Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics and Intercultural Communication

Synopsis

The German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, is perhaps the foremost representative of the hermeneutic tradition. Since the publication of *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)* in 1960, Gadamer’s ideas have appealed to academicians of various stripes. Many communication researchers have adopted Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as a key approach to communication inquiry. His key notions of prejudice, tradition, praxis, dialogue, etc, offer stimulating insights into today’s intercultural communication research and have important implications for intercultural research, education and training.

This thesis consists of seven chapters.

In Chapter One, definitions of hermeneutics by different scholars are discussed, followed by a brief introduction to the development of the hermeneutic tradition and the main theories of some famous philosophers.

Chapter Two is focused on seven basic notions of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, which include understanding, prejudice, tradition, fusion of horizons, effective history, praxis and dialogue.

Chapter Three goes on to give a further explanation of Gadamer’s understanding of language.

Chapter Four explores the achievements and problems existing in intercultural communication research.

Chapter Five is concerned with the application of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics to intercultural communication study, which is the core of this thesis.

Chapter Six discusses the progress that China’s intercultural communication research has made in recent decades and calls upon researchers and educators to pay attention to the consequences of the “aphasia” phenomenon of the Chinese culture.

Chapter Seven suggests some implications that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics may have for intercultural communication education, research, and work training.

key words: Gadamer, philosophical hermeneutics, intercultural communication, language, culture, understanding
Hans-Georg Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics and Intercultural Communication

Catch only what you’ve thrown yourself, all is mere skill and little gain;
but when you’re suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner
with accurate and measured swing
towards you, to your center, in an arch
from the great bridgebuilding of God;
why catching then becomes a power—
not yours, a world’s.

Rainer Maria Rilke
(quoted in Truth and Method, 1976)

Introduction

0.1 Background of the Present Study

In recent decades, economic ties between different countries have become closer than ever before, and tourism and the mass media (especially the flourishing of the internet in the past ten years) have made remote countries no longer mysterious to each other. “The world has grown so small that all depend on each other now. What happens in one place in the world affects other places” (Samovar et al, 2000:F 28). Cultural exchanges between countries of different historical and cultural backgrounds and problems arising from these exchanges have been attracting more and more attention from linguists, philosophers, sociologists and communication researchers worldwide. They have been doing extensive researches on various topics concerning these transnational exchanges. What they have done is generally called intercultural communication study.

Chinese researchers have in the past twenty years made remarkable progress in this field of study, whose writings on relevant topics have caught attention from both educators and policy makers. Revisions of textbooks based on the findings of their researches have received positive feedback. But there is still a problem: though tremendous efforts have been made to describe the “linguistic” and “cultural” causes
of misunderstanding and communication breakdowns, this kind of research is still at
the preliminary stage, as a complete listing of similarities and differences between
two different cultures is an impossible mission and cannot offer a fundamental
solution to failures in communication and understanding. Therefore we need a
different perspective and a new guiding theory for the development of this field of
study. The present thesis argues that by drawing upon philosophical hermeneutics, it
is possible to obtain a new perspective and a better theory guiding researchers in the
field of intercultural communication research.

The German philosopher, Hans-Georg Gadamer is a student of Martin Heidegger’s.
Since Gadamer published his famous work Truth and Method (Wahrheit und
Methode)\(^1\) in 1960, many scholars have adopted Gadamer’s philosophical
hermeneutics in their research, especially in the field of humanities and art. Those
notions such as “fusion of horizons”, “effective history”, “dialogue”, “praxis” etc have
offered us a fresh perspective in cultural studies. Therefore this thesis has chosen
Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as a new approach to intercultural
communication research.

0.2 Organization of this Thesis

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter One is a brief introduction to the
development of hermeneutics. Chapter Two elaborates on seven key notions of
Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. Chapter Three offers a discussion of
Gadamer’s understanding of language. Chapter Four takes a look at the current
situation in intercultural communication research. Chapter Five concentrates on the
application of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics to intercultural communication
research. And Chapter Six is devoted to identifying some problems with China’s
intercultural communication research and finally, Chapter Seven is focused on
implications that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics may offer for intercultural
communication research, education and training.

