

Intercultural Dialogues at the Heart of Hermeneutics

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Received: 12-Feb-25

Accepted: 9-Mar-25

Published: 19-Mar-25

Abstract

The field of hermeneutics transcends dealing with religious texts or human actions. Indeed, it rather became interrelated with cultures. This paper tries to evoke public sympathy about how the multifaceted aspects of globalisation have shaped the world interconnectedness. The latter created no boundaries between nations, communities, and their cultures, which is why developing a sense of interculturality is assumed to solve cultural conflicts. Doing so necessitates raising awareness and respect of both own and others' cultures in addition to "others' otherness."¹ Such a process is at the heart of hermeneutics, constituting intercultural dialogues with and between the self and the other. Indeed, it studies interculturally-driven human actions in intercultural 'milieu.'

Keywords: *culture, hermeneutics, intercultural, otherness, self.*

1. Introduction

In the wake of our volatile world, the proliferation of globalisation unfolds every life aspect and all human activities due to knowledge explosion and the swift spread of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) among many other facets. Ergo, living in such a ‘milieu’ is penetrated by dealing with the diversity of thoughts, beliefs, traditions, languages... when in contact with culturally-distinct others.

Human beings are by nature communicative. Indeed, this necessitates using languages to execute several functions. Language has long been receiving many researchers’ interests who agreed and/or disagreed on the degree to which its form, functions, meanings, and skills are salient. Advances in language theories brought about developments in language competences -among which Intercultural Competences are of paramount importance- that occupy the jewel in the crown in recent studies.

In intracultural communications, humans bring their commonalities and shared understandings to the ground, which eases their communicative exchanges. However, in intercultural communications where interlocutors are from different languages, cultures, and pragmatic concepts, either locally or globally, the latter elements may collide with those of another culture because of the differences attributed to the conventions, commonalities, and shared knowledge that govern the speech community.

These kinds of exchanges are among the concerns of hermeneutics where it studies interculturally-driven human actions in intercultural settings.

2. Historical Crossroads of Hermeneutics

Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) is an essential resource in understanding the complex trajectories that hermeneutics followed and the in-depth changes that it underwent throughout its history. He posits that it started limited and restricted, and ended as intertwined with humans' experiences.

2.1 Infancy as an Art

The fields of theology, classical philology, and jurisprudence witnessed hermeneutics as an art which is specialised in understanding meanings. First, theologians deployed hermeneutics as a method in order to understand the meaning of, and to decipher, displaced scriptures. Second, philologists adopted hermeneutics as an approach to discern the meanings of modern idioms which are embodied with classical texts. Third, in the postclassical era, jurists attempted hermeneutical analyses of classical law books to understand meanings.

2.2 The Modern Age

In the Modern Age, Renaissance humanism and Protestant theology were applied to the aforementioned endeavours. Proponents of these fields advocated seeking a hermeneutical approach to understanding a more purely original meaning of the texts. Indeed, they were concerned with

purifying hermeneutical understandings from any sort of corruptions and deformations.

2.3 The Romantic Era

According to Gadamer (1989), Friedrich Schleiermacher's work is particular to this period, which focused on a major innovation of that time. He further applied hermeneutics to literary discourses and to 'psychologizing' the methodology. Interpreting such genres is believed to be correlated with interpreting the 'author's mind' (*mens auctoris*) or his/her inspiration that led to a specific work.

2.4 The Historical School

In the 19th century, hermeneutics was academically fastened to the 'Historical School.' Its major advocate is Wilhelm Dilthey. He claimed that hermeneutically approaching human history is indispensable in the sense that he encouraged a "scholarly disciplined effort" in order to interpret and to understand historical events through analysing historical figures' inner intentions.

In the same vein, Gadamer (1989) said that Dilthey was the first to expand romantic hermeneutics into a historical method underpinning accepted knowledge (epistemology) in human sciences. Indeed, historical sources are considered texts for Dilthey, and historical reality is also perceived as text that requires understanding. Therefore, hermeneutics' core interest became the rooted in the "study of history" (pp. 198-199)

Despite the achievements established by Dilthey and the Historical School, they were accused by other premises that

confined the scope of ‘historical hermeneutics.’ These obstacles were epistemologically-fronted in the sense that they opposed the fact that historical studies are transposed into a science and are submitted to the norms of natural sciences. Indeed, in perceiving history scientifically, historians tend to be objective, exhibit a neutral viewpoint, and free themselves from any kind of belonging to the flow of history.

