

## Research Article

**Hermeneutics between interpretation and translation****Mangia Guerrero Eugenio Virgilio**

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**Abstract:** The intention of this text is to present the argument that the writings and thoughts expounded on by Hans-Georg Gadamer can be interpreted/translated by way of a certain historical tradition- not necessarily the tradition in which it was written (that tradition cannot be recovered), yet it is possible by way of the tradition of interpretation/translation which has itself developed around the text/idiom (oral) from where it has, in its own right, been written. By means of this argument the intention is to demonstrate the intrinsic relationships between interpretation and translation in terms of the cultural and social considerations surrounding and configuring the context within which are found the writings of H.G. Gadamer.

**Key Words:** Interpretation, translation, tradition, comprehension, hermeneutics.

**Introduction:**

Hermeneutics is a term derived from the Greek “hermeneutikos” texts (Gadamer, *Verdad y Método I*, 1993).

which signifies to interpret; as well as, to declare, to announce, to clarify and eventually to translate. It means to make comprehensible to bring to some kind of understanding. It is considered that the term comes from the Greek god Hermes (Egyptian Theuth), the messenger, of which the gods attributed the origins of language and writing and of whom they considered the patron of communication and of human understanding. The term originally expressed the comprehension and explanation of some kind of obscure and enigmatic judgment of the gods or a sentence of an oracle which necessitated a correct interpretation (Plato, 1975, p. 68).

*To be behind the sign, is it not in the first term to be in a condition to assist (at) your word, lend it your help, according to the expression in the Phaedrus debating against Theuth (or Hermes)...? Only the living word, in its domain and its majesty, can lend help, only she is expression and no subservient sign. (Derrida, *Violencia y Metafísica*, 1989, P. 24, trans. by author)*

Gadamer’s thoughts began and remain connected with ancient Greek thought, especially with that of Plato and Aristoteles. In this respect, Gadamer’s early commitment with Plato, which rested significantly as much on his doctoral dissertation, as well as, his professorial habilitation, were very important in defining the character and direction of his philosophical thought. He had studied the very structure of the Platonic dialogs as the key to understanding Plato’s philosophy. The only way to understand Plato, according to Gadamer, was by working through the Platonic texts in such a way that one not only enters into the dialogs and dialectics expounded upon in those texts, but one also repeats (reproduces) that dialogical movement in the intent to understand them as they are. Moreover, the structure of the platonic questioning also provides a model for an understanding of the matter that is open to inquiry by way of questioning oneself with that matter at hand. Gadamer, in this respect, discovered the elaboration of the dialogical concept for the comprehension of platonic

*I am conscious – above all confronting the French continuators – that my own intents to “translate” Heidegger gives away my limits and shows especially up to what point I myself am engrained in the romantic tradition of the sciences of the spirit and of the humanist legacy. But precisely due to the “historicist” tradition in which I am immersed I adopted a critical attitude. (Gadamer, *Verdad y Método II*, 1984, 2004, p. 322, trans. by author).*

The dialog is the essential point of departure for the development of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Philosophy is in essence, hermeneutic. “In this sense the universal pretention of hermeneutics is beyond all doubt (Verdad y Método II, p.319).” Gadamer’s emphasis on the universality of hermeneutics was one of the explicit points in the question of the debate between Gadamer and Habermas, and in a certain sense, also between Gadamer and Derrida. Likewise, Gadamer was capable of developing an alternative to the subjectivism which also connected with the ideas of the dialog and practical wisdom ([ph] *frónesis*) taken from Plato and Aristotle, and even more so, from the situated manner of the hermeneutics of the early Heidegger (Dutt, *En conversación con Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 1998).

