

# I. Logic and Ontology

## Linguistic Relativism: A Gadamerian Understanding

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**Abstract:** This paper tackles the problem of linguistic relativism as it is entailed in the hermeneutic philosophy of Gadamer. More precisely, it asks how Gadamer comes to terms with the problem of linguistic relativism given the fact that reason for him is not absolute but depends on a given situation and context. The paper draws the conclusion that the phenomenological understanding of the nature and role of language in human understanding is what enables Gadamer to respond in a unique manner to the challenge of relativism and in doing so he offers us some crucial insight to the role of language in understanding and interpretation.

**Keywords:** Gadamer; Relativism; Hermeneutics; Language; World; Husserl

You are surely from some foreign land.

Though the language you speak seems to be ours,

not a single word of yours make sense to us.

Ramakanta Rath ( *Remember Us*)<sup>1</sup>

The question of relativism has remained one of the most vexing problems throughout the philosophical literature on language. The German philosopher Gadamer insists that

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<sup>1</sup> Rath, 2008: 37.

reason is subject to human prejudices as long as our being is situated in tradition and history. Hence reason has no exclusive, independent and absolute ground of its own but is rather dependent on situations and circumstances. To quote Gadamer,

Is not, rather, all human existence, even the freest, limited and qualified in various ways? If this is true, the idea of absolute reason is not a possibility for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms--i.e., it is not its own master but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates.<sup>2</sup>

This finite and epistemically circumscribed historical nature of reason by implication parallels the way Gadamer conceives of the role of language in understanding the world: No language can possibly comprehend a world- in-itself to the fullest.<sup>3</sup> In other words, "... whatever language we use, we never succeed in seeing anything but an ever more extended aspect, a "view" of the world".<sup>4</sup>

Holding such views as Gadamer does at once beg the question: is our understanding of the world relative to our "language games", to use a phrase from Wittgenstein. Are language games monadically sealed from each other? Are they incommensurable? There are two problems involved here: one is about the incommensurability of language games, and the other is about the problem of relativism as it ensues from a failure of understanding the world-in-itself on the part of the subject.

### **Gadamer's Understanding of the role of Language**

From a Gadamerian perspective our being conditioned by a particular linguistic belief system is not a barrier that prevents intercourse with alien linguistic communities. As Gadamer constantly emphasizes, instead of being a barrier our linguistic horizon in fact opens us and makes it possible for us to understand other communities in the first place. Hence the question of complete unfamiliarity with other linguistic communities is out of place. However strange and unusual another linguistic community might be for us, we believe their members' behavior and beliefs make sense to them in the context of their culture. So here is a commonality that every linguistic community presupposes if it has

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<sup>2</sup> Gadamer, 2005:277.

<sup>3</sup> That Gadamer takes language to be one of the most primordial modes, if not the only mode, in which reason manifests is reiterated many times in *Truth and Method*. One quote "language is the language of reason itself" is typical of those reiterations. Gadamer, 2005:402.

<sup>4</sup> Gadamer, 2005:444.

to make sense of the alien as the alien. “[T]he other world we encounter is not only foreign but is also related to us. It has not only its own truth *in itself* but also its own truth *for us*.”<sup>5</sup> (Emphasis in original)

Furthermore, Gadamer argues that our language potentially possesses other forms of linguistic world because of the fact that “world” is not something objectifiable; it is a totality which is constantly at play without ever getting objectified. We stand within this realm of this constant negotiation between the strangeness of the other language and the familiarity of our own; between the “one” and the “other.” What at first may appear as a totally other linguistic community for us is actually the extension and variation of the “strangeness of the other” internal to our own community. In short, strangeness and familiarity are dialectically at play in any linguistic comprehension of the world.

At the mundane level our first comprehension of language is not just a mere stepping into or following the convention and norms of language games given in social practices. This stepping into the first language is simultaneously an understanding of what it means to be a linguistic being i.e., to transcend<sup>6</sup> the boundaries of language. As a result the learning of any new language hence forward is a kind of translation of it into the native language that we are given with in the first place. In this understanding language is not a mere tool or game we use to understand other language but in itself it integrates and assimilates plurality of language games. Gadamer uses the metaphor of a traveller to illustrate the point made here.

The fact that our experience of the world is bound to language does not imply an exclusiveness of perspectives. If by entering foreign language worlds, we overcome the prejudices and limitations of our previous experience of the world, this does not mean that we leave and negate our own world. Like travellers we return home with new experiences. Even if we emigrate and never return, we still can never wholly forget.<sup>7</sup>

In fact any understanding and its concomitant interpretation is always open to further revision and change. As a result of this constant reconstruction of our hermeneutic

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<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, 2005:439.

<sup>6</sup> This transcendence is well explained by Habermas according to whom “[T]he first grammar we learn to master already puts us in a position to step out of it and to interpret what is foreign, to make comprehensible what initially is incomprehensible, to assimilate in our own words what at first escapes them. The relativism of linguistic world views and the monadology of language games are equally illusory.” See, Habermas, 1988: 243-44.

<sup>7</sup> Gadamer, 2005: 445.

horizon Gadamer is tempted to deny to any singular interpretive act its claim to superior knowledge: Criticizing any appeal to criterion that textual interpretation needs to confirm to in order to be deemed valid and superior Gadamer provocatively claims that

Understanding is not, in fact, understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is not enough to say that we understand in a *different way, if we understand at all.* (Emphasis in original)

Once we concede the truth of the nature and role of language as illustrated above in the unique Gadamerian way we could clearly see the futility of the purely reflective argument which, rooted in a propositional-logical framework, sees historicity of language as a concept self-refuting. The question often raised is this: isn't one's awareness of being conditioned by historicity a historical insight itself? For Gadamer such a question is a nonstarter and betrays abstraction of what he, following Hegel, calls the speculative character of historicity. For, it seeks to force the movement of dialectic inherent to history to be subsumed under a propositional framework that needs to be secured from self-contradiction. Here is Gadamer's emphatic rejection of such vapid and what he pejoratively calls the reflective argument.