In Chapter One, definitions of hermeneutics by different scholars are discussed,
followed by a brief introduction to the development of hermeneutics and the main
theories of some famous philosophers (including Friedrich Daniel Ernst
Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer). This
theoretical preparation paves the way for a better understanding of Gadamer’s
philosophical hermeneutics.
Chapter Two is focused on seven basic notions of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics. The key notions include understanding, prejudice, tradition, fusion of horizons, effective history, praxis and dialogue. For Gadamer, understanding can never escape the historicity of tradition. Understanding is a process in which each finite human participates. We enter a particular point in the process and so are affected by what has gone before us, or in other words, we are subject to the influence of tradition. Thus we have certain prejudices because we are part of the process. These prejudices form and make possible our understanding. Yet, as finite humans, we can still develop interpretative distance and therefore filter prejudice. We cannot remove ourselves from the situation to which we belong, but we can move around within that situation and change our horizons. In this process we experience the fusion of horizons. And understanding occurs when two horizons fuse. Through an endless unpredicted process of fusion of horizons, our personal horizon is gradually expanded and deprived of its distorting character. In this way we can arrive at the effects of “effective history” that enable us to get a historical understanding of the event. Indeed we are active participants in a dialogue with the past that will carry on into the future. For Gadamer, participating in a dialogue and constantly questioning and answering will be the only way to find truth. In fact, Gadamer is concerned about the existent condition of humankind and incorporates moral dimension into his study. He claims that hermeneutics should not be an art of interpretation and understanding, but should involve application of the understanding raised in hermeneutic inquiry to the political and social matters of the present as well. These seven notions are closely related to intercultural communication research.

Chapter Three goes on to give a further explanation of Gadamer’s understanding of language. Gadamer views language as being central to all understanding. Language constitutes more than a tool to accomplish one’s purpose; it determines who the person is and what will become of him/her. Through dialogue we communicate, and the language completes the “fusion of horizons” between the rhetor and the audience where both are conjointly transformed into different Beings.

Chapter Four takes a look at the current situation in intercultural communication research. We first briefly define intercultural communication and elaborate on the importance, content, and philosophy of intercultural communication. In today’s world, no country can be exempted from the overwhelming globalization, in the process of which, intercultural communication has become an inevitable part of social life at every level, e.g. economical, political, academic and cultural. So we will not marvel at the accelerating development of intercultural communication research. But we have to admit that the current mainstream intercultural communication research is
problematic. The study of linguistic and cultural differences, or its variant forms, has become the dominant genre of this field. Social factors, which are implicit yet influential in communication process are often neglected by researchers, especially when they are faced with temptations to reduce communication breakdown to external causes in order to produce a powerful explanation and to isolate those social factors and power struggle outside the communication sphere. More alarmingly, western stereotypes, which dominate the western research field, turn out to be a typical example of lack of respect for moral principles in communication studies, which is also the main concern of Gadamer.

Chapter Five is concerned with the application of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics to intercultural communication study, which is the core of this thesis. We try to establish a relation between them through an analysis of the “macro context” of intercultural communication. The existence of power, pre-existing prejudice and tradition and their impact on communication are examined, followed by a discussion of “symbolic power” and the consequences of its imbalance. Power relation is an important factor that deserves our attention in humanities and social sciences. Power is the origin of all that is liberating and productive as well as repressive and destructive in social life. And the existence of pre-existing prejudice and tradition should be taken into consideration in communication research. An effective way is to enhance the dialogue awareness, which means that partners (researchers and participants) are bound to one another in the new community but not adapt themselves to one another. In this way, we can be open to all possibilities and experiences, and have a more truthful picture of the event being studied. Finally this chapter discusses Gadamer’s “Third Culture” building theory, which encourages researchers to open dialogue with participants to co-create a third culture, a mutual reality in order to have more collaboration and participation.

Chapter Six discusses the achievements of and problems with China’s intercultural communication research. Representative researchers, their works and relevant improvements and the main characteristics of intercultural communication research are listed. The “aphasia” phenomenon of Chinese culture has begun to rise as a crisis in the past 10 or 20 years. We try to figure out the causes of such a phenomenon and the devastating consequences it may have. The proposition is that “communication should be bilateral, not unilateral.”

Chapter Seven suggests some implications that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics may have for intercultural communication education, research, and work training. Power relations and moral considerations should be taken into account
in educational policymaking, and some strategies are proposed for the “aphasia” phenomenon. In research, we should be alert to the western stereotype and the lack of awareness of power relations. We should try to incorporate moral dimension in our research and impose on it an emancipatory task. In the multicultural workplace, successful communication has social and economic consequences. The most feasible way to cross this obstacle is to train people in a specially designed programme in which both the employers and employees participate. At the same time we have to bear in mind that it would be unlikely to find any two cultures or members of any cultural group differ from each other on all dimensions. They in fact contribute to the healthy development of global cultural ecology. Differences sometimes make a difference.
Chapter One
What Is Hermeneutics?

