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**THE ACT OF TRANSLATION IN HANS GEORG
GADAMER'S HERMENEUTIC PHILOSOPHY
OF LANGUAGE**

Introduction

The development of the field concerned with the study of the phenomenon of translation was strongly influenced by philosophical hermeneutics. This should be of no surprise as hermeneutics, in all its forms and configurations, revolves around such topics as language, understanding, meaning, text, interpretation, and, consequently, translation. Also, hermeneutics, just like translation studies, is concerned with overcoming barriers in order to come to a specific understanding. As Gadamer put it, the translator's task of recreation is different only in degree from the general task presented for hermeneutics by all texts.¹ The chief thinkers who in their hermeneutical considerations took up the analysis of the process of translation and the role of the translator include Rolf Klopfer, Friedmar Apel, Frits Pæpcke, George Steiner, Douglas Robinson, Lawrence Venuti, and precisely Hans Georg Gadamer.² Here we can refer to the words of Palmer, who stated that contemporary hermeneutics finds in translation and its theory a specific "reservoir" for exploring certain hermeneutical issues and problems, and that the phenomenon of translation is in a way a key matter of hermeneutical studies.³ And it was Gadamer who influenced the theoreticians and critics of translation studies more than any other hermeneuticist.⁴

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, London–New York 2004, p. 389.

² H. Kittel, J. House, B. Schultze, *Übersetzung: Ein international es Handbuch zur Übersetzungsforschung*, Berlin 2004, p. 191–194.

³ R. E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger*, Evanston 1969, p. 33.

⁴ *Routledge Encyclopaedia of Translation Studies*, ed. M. Baker, G. Saldanha, London–New York 2008, p. 132.

Therefore, this article aims at presenting the act of translation as a specific hermeneutical experience in the light of Gadamer's philosophy of language and his comments on translation and the role of the translator. The discussion of these issues starts with reflections on language and man's relationship with the world, as translation, a process totally "immersed" in language, is closely related with this relationship and man's image of the world as expressed in a given language. Moreover, due to the fact that Gadamer's views on the process of translation are presented in the framework of his philosophy of language and remain in a close connection to it, and that the translation process itself is a linguistic act, the discussion of translation must start with an overview of the relationship shared by language, man, and the world. The following parts of the article look at the act of translation in the context of hermeneutic concepts of understanding and dialogue, interpretation, and text.

Language and man's relationship with the world

Gadamer's philosophy of language is described as hermeneutical, belonging to the continental, transcendental and fundamental tradition of language studies. Bronk characterizes it also as romantic, or humanistic.⁵ However, we must ask here about the essence of this hermeneutic philosophy of language. It seems that Bronk has prepared an accurate description for it by saying that the hermeneutic approach means looking at language holistically – analysing it with due respect to the totality of the linguistic and extra-linguistic context. Thus language is perceived in the light of human existence, the functioning of the world, or everyday activities. It is a universal medium through which (and in which) the process of understanding takes place. The emphasis is put on the relationship that language has with cognition and the world.⁶ On the other hand, Pawliszyn, in her synthesis of the hermeneutical concept of language, highlights the importance of living speech as the fundamental basis for the occurrence of this phenomenon. Also, she adds that the meaning of an utterance is to a great extent formed by certain subjective contents provided by the speaker. This subjective state

⁵ A. Bronk, *Rozumienie, dzieje, język. Filozoficzna hermeneutyka H.-G. Gadamera*, Lublin 1998, p. 278–279. Bronk states there that Gadamer's philosophy of language is characterised by a "mythical and magical" approach, and the act of using language itself equals to a "creation" of a world. Also, language, thought, and world are closely connected to each other.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 291–294.

of the person uttering specific words significantly influences the understanding of the content he is trying to convey. Moreover, the proper reading of his message is only possible when the subjective state of the speaker is taken into account. This also emphasizes the importance of the relationship between language and the world, and other man.⁷ In short, hermeneutical philosophy of language consists mainly of a total analysis of language, particularly its relation with human existence, the world, and other man. Nothing here is said once and for all: the meaning of a statement appears only in concrete situations, in the context of other words or expressions – only then is understanding possible. Truly, Gadamer's philosophy of language is, to quote Baran, "[...] a specific sameness of the counter-members [...] of world and language."⁸ Let us have a closer look at this sameness.

