortung* and *Verbindlichkeit*. Both terms are currently the focus of discussion in a variety of disciplines, as a glance into the *Verzeichnis lieferbarer Bücher* (the German counterpart to *Books in Print*) will reveal, in which a search for our two terms yields more than eight hundred results.

¹³ Lexer 1878, vol. 2, column 810.

¹⁴ Lexer 1878, vol. 3, column 193.