Intercultural Hermeneutics in Metacultural Perspective

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Abstract: Philosophical hermeneutics is becoming a methodological basis for research in cross-cultural communications defining conditions for the possibility of comprehensive intercultural understanding. The article provides for a short analysis of stages in the becoming of hermeneutics as a foundation for studying intercultural processes and shows that the primary goal of a hermeneutical approach involves interpreting the creative nature of intercultural borrowings as well as the meta-cultural role of a human and their gift of creation in this process. Meta-cultural perspective of using a hermeneutic approach provides for new grounds in understanding the meaning of the gift as a regulative principle of any cultural community.

Key words: Intercultural hermeneutics % Philosophical hermeneutics % Theory and methodology of interpretation % Intersubjectivity % Metaculture % Human creative work % Culture of the gift.

INTRODUCTION

The Formation of Problematic of Intercultural Hermeneutics: The whole area of cross-cultural relations, interactions and communications (traditionally referred to as *Intercultural Studies- IS*) is currently beginning to rely on hermeneutics exactly to the extent to which the question about the conditions for the possibility of comprehensive cross-cultural communication is getting more critical. Therefore, the primary question of intercultural communication theory is to define how people of different cultures find a common language, come to an understanding and reach a consensus. Hermeneutics is becoming this ground of *IS* not only and not so much in its "technical status" of a "theory and methodology of interpretation" but also as a special human philosophy, since *understanding* is a fundamental way of human existence. In this context communication between different cultures is a very indicative manifestation of the problem that exists in every situation of the human life.

Hermeneutics could have become a natural theoretical and methodological basis of *IS* ever since these research problems were formulated. However, it did not happen due to the difference of research objects. The *IS* have mostly focused on face-to-face communication between people of different cultures, their customs and traditions; hermeneutics has traditionally studied written texts and their transfer between cultures. Despite the similarity between the face-to-face and technical communications the technical and methodological aspects of research were different. *IS* mostly relied on ethnographic (anthropological) methods including those of psychology and sociology; hermeneutics originated from ancient (book) exegetics. The approaches became closer since hermeneutics evolved from a technical discipline of text interpretation (understanding) into a philosophical trend, a special principle of validating the human and cultural existence. M. Heidegger triggered this turn in hermeneutics by interpreting understanding not only as a way of cognition but primarily as a fundamental way of human existence.

Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics was anteceded by the psychological hermeneutics of W. Dilthey who introduced the idea of hermeneutic justification for the "sciences of spirit" (In his unfinished work Critique of historical reason W. Dilthey writes that hermeneutics is a universal method of all humanities) [1]. However, hermeneutics needed one more step towards the technique of interpreting face-to-face communications in order to become a basis for *IS*. This step was made by H.-G. Gadamer, M. Heidegger's disciple and follower, who brought back the philosophical hermeneutics back to the area of cultural studies by interpreting them through the living language. He provided for the following methodological statement: "being that can be understood is language"[2]. Paul Ricoeur who admitted the legitimacy and necessity of applying hermeneutics in this fashion

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still considered it possible to preserve its previous methodological status of theory and methodology of interpretation [3]. This turn of ontological hermeneutics towards the problems of the living culture resulted in the rapprochement of IS and hermeneutics and put hermeneutics as philosophy of an understanding being into the basis of interpreting international communication. Now the question of the way of intercultural understanding can be addressed in the context of hermeneutics based on the cultural way of human existence. This idea is incorporated in all works of this kind, though incorporated inconsistently since the very idea of human existence ontology (human nature) was virtually left aside. The task of the metacultural perspective of intercultural hermeneutics (*IH*) is to reveal the image of a human as a full-scale subject of international communication.

The problems of *IH* have already been included into the academic section in periodical publications. It is completely natural that formation of *IH* problems is primarily connected with discussing a possible transfer of the hermeneutic procedure from text interpretation onto intercultural interactions. The work of F. Dalmayr is devoted to this topic [4]. The author sets the question directly: can the mechanisms of text interpretation be used to explain the mechanisms of communication between people and cultures? Though it is obvious that culture cannot be reduced to written texts and often the impossibility of this methodological extrapolation is explained by the phenomenon of culture, Dalmayr considers this prognosis unjustifiably pessimistic. He agrees that the challenges do exists; however, an experiment can be set up and its outcomes could be of interest. The author's optimism is based on the principal commonality between the text interpretation and a face-to-face dialogue: both are based on so-called "circle of understanding". If we separate the spheres of application for hermeneutics and dialogue, we will see that the dialogue plays the same role in verbal communication as hermeneutics does in the written communication.

Becoming of intercultural hermeneutics mostly results in the involvement of the authors who even "did not suspect" about their relations with hermeneutic problems though in fact they were addressing them. Dalmayr emphasizes the significance of the works by C. Taylor, J. Dewey and M. Merleau-Ponty, both for interpretation of the dialogue between cultures and for real mutual understanding between people of different cultures. The most significant ideas in this area are as follows: C. Taylor's principle of "presumed careful research", J.

Dewey's principle of "active observer" and significance of body practices (as embodiment of the spirit) emphasized in the works of M. Merleau-Ponty.