This ‘epistemological pull of Cartesianism’ proved patent, and stigmatised Dilthey’s attempts to set a scientism-based hermeneutics and to embody his thoughts of “historicity of historical experience itself” (Gadamer, 1989, p. 241) into hermeneutics. Besides, in criticising this approach, Gadamer denotes the impossibility to consider historical experiences as a ‘procedure’ or as having the ‘anonymity of a method’ (Gadamer, 1989, p. 241).

2.5 Toward Ontology

According to Gadamer (1989), the shift from epistemology to ontology is what clearly shaped the significance of hermeneutics. Martin Heidegger is the main figure in this period, for he is the one who instigated change in the way hermeneutic understanding is perceived; it became a “mode of human existence” rather than a “methodology tailor” (p. 254).

In the same vein, Gadamer (1989) states that Heidegger rejected both the goals of historical research, under the aegis of a “hermeneutics of facticity” and the fact-essence dichotomy advocated by Husserl’s eidetic phenomenology. As opposed to this view, the ontological assumption underpinning

phenomenological inquiry is represented by “facticity”, justifying essential universality

For Heidegger, hermeneutical understanding is not specialised in discerning human disciplines, but it is rather a constructive lineament of all humans living in both a temporal movement and the world at large (Gadamer, 1989).

According to Gadamer (1989), the Heideggerian ontology began from the dilemmas raised by the Historical School, but it overcame them. Therefore, understanding under this premise is no longer pondered over as methodologically-driven, for it rather focuses on the originality stemming from human’s life per se. This view evinces projection as a main characteristic of understanding, and it demonstrates a conception of understanding stipulating a transcendentalist movement.

In fact, using this approach necessitates background knowledge and critical thinking, and requires the reader to grapple the text as ‘pre-understanding’ (Vorurteil) or a ‘projected meaning’ (Vorentwurf) (Gadamer, 1989, p. 267) rather than a ‘blank slate’ (tabula rasa) that causes passivity. Gadamer explains this process by showing that anyone’s attempt to comprehend a text entails projections of meaning that derives from the initial meaning grasped in the first contact with the text, which only takes place because of readers’ particular expectations.

Gadamer adds that despite bringing fore-meanings and pre-understandings, the text may still yield confrontations with the reader’s projections. Hence, the latter may be revised due

to text resistance, and revisiting initial assumptions may seem painful. Gadamer advocates that abandoning initial understandings is not imperative; rather openness toward what is raised in the text, and toward the possibility that one's own understandings are false, should be developed. In this sense, Gadamer (1989) posits that trying to understand a text requires readers to be open and ready to what the text communicates, which is how hermeneutically trained readers should receive texts' differences.

2.6 Hermeneutical Dialogue

The aforementioned historical crossroads and the development of hermeneutics bring into light one of its critical considerations related to understanding as dialogical and circular (Heidegger & Gadamer, 1974). Particularly, Gadamer (1989) insists on the close co-relational relationship between dialog and hermeneutical understanding. In his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (1989) posits that texts pose questions of interpretation

However, every question needs an answer which automatically generates a dialogue. For Gadamer, a dialogue requires the 'structure of question and response,' attentiveness among participants, turn-taking principles, listening, curiosity, openness, and many other prerequisites. Thus, dialoguing is not a matter of overpowering one's viewpoints; it is rather a shared understanding and a mutual learning of one's and others' knowledge, and is a sense of empathy-based relationships.

This characteristic allowed Gadamer (1989) to establish a firm relationship between dialogue and hermeneutics. He proclaims that a dialogue involves a question/answer process, a give and take relationship, negotiating meanings, and reaching consensus among writers and readers. Thus, hermeneutics is related to engaging in dialogue with a text, involving writers', texts', and readers' conceptions of meaning.

Dialoguing with a text is likened to dialoguing with a human being. It is, indeed, as much difficult in the former process as appealing in the second since it is penetrated with many pitfalls and deviations.

Gadamer's conceptions proved void of any conflicts or critiques to the extent that his *Truth and Method* blended different views that ease dialogical interpretations and understandings. The notion of "fusion of horizons" is a well-constructed illustration especially when he claimed understanding to be "the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves" (1989, p. 306). This refers to openness to horizons to the extent that hermeneutical understanding is never fully accomplished due to the tension between reader and the self, the text, and the other. Gadamer (1989) posits that approaching texts hermeneutically refers to a pre-existing link that persons seeking understanding should have before embarking upon this process. They should be connected to what the texts communicate.