1.1 What Is Hermeneutics?

Before we get down to any theoretical analysis, the first and most important thing to be done is to define ‘hermeneutics’, about which there exist loads of writings and contentions. The word “hermeneutics” itself is derived from the Greek word *Hermes* (the messenger of the gods), which means to “interpret”. Hermes carried messages from Zeus to everybody else, especially from the divine realm down to the human. “He not only bridged physical distances and the ontological gap between divine and human beings, but also bridged the difference between the visible and the invisible, and between dreams and waking, between the unconscious and the conscious” (Palmer, 1999). According to Greek mythology, it was Hermes who invented language and writing for the purpose of making communication possible between the gods and human beings. Thus, hermeneutics suggests a process of making intelligible what was once foreign and impenetrable.

Aristotle’s treatise *Peri hermeneias* defined hermeneutics narrowly in terms of determining the truth and falsity of assertions. In ancient Greek, hermeneutics means interpretation in several senses: (i) oral interpretations of classical texts; (ii) translation from one language into another; (iii) the exegesis of texts (which is to bring out the hidden meaning); (iv) explication of legal texts and precedents, and literary and religious texts.

In Palmer’s words, “hermeneutics is both an endlessly suggestive liminal discipline taking its character from Hermes and a discipline of the rules for interpreting various kinds of texts stretching back to antiquity” (1999).

1.2 Development of Hermeneutics

Throughout history, the goal of hermeneutics has been to find some sort of objective method for interpreting authoritative texts. Hermeneutics began as the interpretation of Biblical texts. Usage has restricted the meaning of hermeneutics to the science of biblical exegesis, that is, to the collection of rules that govern the right interpretation of the Holy Scriptures. In the 18th century, it “moved into a secular philosophy with
the publication of Johann Martin Chaldenius’s *Introduction to the Correct Interpretation of Reasonable Discourse and Books*, which sought, with true Enlightenment idealism, to create a system of interpretation that would provide science a unity of understanding” (quoted in Honeycutt, 1995).

In the 19th century, such thinkers as Friedrich Shleiermacher, William Von Humboldt and Wilhelm Dilthey represented the hermeneutic tradition. Though they varied in their views about hermeneutic understanding, they agreed on the general process of interpretation, sometimes known as the “hermeneutical circle”. This interpretative process involves examining a certain text or event through a systematic investigation of general and particular aspects, the results of which, in turn, are related to what is already known by the interpreter. This process continues around in a circle, moving from one subprocess to another until the interpreter is convinced of a satisfactory interpretation.

In the 20th century, hermeneutics took a different path, especially with the publication of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, which shifted the entire focus of hermeneutics to ontology. Thus, hermeneutics moved from the “epistemological concerns” of the nineteenth century to a phenomenological investigation of existence.

And it was Heidegger’s student – Hans-Georg Gadamer who developed a complete framework of philosophical hermeneutics based on his mentor’s apprentice. Both of them had worked toward establishing hermeneutics as a basis for understanding both historical events and literary texts. Indeed Heidegger saw the task of philosophy as hermeneutical interpretation and Gadamer suggested that his philosophical hermeneutics was universal in its scope.

Today the so-called “hermeneutic turn” is undoubtedly one of the major events that have taken place in the contemporary scene, and its impact goes beyond the boundaries of any academic discipline, embracing the whole field of humanities and social sciences.

The following is a brief introduction to some representative thinkers whose works and views need to be further explored.

**1.2.1 Friedrich Daniel Ernst Schleiermacher**

In the early 19th century, Friedrich Schleiermacher proposed that “there should be a
hermeneutics that was not a collection of pieces of ad hoc advice for the solution to specific problems with text interpretation but rather an *allegemeine hermeneutic* (general hermeneutics), which dealt with the ‘art of understanding’, and which pertained to the structure and function of understanding wherever it occurred” (quoted in Suber, 2002). As Palmer (1999) points out, Friedrich Schleiermacher, following the universalism of Kant, looked for “the universal conditions” of all understanding in language.

For Schleiermacher,

Culture was thus the outcome of this reciprocal interaction between irreducible subjects self-consciously aware of their own uniqueness and the various communities in which their personalities could find expression.... Subject and community thus lived in and through one another and culture was the organic, living result of the historical unfolding of this reciprocal interaction”. (Suber, 2002:51)

His understanding of communication can be illustrated by the following model:

**Thought** ➔ **Language** ➔ **Communication**

Schleiermacher’s model for communication refers to “dialogue” between author and reader brought about by the sharing of an author’s thoughts expressed through the text. And the interpretation process should involve two aspects: both grammatical (in the larger context of language itself) and psychological (the expression of a subjective experience).