What is the primary effect of intercultural dialogue and what is the criterion of understanding between cultures (and nationalities)? It is the methodological potential of *IH* that allows going beyond those truisms which maintain the ideology of tolerance (as if tolerance towards each other is the major task of the dialogue between cultures and nationalities). Philosophical hermeneutics is based on phenomenology; the concepts of phenomenology include *experience, life world and life world horizon.* J. de Mul[5] relies on these concepts while setting those two questions. Understanding between *different* cultures cannot and should not result in blending of their life worlds (horizons of experience). Nor should it lead to the absorption of one of them by the other. However, there are always risks of those events happening. Only phenomenology-based hermeneutics can reveal the perspective of "intersecting the horizons of experience" with the senses of one culture retaining their uniqueness while being included into the experience (life world) of the other. (The author uses as an example the interpretation of Chinese hieroglyphics in the context of Western cultural experiences).

Probably the most important thing is that intercultural hermeneutics thematizes the circumstance which has always been implied but never discussed in IS: in communication we deal with the subjectivity of the Other and thus every communication is essentially a symbolically mediated intersubjective relation. Life experience exists only in a subjective perspective (it is produced "from the first person"); a text or a verbal message make sense only since they hide/reveal somebody's subjectivity. (Heidegger's ontological hermeneutics an unsolvable game of the hidden and revealed defines the process of understanding).

According to J. de Mul introspection is the only way for us to access our life experience; this introspection is completely inaccessible for everybody who is not ourselves. Hence, according to N. Schröer, a principal inaccessibility of the subjectivity of the other is one of the major postulates of hermeneutics; however, we make efforts and have possibilities to cognize it [6]. Access to something which the Other has in mind can be obtained only through interpretation of the "external" manifestation of its subjectivity in written and verbal speech, as well as in gestures, deeds, things produced by people, buildings and social institutions. Hermeneutics, as a philosophical science of understanding the *human existence, is the only*

way of studying the ultimate intersubjective basis of any communication. Intercultural character of this communication only emphasizes the principal significance of *symbolic mediation of* an intersubjective relation. Unlike internal cultural communications, intercultural communications problematize the language of communication and define a special status of hermeneutics as a theory and methodology of interpretation.

Here lies the primary methodological "split" of *IH* and different prospects of its further development. The question is how to interpret the proportion of human existence per se and culture. The current state of *IH* still carries the gap between philosophical hermeneutics (in the spirit of Heidegger) and application of hermeneutics in the area of sciences about culture. Heidegger did not discuss the dependence of the human and language existence on culture (though he implied this problem). To the same extent intercultural hermeneutics in its current state does not deal with the question of the human nature.

Metacultural Perspective: Within a cultural and anthropological tradition (which involves psychological anthropology and a section of *Culture and Person*) intercultural hermeneutics maintains the idea of the unity of human *nature* which helps people of different cultures understand each other. We understand what it means to love, be hungry, feel pain, play, or work, etc. regardless of the culture. It is very important to admit here that mutual understanding is based on the commonality of human nature which is perceived in its narrow physical or psychological meaning. This interpretation of a human is quite far from Heidegger's views and the whole phenomenological tradition which defined a human with the ability of "hearing the voice of existence". This metaphorical formula (it belongs to Heidegger) hides one very familiar (and mysterious) circumstance: the essential feature of humans (unlike animals) is in their ability for creation; the state of creative inspiration is not dependent on any cultural form. According to M. Bakhtin, a human as a human is *outside and beyond* any culture.

Let us apply this point of view to the development of genus cultures [7]. If we look at any genus culture in the context of its "content" it will appear as an aggregated contribution of creative geniuses of this culture: writers, artists, scientists, teachers, reformers, etc. This is the way of compiling the content of any culture which realizes its identity and consistently reproduces itself in history. While cognizing this fact we have to emphasize that mutual understanding and dialogue between cultures is eventually a hermeneutic cognition of the subjectivity of the geniuses who create the culture. Without underestimating the significance of a reader in storing the culture we will emphasize the key role which a writer plays in developing the culture. In the context of modern intensification of all communications tribal cultures can preserve themselves (as we say, preserve their identity) exclusively by the competition of *content* development rates. Since cultural isolation is absolutely impossible in the modern world, every cultural commonality has to show its *metacultural potential*, i.e. the potential of its geniuses as the material of hermeneutic interpretation by other cultures. The culture will exist as a living culture only as long as its content is of interest to other cultures. If for any reason other cultures (represented by creative people) lose interest in a culture, its content will be at best forgotten in archives to be stored only out of respect for the principle of cultural diversity.