Referring to Aristotle's thoughts on the differences between man and animals in terms of language, Gadamer points to the human-specific ability to convey their thoughts to others, which, consequently, enables the process of forming human communities and social life in general. Interestingly, Gadamer does not describe language as a tool used for communicating with the surrounding world. Due to the fact that language precedes the thought process and man's knowledge of the world and of himself is in a way immersed in it, language and thought cannot be separated. The two are inseparable and, what is more, thinking is only possible in a given language. Therefore, according to Gadamer, it is impossible to think without being "at home" in language. This settling at home determines man's acquisition of knowledge about the world and himself. It is through speaking that we learn about the surrounding reality, which we familiarize in the act of speech. Language (or, to quote Gadamer: "our linguistic interpretation of the world") is unchangeably something primal in relation to thought and cognition. "[...] Language is the real mark of our finitude."⁹ This is very similar to Wittgenstein's statement about the limits of our language. At a different occasion, Gadamer claims that in shaping language (as we are able to do so) we are still enclosed within the boundaries of this ability.¹⁰ Therefore it seems that language, which determines our world-view, influ-

⁷ A. Pawliszyn, *Skryte podstawy rozumienia. Hermeneutyka a psychoanaliza*, Gdańsk 1993, p. 29–30.

⁸ B. Baran, *Spekulacja hermeneutyczna*, [in:] H.-G. Gadamer, *Prawda i metoda*, Kraków 1993, p. 14.

⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Man and Language*, [in:] *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, Los Angeles 2008, p. 59–69.

¹⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Boundaries of Language*, [in:] *Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer's Hermeneutics*, ed. Lawrence K. Schmidt, Lanham 2000, p. 12.

ences human experience and the knowledge acquired by men. Here it is worth to quote Rosen who analysed Gadamer's philosophy of language and said that there is no "prelinguistic consciousness of oneself or the world"¹¹ as it is language that forms consciousness.

This relates to the significant issues of consciousness and language. According to Gadamer, language is not contained in any individual consciousness or in any group of consciousnesses. Also, he characterizes three aspects of the being of language. Starting from the statement saying that language is a living process, Gadamer claims that whenever something is expressed, language disappears along with its consciousness. Therefore, to quote Gadamer: "[the] real being [of language] consists in what is said in it. What is said in it constitutes the common world in which we live and to which belongs also the whole great chain of tradition [...]" The second aspect of the being of language is that speech is present only in the sphere of a community, and the third is its universality – in which it resembles reason: "[...] "the full potential that lies in language [...] enables [it] to keep up with reason."¹² Thus language is in a way an inseparable thread connecting all men and their relationship with the surrounding reality, which is the basis of understanding.

Language according to Gadamer – as was said at the beginning of this article – is inextricably bound with man's being in the world. Gadamer went as far as to claim that "language is the real medium of human being."¹³ Man was somewhat equipped in language, which, at the same time, is evidence of the fact that humans "have a world", or, in other words, they relate to it. This means that man possesses both world and language. World and language are two members that intertwine each other and in a way determine their existence. Can we say that language and the world are two separate entities? Well, Gadamer claims that it is impossible: the world is itself only when expressed in language; language exists only when it presents the world. Therefore we can say that there is no world without language, and no language without the world. People, possessing language, relate to the world and the environment they inhabit. What is relevant here is the fact that they are free from their environment – as expressed in their possession of language and the world. Therefore man can freely express anything that happens to him in the world through speech. Man, moving away from his

¹¹ K. Rosner, *Gadamerowskie rozumienie języka*, [in:] eadem, *Hermeneutyka jako krytyka kultury*, Warszawa 1991, p. 175.

¹² H.-G. Gadamer, *The Boundaries of Language*, op. cit., p. 10.