### 1.2.2 Wilhelm Dilthey

Half a century later, Schleiermacher’s biographer, Wilhelm Dilthey, tried to continue Schleiermacher’s “general hermeneutics” as a “general methodology of the humanities and social sciences”. Hermeneutics was for Dilthey still a methodology, but also a general methodology which he hoped would become the theoretical foundation for all the humanities and social sciences.

Dilthey was influential in the development of what came to be known as “*lebensphilosophie*” (a philosophy of “lived” experience). It was a philosophical practice based on commonly shared, everyday skills and insights.
“Lebensphilosophie was one (perhaps the first) attempt to provide a separate philosophical approach to the social sciences and humanities based on the key concept of understanding” (Suber, 2002).

Dilthey’s model of human understanding can be represented schematically in the following way:

Experience ———> Expression ———> Understanding

In Dilthey’s words, culture is described as “the objectification of the meaning that makes up lived experience,” and understanding as “the process by which we interpret these objectifications of lived experience in order to gain access to the lived experiences that they express” (Suber, 2002).

As for the concept of “history” and its function, as Dilthey asserts,

The human being knows itself only in history, never through introspection; indeed, we all seek it in history. The individual always realizes only one of the possibilities in its development, which could always have taken a different turning whenever it has to make an important decision. The human being is only given to us at all in terms of its realized possibilities. (Suber, 2002)

1.2.3 Martin Heidegger

Martin Heidegger, the founder of the hermeneutic paradigm, was influenced by the historically-based life philosophy of Dilthey, but he was in disagreement with making consciousness of the life-force the basis of his thought about interpretation. Instead, he chose “being” as his universal component. Being, as it occurs in the everyday existence of human beings, is understanding. Understanding is the basic way for a human beings to exist in the world. To “be” is to understand; it is to interpret the world in terms of one’s own possibilities for being.

In Being and Time (1927/1962), Heidegger worked out the condition for the possibilities of human beings in the world, and in this sense he offered a Kantian universalistic analysis. Heidegger’s contribution to hermeneutics lies in the fact that he points out that “human understanding becomes the universal door, process, filter, through which all thought of whatever kind must pass” (Palmer, 1999). The being of the world, the being of truth, the being of one’s experience are understood. They are
“always already” understood before they are linguistically articulated, i.e., before they are interpreted.

Heidegger’s hermeneutic circle is another important concept that has exerted huge influence on Gadamer’s theoretical inquiry. Understanding, Heidergger argues, involves a circular process of moving from a pre-supposed meaning of an event, to an interpretation of that event based on the pre-understanding, and then with evidence gained in interpretation back to a revision of the pre-understanding. “The hermeneutic circle is the continuation of this process in revising the projected whole to conform to evidences gained in the interpretation of the individual part. A new whole of meaning is then projected and the parts are interpreted in light of it. This circular exercise is an ongoing process, moving from whole to part and then back to whole” (Davidow, 2002).

Heidegger’s hermeneutics also stressed that language could no longer be seen as a means by which to express experience, but instead was experience itself, which Hans-Georg Gadamer called “hermeneutic experience”.

Heidegger also rejected the traditional account of cultural activity as a search for universally valid foundations for human action and knowledge. In his main work, *Being and Time* (1927/1962), he developed a holistic epistemology according to which all meaning is context-dependent and permanently anticipated from a particular horizon, perspective or background of intelligibility. The result was a powerful critique directed against the ideal of objectivity.

### 1.2.4 Hans-Georg Gadamer

Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher, and a student of Heidegger’s, is best known for his important contribution to hermeneutics through his major work, *Truth and Method* in 1960. In his main book, he argues that experience, culture, and prior understanding render the scientific ideal of objectivity impossible. His system of philosophical hermeneutics was a response, through an exploration of historicity, language, and art, to Wilhelm Dilthey, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger.

For Gadamer, the previous history of hermeneutics that centered on the interpretative aspect did provide the starting point, but he added a neglected supplement -- the experience of art, which with historical science constituted “modes of experience in which our own understanding of existence comes directly into play” (Gadamer, 1975).
In Gadamer’s words, understanding is a process in which each finite human participates. We enter a particular point in that process and therefore are affected by what has gone before us. “We have certain prejudice because we are part of this process. These prejudices form and make possible our understandings. Yet, as finite humans, we can still develop interpretative distance and so filter prejudices” (Kolak, 2002). We cannot escape this process and the tradition that we are bound to, but we can change our horizons. Thus we experience the “fusion of horizons”. “We are active participants in a dialogue with the past that will carry on into the future” (Kolak, 2002). And this dialogue is mediated through the medium of language.