*..., and we have learned from Heidegger’s radical critique of the concept of consciousness to see the conceptual prejudices that proceeds from the logos of Greek philosophy and which the modern turn has given priority to the concept of the subject. All this provides predominance to a “lingüisticity” of our experience of the world. (Gadamer, *Verdad y Método II*, 1984, 2004, p.327, trans. by author)*

The key to the study of Gadamer’s concept of comprehension is by way of logos, “there is a classic definition proposed by Aristotle in whom man is a being endowed with *logos* (Gadamer, *Verdad y Método I*, 1965, 2004, p.145)”. Logos is

the vehicle that enables one to communicate with others, and when we think and talk “we can only think within language, and this insertion of our thoughts within language is the most profound enigma which language proposes to thought (Gadamer, *Verdad y Método I*, 1965, 2004, p.147)”. Thusly, with the communal (“all communities of life are communities of language, and language only exists in dialog (Dutt, *En conversaciones con Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 1998).”) and with language there is a shared and assured acceptance in the significance and ability to vocalize thought when one is alone or with others. Gadamer developed an ontological reflection of language as a way to communicate the meaning of what others say and write and this ontological freedom constitutes a historicism, a temporality, an authenticity through a hermeneutic analysis.

*Heidegger's criticism unmasked more radically as dogmatic the concept of consciousness in phenomenology and... the concept of "pure perception"... But this signifies definitely that interpretation is not a complementary recourse of knowledge, instead it constitutes the original structure of "being-in-the-world". (Gadamer, *Verdad y Método II*, 2004, p.328, trans. by author)*

For Heidegger and Gadamer understanding the concept of being and ‘what is being’ a human being meant that by way of the analysis of such an important concept we can, and only then, begin to understand how we live and interact in the world thanks to a medium such as language (Gadamer, 1993; Gadamer, 2004). Gadamer suggests that hermeneutics is not a method, but rather, a fluid game of directive principles which support the human search for truth in the hidden forgetfulness of language. The thing is then, not so much the truth about which the author wrote, but rather the realization of the truth contained therein for the reader, how it becomes alive for the interpreter (Gadamer, 1993). The principle thing here is to be able to identify this in the reading of a text, for the interpreter must find an understanding of his/her own expectations about what a word or phrase signifies in the relationship of the parts and to the whole. We must understand the whole in terms of the details and *visa versa* (Ibid.). Language permits the process of information to be specifically ontological for the interpreter, depending on the culture to be shared, assimilated and accommodated. Gadamer proposed that the same historicism and temporality of the interpreter should affect the whole interpretation of all that is spoken and written. The time of the here and now resounds due to the effects of the immediate and only once this has vanished towards the past can the true significance be gleaned and recognized. With the mediation of the past within the present, the most important emphasis is on the assimilation of what is past and tradition, with the inevitable influence of our tradition being over the present. He asserts that it is tradition which facilitates understanding (Gadamer, 1993). In this respect, language is perceived under the light of human existence, toiling in the world, or in daily activities. It is a universal medium though which the process of understanding is made possible.

Therefore, in a certain sense, language is a linking line (language as the connecting string of the ontological turn of hermeneutics (Dutt, *En conversaciones con Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 1998).”), involving all wo/men and their relations with the surrounding reality, which is the basis for understanding.

Language determines our experience in the world and, at the same time, it allows us to enter a different linguistic world. When we listen or read an expression in a different foreign language, we then enter a different linguistic world. Nevertheless, we do not negate our own world, but rather we enrich it with new experiences. According to Gadamer, the oral tradition is that which permits a conversation between two languages, it obligates the translator to transmit the meaning of a message, but this significance should at the same time refer explicitly to the context in which the speaker finds him/herself laboring at that moment. Hence, Gadamer asserts correctly that every translation is an interpretation, due to the fact that, when the translator listens to the words spoken to him/her, s/he imbues them with a specific and unique significance; the meaning is unique because it is closely related to the concrete situation in which the translator finds him/herself (Gadamer, 1993, p.387). “In the literary text the words themselves contain the narrative sense which the reader in a pragmatic attitude attempts to capture. It is not lost by way of a simple transmission.” (Dutt, *En conversaciones con Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 1998, p.86).