¹³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Man and Language*, op. cit., p. 68.

environment, assumes a different attitude towards that which is reflected in the language he uses. In Gadamer's words, we can say that man "is, from the beginning, free for variety in exercising his capacity for language."¹⁴ Man is able to use language freely, and therefore he is capable of expressing the same thing in many various ways. Language is, as Gadamer rightfully pointed out, in its essence changeable: "In language there is an unlimited openness for further expansion. No language is just the system of rules that the language teacher has in mind or that the grammarian abstracts. Every language is constantly changing."¹⁵ Here rises a rather interesting issue: since it is possible to express things in various ways, and language also has the capacity to change, is man therefore capable of changing the world? Apparently it is so, especially if we relate this world to human behaviour and his relation to his surrounding reality.

The world is a specific foundation upon which human understanding is built in some language. The world is the medium through which understanding can be reached. It is realised via dialogue, because only through it men can give meaning to the world. This dialogue, however, can be understood in two ways: as an actual act of communication between two partners of a conversation, or as a hermeneutical conversation, whose partners are text and the person who interprets it.

These considerations acquire a specific meaning when we take into account the relationship between a foreign language and its user, meaning here also the translator. Gadamer rightly points out that "a foreign language remains a specific limit experience," and that actually we are never convinced that the words in a foreign language are simply other names of the same things which we have in our native language.¹⁶ As previously mentioned, language determines our experience of the world and, at the same time, allows us to enter a different linguistic world. When we hear or read an expression in a foreign language, we enter a different linguistic world. Yet we do not negate our own world – we enhance it with new experiences. A foreign language opens new possibilities of perception of the same reality; as Gadamer puts it: "[...] what really opens up the whole of our world orientation is language."¹⁷ Let us once again refer to Gadamer's concept of man's having the world and language. Now, learning a foreign language does not mean that man changes his relation to the world. On the contrary, his relationship

¹⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 442.

¹⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Boundaries of Language*, op. cit., p. 14.

¹⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Boundaries of Language*, op. cit., p. 14–15.

¹⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 446.

with the world is retained, but is also extended and enriched.¹⁸ This is of particular relevance to the situations faced by translators (both written and oral) who, being in contact with a foreign language, enter a specific relation with the world – the world enhanced with a different cognitive horizon, but also with some unchangeable difficulties, mainly in understanding.

Translation as a situation of obstructed understanding

As was said previously, understanding is reached through language. However, this understanding is often interrupted or obstructed. An example of such situation is – according to Gadamer – oral translation, which allows for a conversation in two different languages. The task of the translator is of course to convey the meaning of the message, but this meaning must at the same time explicitly refer to the context in which the speaker is functioning at the moment of speaking. The translator, who renders the message in a different language, must also provide it with a new expression. Therefore Gadamer rightly highlights the fact that each translation is interpretation, since the translator, when hearing the words said to him, provides these words with a specific and unique meaning; the meaning is unique because it is closely related with the concrete situation in which the translator finds himself.¹⁹

Let us return to the central issue of this part of the article, that is, the obstructed understanding as manifested by oral translation. At this point it is worth asking how much – in the light of Gadamerian hermeneutics – of the process of oral translation is conversation, and, more importantly, how much of it is understanding, and whether it is even possible to call it that. Therefore in this respect, what remains essential is the following issue: between whom does the understanding take place in this type of translation? According to Gadamer, in such situations, understanding does not occur between the partners of the conversation, but between the translators of the particular languages. Because what is oral translation if not depriving the partners of a conversation of their possibility to express themselves and their ideas?²⁰ While it is true that it seems that in such translation, the persons participating in the conversation (excluding the translators) reach a certain understanding and, to some extent, they can finalise their

¹⁸ Ibid, p. 449.

¹⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 387.

²⁰ Ibid.

business, but can we honestly say that there is an exchange of ideas between them? Apparently there is none. Since the presupposition of understanding is dialogue, and such dialogue can take place only between partners who understand each other, in the case of a translated conversation there can be no talk of understanding, much less of exchange of ideas.