The consciousness of being conditioned does not supersede our conditionedness. It is one of the prejudices of reflective philosophy that it understands matters that are not at all on the same logical level as standing in propositional relationships. Thus the reflective argument is out of place here for we are not dealing with relationship between judgments which has to be kept free from contradictions but with life relationship. Our verbal experience of the world has the capacity to embrace the most varied relationships of life.<sup>8</sup>

Gadamer describes an analogous situation in which despite the scientific inconsistency of idea of "sun setting" (from a scientific point of view the sun never sets), yet that event has its meaning for us. The scientific truth cannot supersede the truth of what really appears to us in our mundane life. We know by science that the sun never sets but that does not prevent us from seeing the truth of the experience. A particular scientific

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<sup>8</sup> Gadamer, 2005: 445.

orientation cannot capture the rich and complex symbolic world which has its own truth for us.

[W]hat really opens up the whole of our world orientation is language and in this whole of language, appearances retain their legitimacy just as much as does science.

... [W]e finite beings always come from afar and stretch into the distance. In language the reality beyond every individual consciousness becomes visible".<sup>9</sup>

One can say that Gadamer almost parades an array of philosophers to circumvent the problem of relativism. In this his eclecticism comes to fore. In order to find parallel in his holistic conception of language and that of Humboldt, he quotes approvingly the latter, for whom language is

[R]eally situated in relation to an infinite and truly boundless sphere, the epitome of everything that can be thought. Thus it must make an infinite use of finite means and is able to do so through the identity of the faculty that generates thought and language.<sup>10</sup>

Such a conception further converges with Gadamer's appropriation of Husserl's idea of object perception<sup>11</sup> – an idea that, it might be said, proves to be Gadamer's most fitting reply to the problem of relativism.

Following Husserl, Gadamer likens the idea of the plural and unitary nature of language with Husserl's idea of perceptual shading in which, too, we find the retention of a sense of the unitary perceptual object. All linguistic appropriations of world retain in them a unitary object i.e., the world-in-itself. So no single language game can possibly exhaust the totality of the world-in-itself. In other words, we can say every language game while it intends the world also co-intends other language games. Stated otherwise each language game is potentially present in every other. There is no world-in-itself that is beyond the grasp of language.

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<sup>9</sup> Gadamer, 2005: 446.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 438.

<sup>11</sup> For Husserl, in perception of an object the thing- in- itself is always projected through myriad profiles without ever getting perceptually exhausted by any single profile. When I see the object from the side it is a side that I perceive with respect to a sense of the total object. The object presents itself in several profiles that are co-perceived by others along with me. In other words, the object comes in to being as apperceived in all the profiles. See Gallagher, 2008: 172.

In the same way as with perception we can speak of the “linguistic shadings” that the world undergoes in different language-worlds. But there remains a characteristic difference: every “shading” of the object of perception is exclusively distinct from every other, and each helps co-constitute the “thing in itself” as the continuum of these nuances – whereas in the case of shading of verbal world views, each one potentially contains every other within it – i.e., each world view can be extended to every other. It can understand and comprehend, from within itself, the “view” of the world presented in another language.<sup>12</sup>

In a cryptic and beautiful way Gadamer puts the insight of the above analysis thus: “The world is the common ground trodden by none and recognized by all, uniting all who talk to one another.”<sup>13</sup>

Little surprise that Gadamer takes our verbal experience to be a kind of absolute; an unimpugnable part of our being that encompasses everything that is thinkable without at the same time being exhausted by any particular thought (linguistic discourse). It is not simply possible on our part to get behind this pre-thematic opaque background to survey all our beliefs from an ahistoric or pure objective point of view. That is to say there is no such God’s eye view or privileged access that we have on our language such as to get transparent about all its intricacies, obscurities and non-articulateness. Thus Gadamer’s conception of such an absolute has been described as “transitory apriori conditions”<sup>14</sup> as it makes possible the manifestation of history and language. Gadamer gives a crisp summary of his position thus.

Verbal experience of the world is “absolute”. It transcends all the relative ways being is posited because it embraces all being-in-itself, in whatever relationship (relativities) it appears. Our verbal experience of the word is prior to everything that is recognized and addressed as existing. *That language and world are related in a fundamental way does not mean, then, that world becomes the object of language.* Rather, the object of knowledge and statements is always already enclosed within the world horizon of

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<sup>12</sup> Gadamer, 2005: 445.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 443.

<sup>14</sup> This is Habermas’ phrase; quoted from Wachterhauser, 2002: 57. A similar kind of oxymoronic phrase (Heideggerian Platonist) has been used by Lammi to characterize Gadamer’s philosophy. See Lammi, 1991: 487.

language. That human experience of the world is verbal does not imply that world-in-itself is being objectified.<sup>15</sup> ( Emphasis in Original)

## **Conclusion**

In this paper I have tried to show how Gadamer understands the problem of linguistic relativism as it ensues as a consequence of the nature and role of language, reason, historicity that he conceives of in regard to his hermeneutic philosophy. He mainly sees language as coeval with the world. Both language and world co-constitute the subject. To be a subject means to be given a world in the phenomenological sense that sets forth the context for one to understand the world at the empirical level. Seen thus, world and language do not hold us captive within a particular linguistic community so that all language would appear relative having no absolute common anchorage. On the contrary, the world as an absolute partakes in every language without getting exhausted by any particular language.

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<sup>15</sup> Gadamer, 2005: 446-47.

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