Heidegger’s theory of hermeneutic circle provided important theoretical implications for Gadamer’s historicity research. Gadamer’s inquiry has placed the researcher in a process of tradition in which past and present are fused. “The hermeneutic circle then describes the linkage of the movement of tradition and the movement of interpreter” (Crocker, 2002).

Gadamer’s incorporation of moral dimension in research has made his philosophical hermeneutics distinctive in humanities study and appeal to more and more researchers in relevant fields of studies. He hoped to exert on humanities studies an emancipatory task for the whole humankind.

Gadamer’s key notions that are closely related to culture and language studies consist of the following: understanding, prejudice, tradition, fusion of horizons, effective history, praxis, and dialogue. In the next chapter, we will analyze each of these notions in details.
Chapter Two
Basic Notions of Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics

Recent movements in anthropology and sociology have attempted to shift the disciplines away from a scientific paradigm and to base humanities on an interpretive dialogical foundation often akin to literary analysis. A great bulk of this work stresses the interdisciplinary communication inherent in sociological and anthropological researches, approaching it more as a dialogue than as a scientific experiment. They suggest that the process of writing about other cultures or historical periods is instructive in understanding not only others but ourselves as well. But most of researches avoid the tangled details of philosophy and the basic questions concerning the nature of human understanding. Gadamer’s work is insightful as it raises the philosophical questions that lie at the root of interpretation and social sciences enquiries, which is helpful in our intercultural communication research and practice. Before embarking on further explorations, we have to define philosophical hermeneutics first.

2.1 What Is Philosophical Hermeneutics?

Hermeneutics is the art of interpreting and understanding texts. Beginning from the twentieth century, hermeneutics took a different path from the earlier hermeneutic tradition, especially after the publication of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927/1962), which shifted the entire focus of hermeneutics to ontology. This paradigm shift in hermeneutic resulted in changes in the following aspects. First of all, hermeneutics moved from the “epistemological concerns” of the nineteenth century to a phenomenological investigation of existence. Secondly, earlier hermeneutical attempts to build a system of understanding through re-enactment of the relationship between an author and his or her original audience gave way to extreme skepticism of any such understanding. Heidegger's hermeneutics, stressed that language could no longer be seen as a means to express experience, but instead was experience itself, and Hans-Georg Gadamer called it “hermeneutic experience”.

As a student of Heidegger’s, Gadamer obtained inspirations from his mentor. Heidegger’s theory of hermeneutic circle provided impetus for his historicity inquiry. But he strongly disagrees with his mentor’s later attempts to transcend metaphysics
through the use of quasipoetical language. Having broken with his master, Gadamer put forward his own philosophy of hermeneutics in his *Truth and Method* (1960), in which he seeks to show how works of art are an “emergence of truth” in that they give enlightening structure to otherwise confusing and chaotic human experiences (as quoted in Jenson, 184). In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer extends Heidegger’s concept of understanding to the concept of Being, and incorporates ontology into the focus of hermeneutics. He proposes that hermeneutic phenomenon is the universal experience of the human world, which emphasizes the universality of understanding. He emphasizes that all understanding is self-understanding. Through the rehabilitation of the concept of aesthetic consciousness, he succeeds in developing a philosophical position that overcomes the sense of alienation that results from Enlightenment thinking. He examines the experience of art, moving to the conclusion that we belong to our world in an integral manner.

For Gadamer, “the task of hermeneutics, seen philosophically, consists in asking what kind of understanding, what kind of science it is, that is itself changed by historical change”(1975:276).

In the recent section, we take a look at some basic notions of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics.

### 2.2 Basic Notions of Gadamer’s Philosophical Hermeneutics

Following the discussion of how to define Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, we would like to briefly trace the theoretical propositions made by Gadamer before we start to discuss their applications. His key notions that are frequently related to intercultural communication studies include: understanding, prejudice, tradition, fusion of horizons, effective history, and praxis.