Hermeneutics in all its forms and configurations revolves around themes such as language, understanding, meaning, text, interpretation and consequently translation. As such, hermeneutics, as well as, studies in translation, are conceived such as to overcome obstacles in language so it may render a more specific meaning. Just as Gadamer has commented, the task of the translator of recreating a text is different just in one degree from the general task presented by all the texts concerning hermeneutics (Gadamer, 1993). The discussion of these themes begins with a reflection upon language and the relationship with the world; such as translation, a process completely immersed in language, which is closely linked to this relationship and the image wo/man have of the world and how this is expressed in a given language. Gadamer’s opinions dealing with the process of translation are presented within the framework of his philosophy of language and lie closely within it; and emphasizes that the very same process of translation is a linguistic act. The discussion about translation should start from the relationship shared between language wo/man and the world.

Gadamer describes the translation from a foreign language as an extreme case that effectively duplicates the hermeneutic process: the process between the translator and one who accompanies him/her and between another person and the translator (Gadamer, 1993). “Speaking signifies speaking with someone. Language is not something related to isolated subjects (Dutt, *En conversación con Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 1998, p.55)”. This also has to do with the translation of texts. “The written dialog requires, of course, a foundation the same basic condition that directs the oral exchange (Gadamer,

Verdad y Método II, 2004, p.331).” Gadamer states correctly that in any conversation there is an opening up to the other, we consider their opinions and points of view and in a certain manner, we accept and identify with the other person, but only in terms of their message and its content. Also Gadamer points out that thanks to the acknowledgment of the point of view of the other, accepting the reasoning of the other party; the dialog establishes common conclusions; which in turn, if it were the case, would involve a shared interpretation of the world that would make possible a moral and ethical solidarity. “Language is common to us where we relate in a mutual manner and where the individual does not have a pre-established frontier.” (Dutt, En conversación con Hans-Georg Gadamer, 1998, p.55).”; in which, we make certain compromises with the lexical, grammatical, stylistic and cultural sphere of the text which is being translated. The task of the translation is to recreate the text; to be able to do this; one must empathize with the author. Although, this does not necessarily assure the success of the translator, Gadamer writes that language is such that, any single word cannot possess a particular meaning, words do not have a singular and permanent significance, rather they have a fluctuating range of meanings. The translator must confront the fact that each translation, even the best, will not transmit the spirit of the original, but as Gadamer puts it, (1993), it will always make the original idea seem flat. The translation will make the original seem two dimensional; its recreation will be somewhat superficial, which results in the translation having a lack of space, it requires a third dimension that will impart a profundity to the original and a multiplicity of meaning, perhaps a certain architecture of language. The translator must penetrate more profoundly within the meaning of the text, and from there relate the significance him/herself, to the situation in which s/he finds himself, to locate a space for expression, one that is appropriate to the original. Only then will there be a change allowing for a proper comprehension with the reader of the text in question, in this manner, there will be a truthful exposition of the original idea. The translator must fuse his/her own horizon with the text s/he is translating (Gadamer, Verdad y Método II, 2004, p.388).

#### Discussion:

Therefore, any translator, in the end, is an interpreter. The interpretation of a translated text is in effect a specific hermeneutic task endowing meaning to the written sign. It is the translator as interpreter, whom resuscitates the matter of the text towards life. This implies that the ideas and opinions of the translator, that is to say, the so called horizon of the interpreter has also to do with the process of translation. Apparently interpretation and understanding are two aspects of the same process, and we can say that the two mutually intertwine. Nevertheless, the process of interpretation involves the horizon of interpretation, and must remain unusually subjective.

Gadamer notes that in fact, the text should open up to a horizon for its interpretation and comprehension. Writing is not just an archiving of what has been said, but also what

happened outside of the text; it considers its reader and wants to know how s/he understands the text they are reading. The author always seeks an understanding with the reader (Gadamer, Verdad y Método II, 2004, p.332-333).