Gadamer rightly notices that every conversation assumes that its participants use the same language. Only then does understanding take place; it cannot occur during translated conversations – in a situation where the participants (if we can call them that) use different languages. Since a given person uses the services of a translator, it means that he or she does not understand a given foreign language. In consequence, this indicates the impossibility of understanding, whose basic requirement is proficiency in and comprehension of language. Gadamer describes translation from a foreign language as an extreme case that doubles the hermeneutical process: the process takes place between the translator and the one partner, and between the other partner and the translator.²¹ This also relates to the situation of translating texts. In this case, the partners of a conversation consist of, on the one hand, the author of the source text, and on the other, the reader of the target text. If the latter uses a prepared translation, and not the original text written in a foreign language, it mainly suggests that he has not mastered that language well enough to use it freely and without any obstruction in understanding. Therefore, reaching an agreement is in such a case impossible. We must also mention here the specific doubling of the hermeneutical situation. The reader, although not of the target text, but of the source text, is the translator himself, who – at least presumably – has mastered the foreign language in a way that allows him to understand the text and render it in a source language. The translator and the author of the source text are also partners in a conversation; although here it seems that reaching an understanding is easier and achieved more freely than in the other case. Whether the translator reaches an understanding with the author of the original determines – if only we can call it that²² – the understanding taking place between the author of the original and the reader of the translation. If the translator has not mastered the foreign language well enough – and there can be no understanding in such case – he is not able to ensure the understanding between the two partners of the hermeneutical conversation in form of written translation.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Maybe such situation should be defined as a secondary understanding, assuming of course that such understanding is, generally speaking, possible.

The oral translator, on his side, also faces great barriers in achieving understanding. First of all, we must again take note of the language competence of the translator, along with his mastery of the given foreign language. We cannot ignore the fact that the lack of proficiency in the foreign language disrupts the understanding in the conversation, or makes it virtually impossible. Reaching an agreement is often problematic even if the partners of the conversation share a common native language, so the problems are much greater if they are using a foreign language, albeit fluently.

Gadamer rightly notices that in every conversation we open ourselves up to the other, we consider his point of view and opinions, and, in a way, we accept them and we identify with the other person, but only in terms of his message. Therefore, in such case we do not try to understand our partner in conversation in terms of individuality, but we try to understand his point of view in terms of content. As Gadamer emphasizes, we cannot talk about understanding when the focus of our interest are not person's ideas, but rather the person itself.²³

Even in the case of perfect mastery of a foreign language, the oral translator feels a distance between him and the person he is speaking to in a foreign language – a distance that cannot be covered even though maximum effort was made to understand the situation of the speaker and the situation of the person to whom he translates. In trying to reach an understanding the translator comes to the conclusion that he must finally settle for a compromise expressed in him using certain lexical means, grammatical structures, modifications in the length of the message, and so on. In order to properly recreate the message the translator must transpose it into the speaker. However, it is also impossible to fully realize this aspect. To come to an understanding, both the translator as well as the partners of the conversation must acknowledge their opinions and points of view, and accept the fact that there is a distance between them that is impossible to be breached. Gadamer notices that thanks to acknowledging the other's point of view and recognizing the reasons of the other party, the partners can draw some common conclusions.²⁴ If we compare this to the situation of the oral translator we can say that this person must acknowledge the foreignness and distance of the other language and, at the same time, convey the message given to him in his native language. On the shoulder of the translator rests the composition of a potential agreement on a given matter, and it is he who is responsible for the establishment of a common language of a given

²³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 387.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 389.

conversation. Following Gadamer's idea, the translator can be described as a negotiator who uses the medium of language to achieve a compromise and convey a message in such a meaning that expresses that which was said to him. Yet this is only possible when the situation of the speaker of the foreign language is related to the situation of the speaker of the native language. Without a doubt, this is the most difficult task. Especially when we consider that, according to Gadamer, conversation is far from being an exchange of arguments or simply adding one opinion to another, but is rather a starting point in the search for a common denominator of a given matter.

The true reality of human communication is such that a conversation does not simply carry one person's opinion through against another's in argument, or even simply add one opinion to another. Genuine conversation transforms the viewpoint of both. A conversation that is truly successful is such that one cannot fall back into the disagreement that touched it off. The commonality between the partners is so very strong that the point is no longer the fact that I think this and you think that, but rather it involves the shared interpretation of the world which makes a moral and social solidarity possible.²⁵

However, assuming such point of view brings yet another difficulty for the oral translator to face. Now, if we assume that the agreement that is supposed to take place between the partners of a conversation consists in such transformation of their ideas so that a compromise can be worked out, then the translator, assuming he wants to make a reliable translation, must assume a totally neutral attitude towards that which he is witnessing. He must not permit to disclose his own personal views, which would influence the final understanding. The question is, however, if such a neutral approach is actually possible. If it is not, it means that the understanding building up between the partners of a conversation is always incomplete, stained by the point of view of the translator, not necessarily giving truth to the original message.