#### 2.2.1 Understanding

In order to explain Gadamer’s notion of understanding, it is necessary to first refer to Heidegger and his concept of “fore-structure” and “fore-understanding”. “Fore-structure” refers to supposition, tradition, prejudice and other similar subjective and objective factors involved in the process of understanding, whereas “fore-understanding” refers to the event of understanding based on the fore-structure. The fore-structure of understanding underlines the importance of the assumptions and
expectations implicit in the process of forming questions about the world. Heidegger writes, “Interpretation is never a pre-suppositionless grasping of something given in advance. [...] Understanding through interpretation is always dependent on the fore-structure of understanding” (quoted in Palmer, 1999). When we try to understand a text, custom, law, experience or any other events, we have to first conceive of “some larger whole of which it is part” (quoted in Palmer, 1999). That is to say, you have to refer to the whole context (including “micro context” and “macro context”) before you can get an understanding of the event you aim at. In the theoretical introduction of Heidegger, we have pointed out that understanding involves “a circular process of moving from a pre-supposed meaning of an event, to an interpretation of that event based on the pre-understanding, and then with evidence gained in interpretation back to a reversion of the pre-understanding” (Heidegger, 1927/1962). With such fore-understanding, we begin the process of understanding through interpreting the event at hand. “Fore-understanding is more than a method, it is the very manner in which understanding takes place” (Crocker, 2002).

Gadamer shared Heidegger’s view on “fore-understanding” and chose it as the starting point of his construction of historical hermeneutics. The concept of fore-understanding acknowledges and underscores the presence of prejudice and tradition, and Gadamer called it “historicity of understanding”. For Gadamer, there is no arriving at a whole that is satisfactory. The fore-understanding, will always determine our understanding of any event. And “this fore-understanding will always be a product of what is available to the interpreter, in the form of what has already been said about an event, in the historical event in which he finds himself” (Crocker, 2002). This process involves the notions of “fusion of horizons” and “effective history”, which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. In this way, understanding occurs when the past assumption and present interpretation fuse.

Another point well worth mentioning is that, for Gadamer, understanding is not merely reproductive, but also productive. The true meaning of a text, of a work of art, or an historical event is never complete, and interpretation is an ongoing process. The object of historical research is not fixed. “It is a unity built upon the object as it is presented to us and the mode of historical scrutiny to which we subject it” (Crocker, 2002).

Since fore-understanding becomes inevitable and significant in the process of understanding, it is necessary for us to further examine those factors that often occur in fore-understanding, such as prejudice, tradition and others.
2.2.2 Prejudice

Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics started from a basic doctrine of Being and Time (1927/1962), the fore-structure of understanding, according to which all meaning is inevitably anticipated by a particular horizon or background that makes world's experience possible. As Gadamer asserts in Truth and Method, “all understanding is ultimately self-understanding. [...] Whoever understands understands himself, projects himself on his own possibilities” (Gadamer: 1975:8).

This acceptance of the hermeneutic circle takes the form of a rehabilitation of the notion: the prejudice.

Prejudice means an adverse judgment or opinion forming beforehand or without knowledge or examination of the facts (The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, 1980). Since every human being is culture-bounded, s/he cannot escape the influence of his /her culture. All understanding and interpreting is done by someone who possesses a background framework, a set of socially acquired abilities and dispositions as well as natural regularities, a set of practical, living prejudgments (prejudices). Thus, prejudice connotes a predetermined judgment that is deemed a fetter on the open-minded pursuit of knowledge.

The modern, western Enlightenment tradition has a prejudice against prejudice, and thus has tried to find a point of view from which interpretation of human life can transcend all social, historical or individual variability.

Gadamer contended Enlightenment tradition about such absolute treatment of prejudice. He claims that all judging begins with taken-for-granted, traditional reasons, prejudgments, which are used until reasons are presented for doubting them. In the discussion of “fore-understanding”, it has been pointed out that “if all understanding involves an anticipation of meaning, its goal does not consist in the elimination of all prejudices (in this point the Enlightenment thinkers were mistaken), but rather in the discrimination between false and true prejudices” (Sampaio, 2000). Legitimate (or true) and illegitimate (or false) prejudices are distinguished in their ability to bring fore-understanding in line with the re-reading of events. According to Gadamer, the truth of our prejudices is verified through their ability to produce a coherent and harmonious picture of the whole that is offered to our understanding. On the contrary,
Degree papers are in the “Xiamen University Electronic Theses and Dissertations Database”. Full texts are available in the following ways:
1. If your library is a CALIS member libraries, please log on http://etd.calis.edu.cn/ and submit requests online, or consult the interlibrary loan department in your library.
2. For users of non-CALIS member libraries, please mail to etd@xmu.edu.cn for delivery details.