The translation is a specific hermeneutic experience, and as such it is multidimensional like a hermeneutic conversation. The translation is, in the first place, a linguistic act involving individuals whom, in large part, communicate in two different languages. Thusly, their communication is obstructed. The translation duplicates the hermeneutic process and is situated at a specific distance between the translator and the other party to the conversation. It doesn't matter if the message was emitted by one person, in the case of the oral translation, or if the message was written by way of a text by an actual author. The translator as an interpreter enriches the text with his/her own experiences, ideas and thoughts. It may be highlighted by the fact that his/her interpretation s/he is already creating a specific text for him/herself. Therefore, we can conclude that no text is established once and for all, no text is a 'being-unto-itself', but rather is a point of departure for a multitude of meanings, a starting point for unending hermeneutic conversations composed of questions and answers. “If at this moment we find ourselves oriented towards the linguistic character of all understanding, we should return to express it from another aspect that which has been shown by way of the dialect of question and response.” (Gadamer, Verdad y Método I, 1993, P. 475).

#### Conclusion:

For Gadamer, tradition and history are never established or correctly interpreted, but rather are understood by the constant and changing horizon of the interpreter (Verdad y Método II, 2004). The profound concept of historicism and comprehension sustains that we are thrust upon a world that has a historical context, which is best understood while the *Dasein* matures with time (Ibíd., 2004). Our essence is already immersed in this ancient world which surrounds us and which is not necessarily of our own making. We are born with a past while we begin also to understand that we exist and have the ability to think and contemplate the world just as it is. “The life of language consists of the continued and uninterrupted game that began when we learned to speak. New verbal usages are produced, and ancient words perish beyond our personal intentions and will (Verdad y Método II, 2004, p.130)”. Therefore, we study history within the measure that we are (products) historical (Ibíd., 2004). This reduces the risk of being self-absorbed in ourselves and to forget history while at the same time remaining innocent to (re)present the past in the present and the future (Ibíd., 2004). “The word of God that invites us to the conversation and promises a better understanding of ourselves cannot be conceived as a mere object that is there. We do not comprehend by ourselves. It is always a past that has us say: I have understood (Gadamer, Verdad y Método II, 2004, p. 331)”.

The past is all too important and weighty a factor; at the beginning of this text, as well as, at the beginning of the transcendent platonic debate found in Phaedrus (Φαῖδρος, 370

BC) rests the origin of it all. The true knowledge of things in heaven and earth is based upon enthusiasm or love of the ideas going before us and ever present to us in this world and in another; and the true order of speech or writing proceeds accordingly:

*Thamus replied: O most ingenious Theuth, the parent or inventor of an art is always the best judge of the utility or inutility of his own inventions to the users of them. And in this instance, you who are the father of letters, from a paternal love of your own children have been led to attribute to them a quality which they cannot have; for this discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves. The specific which you have discovered is an aid not to memory, but to reminiscence, and you give your disciples not truth, but only the semblance of truth; they will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality. (Plato, [file:///F:/The Dialogues of Plato v0.1.pdf](file:///F:/The_Dialogues_of_Plato_v0.1.pdf), p.1173)*

If we permit ourselves to cite the above fragment extensively it is because in good measure it itself is a worthy example of what is recommended. Socrates makes of truth, justice, beauty, and good the only criteria that should be considered at the moment of organizing a text. Of course, writing should also pass through the filter of technique and clarity; from a platonic point of view it would suffice that our spirit be honest so that the text in question could acquire supplementary qualities, but above all the truth.

Is this too much of an ideal posture? Without doubt, especially in an age like ours which; is so submerged in lies and lack of reflection. In any case, it is an attitude when confronting the blank page which is worthy of cultivating, sustaining and defending.

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