3. Hermeneutics and Intercultural Dialogue

In the throes of globalisation, humans are getting closer to each other to the extent that hermeneutical understanding is no longer bound by boundaries. It rather transcends local intracultural and intercultural contexts to cover a cross-cultural and transnational diversity. Indeed, communicators are not confined to interpreting meanings related to their speech communities only, but are concerned with a hermeneutical understanding and a shared meaning building with local and global culturally-distinct others. Doing so necessitates referring to one's pre-understandings, and then putting them into practice, and finally, subjecting them to revisions on the basis of the interactive and dialogical communicative exchanges.

Gadamer (1989) had always been aware of these issues in his works especially in his *Legacy of Europe*. He ponders over Europe as *the* model of "unity in diversity" (p. 28), which is one of the characteristics of hermeneutical dialogues. In fact, this denotes each communicator's willingness to decipher others' meanings while being distinctly different. His description of Europe reveals not only the hermeneutical universal significance, but also the multilingual and multicultural combination contributive to its formation, and its co-existence with otherness in a relatively small space. Gadamer (1989) states that cohabiting with others throughout one's life is similar to peaceful co-existence between communities, nations, and states.

The hermeneutical dialogue applies to intercultural encounters as well in order not to establish a consensus on what is being communicated, but in order to bolster a learning process of different tolerating competencies toward differences. Seeking such an aim requires neither discarding one's local cultural traits nor congealing them; however, their role is apparent in the hermeneutical circle in bringing to view fore-meanings or pre-judgments.

Symmetrically, in cross-national intercultural encounters, communicators are alleged neither to erase themselves nor to gain control over the other. Instead, hermeneutical understanding urges to achieve a mutual tolerance toward differences, or what Heidegger labels 'letting-be'. Gadamer (1989) posits that hermeneutical understanding stipulates neither mastery nor control over the other. Other's otherness is rather experienced in contrast to one's own prejudgments. However, individuals should strive to be in the other's shoes and to share that otherness. Indeed, resources of power may distort human's future of co-joint otherness.

Philosophically put, if we do as Gadamer (1989) says, our learning experiences will be subjected to humanism and to hermeneutical transformations because otherness may be conceived as the 'other of ourselves', which helps individuals be part of one another. This cultural change should be urgently coped with because of the growth of global economy and the widespread of communication networks. Diversity can be considered a dilemma, but communities are searching for a

reconciling life mode through which they resign their own culture with the west.

Gadamer (as cited in Pantham, 1992) conducted an interview with an Indian political thinker from which he concluded that hermeneutical understanding calls for human solidarity, not as globally unifying them, but as unity in diversity. The latter is a European motto that should engulf the entire world. Hermeneutical understanding involves appreciation and tolerance of differences and pluralities ubiquitous among cultures.

Pachauu (2015) highlights different approaches to intercultural hermeneutics as conceived by different scholars from different perspectives. First, interpretations and meanings are viewed as social-cultural encounters where communicators co-construct and decipher meanings based on the cultural, societal group they belong to. Second, philosophers like Habermas (1970, 1981), Ricoeur (1974, 1981), Gadamer (1989), and Tracy (1987) view intercultural hermeneutics from a comparative philosophy perspective. They are the pioneers in engaging with intentional comparisons of ideas from culturally-distinct backgrounds. Indeed, they transcend mere mono-interpretations and advocate the plurality in understandings that are rooted in intercultural dialogues between diverse schools of thought. Last but not least, theologians and missiologists draw on Habermas's and Gadamer's works to establish theological and missiological understanding of intercultural hermeneutics. Schreiter (1997),

Scheuerer (2001), and Ariarajah (2005) are influential in studying inter-faith and inter-religious communications.

4 CONCLUSION

Familiarising the public with the above discussed lineaments of the intercultural dialogue and emphasising the principles of hermeneutical understanding have become imperative. They are necessary in achieving intercultural pragmatic competence which is the all-inclusive competence since it intertwines cognitive, linguistic, social, cultural, cross-cultural, intercultural, pragmatic, and inter-pragmatic aspects specific to different languages (native and second/foreign).

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