The first and the primary requirement of the metacultural approach in intercultural hermeneutics is to admit the decisive role of a personality (or subjectivity) of a creator in all aspects of the hermeneutic situation. Unlike internal cultural communications which are mostly of routine nature, intercultural communication (since it is perceived as such, i.e. as meeting the Other) always has an obvious creative character. It calls for a creative interpretation of the message content. It might seem strange that this requirement returns a researcher of intercultural processes to the regulative principle of the gift as an "eternal" basis of culture. Here we will have to apply new grounds in order to comprehend the gift as a primary principle of cultural existence. These grounds were discussed by M. Moss [8] and B. Malinovsky[9]. We can surely say that originally genus cultures were based on the gift. However, the full meaning of the gift as a principle of cultural existence is revealed only today and only in the position of a creator in relation to its genus culture. M. Godelier refers to the principle of the gift as to a principle of *total provision* [10]. An archaic gift can barely be called creative since it was syncretically related to the principle of exchange in its primary form. The phenomenon that Malinovsky and Moss observed in archaic communities was in fact an *gift exchange*, i.e. a constellation of both principles. The condition of modern society (economy based on knowledge, creative economy) shows that the relationship between the gift and exchange are subjected to absolutely different logics [11]. Today the gift is interpreted as something made by a virtuous creator who "transforms the world with its creative spirit" [12].

How is the principle of a creative gift related to intercultural hermeneutics? Not all intercultural processes call for the effort of mutual understanding both at the practical and theoretical level of cognition -using hermeneutic procedures. Intercultural diffusions are well known and frequently described; they have been emerging thanks to travelers, traders, wars, migrations, etc. These facts have formed an anthropological concept of diffusionism. This process has been a non-stop one. What we call a global mass culture today is executed in the logic of simple cultural diffusions at the level of mass media. For example, fashion and TV shows distribute averaged and generally comprehensible cultural patterns all over the world. These averaged patterns do not require the effort of arduous understanding; therefore, only clear expression of the author's creative subjectivity and appeals to the interlocutor's subjectivity calls for a special hermeneutic competency. It is obvious that comprehension of creative works of a different culture requires the most intensive hermeneutic efforts. The efforts of translating a literary text or learning a language of a different culture well enough to be able to read these literary texts serve as a good example of those hermeneutic exertions. (A new trend within *IH*- a Translational Hermeneutics – is very indicative in this context). Though not all forms of intercultural communication call for a hermeneutic exertion, those which do "require" it, determine the conditions of creative co-development of tribal cultures. This area of intercultural communication constitutes the core of the modern culture of the gift – what I call *the condition of metaculture* [13].

The concept of metaculture is concentrated on the fact that a creative outsidedness of the creator's personality is a source of novelty and hence a content development of a genus culture. That was meant by Daniil Andreev who introduced this term ("Rose of the world") and interpreted it as "a vertical of culture". However, besides a personal gift (talent or a genius personality) there is another obligatory condition for this position. In the course of life, a creator has to be "thrown out" of his genus culture under the influence of a different culture. Pushkin, a Russian poet, is a general example of this configuration of conditions: he made a dramatic contribution into the Russian culture after he was "thrown out of its territory" by the mentality, language and literature of France.

"Throwing" a person out of "the territory" of his genus culture does not always result is a metacultural effect. Throughout the history of the mankind and especially in the modern globalizing world a test by different cultural influences brings a person to a "common place" of interacting cultures and not to the position of creative outsidedness. Prevention of this situation calls for a methodical reflection of what is happening on the lines between cultural environments.

The dramatic difference between the modern intercultural influences and previous co-development of genus cultures is that for the first time the mechanisms of "pushing" the person into the intercultural (including an interdisciplinary) space are used quite reflexively (conscientiously) with the expected effect of a "cultural explosion" (a concept introduced by Y.M. Lotman). It is the factor of reflectiveness that transforms intercultural position of a person into a meta-cultural position, or a position of creative outsidedness. Thus, the state of metaculture is defined as an "inclusion" into the state of a genus culture which creates reflexive mechanisms of "massive pushing out" of a person into a creative meta-cultural position. In the past this process was unplanned and inconsistent; today it is directed quite reflexively. The leading role is played by modern educational ideology if education is understood not in its institutional aspects (school or university) but as all communication processes in science, art and in the very system of professional education aimed at forming the creative position of a person.

This whole situation of striving for mass creation in the context of intercultural (interdisciplinary) communications does require hermeneutic basis, i.e. a reflexive understanding of events. The greater the intercultural influence is (presented by modern communication systems) the greater the risk is for a human to lose all semantic references. The greater the demand for understanding is, the greater the risk of total misunderstanding will be. If a person for some reason is unable of taking a creative position in the network of modern communications (information streams) it results in the defragmentation of the personality. Multiculturalism which was actively promoted until recently resulted in multipersonalism, i.e. a personality would split into the fragments of cultural influences.

The task was defined long ago. In the middle of the 20th century I.A. Ilyin said that "a contemporary person is used to creating his life with ideas, willpowers and partly with imagination and set the following task: "It is especially important to understand and explain the essence of the creative life to people. *It is the most important task for the next generations.* The composition of a creative act that forms culture has to be cognized to the very depth and renewed from the very depth in all areas and spiritual vocations"[14].

Therefore, today we expect that hermeneutics in its philosophical understanding will find a solution for the global pressing needs. Understanding and peace between people become practically unfeasible without a reflexive study of the intersubjective grounds of intercultural communication. This is the metacultural perspective of intercultural hermeneutics.

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