The difficulty with breaching the distance and foreignness in translation is also experienced by translators of texts. Similarly as with oral translation, the written translator also must make certain compromises connected with the lexical, grammatical, stylistic, or cultural sphere of the text he is translating. Undoubtedly, never will there be one and correct solution to the problem, and the one used will always be only partial and, precisely, a compromise. The task of the written translation is the recreation of a text, and to do this he must empathise with the author. However, such approach still

²⁵ H.-G. Gadamer, *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*, Evanston 2007, ed. R. Palmer, p. 96.

does not guarantee the translator's success. In the process of translation, he must accept the foreignness and distance between him and the author of the source text, assume the author's view-point and assume a potential situation in which something cannot be expressed or rendered in a different language. The translator must, when translating something into his native language, stick to his language, but at the same time he must be in contact with the language that remains foreign to him, despite his perfect mastery of it. As Gadamer accurately emphasizes, the translator will be genuinely recreating a text only when he brings the subject matter of the text into language, that is, only when he finds the appropriate language for the target, as well as the source text.²⁶

Another difficulty in achieving understanding in a conversation – to which Gadamer points in his deliberations on language and understanding – is the fact that expressions never have full meaning:

“Occasional” expressions, which occur in every language, are characterized by the fact that unlike other expressions, they do not contain their meaning fully in themselves. For example, when I say “here.” That which is “here” is not understandable to everyone through the fact that it was uttered aloud or written down; rather, one must know where this “here” was or is. For its meaning, the “here” requires to be filled in by the occasion, the *occasio*, in which it is said. [...] [Expressions of this type] contain the situation and the occasion in the content of their meaning.²⁷

This is of great significance in the case of oral translation. Depending on the proper grasp of the meaning of not only particular word but also of whole statements, a conversation can begin to move in a specific direction. Now, this influences its final quality and determines the reaching of an agreement between the partners. What remains extremely complicated in this respect is grasping the appropriate meaning of words, since, as Gadamer puts it: “Language is such that, whatever particular meaning a word may possess, words do not have a single unchanging meaning; rather, they possess a fluctuating range of meanings.”²⁸ This is of particular relevance to understanding, because if the range of meanings does change, and the meanings of particular words or expressions are settled only in concrete context, during the speech act, the translator may be destined to fail *a priori*, especially in the case of simultaneous translation. Whereas in the case of consecutive translation

²⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 389.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 104.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 106.

the interpreter, after hearing a specific fragment, has the time to make the decisions determining the future understanding of his translation, there is no such time in the case of simultaneous translation. The issue of ambiguity of words and statements is also faced by translators of texts, especially when they work with a text written very long time ago. Gadamer goes as far as to suggest that based on the analysis of the vocabulary of such text we can find former values and traditions:

In the German language-world, for example, the word *Tugend* (“virtue”) now nearly always has an ironic significance. If we use other words instead to discreetly express the continuance of moral norms in a world that has turned away from established conventions, then such a process is a mirror of what is real.²⁹

This proves that language and the world penetrate each other, that they share their being and that they influence the matters of interpersonal understanding. The meaning of particular words is a reflection of the current situation of the persons using them in concrete situations. Therefore, the task of the translator who wants to make a reliable translation of any text includes investigating its context (also, historical context) and rendering of particular words and expressions in relation to their current usage.

Let us return to the topic of oral translation. Gadamer claims that the system and context are not the only ones to influence the meaning of an expression:

[...] this “standing-in-a-context” means at the same time that the word is never completely separated from the multiple meanings it has in itself, even when the context has made clear the meaning it possesses in this particular context. Evidently, then, the meaning that a word acquires in the speaking where one encounters it is not the only thing that is present there. Other things are co-present, and it is the presence of all that is co-present there that comes together to make up the evocative power of living speech. For this reason, I think one can say that every speaking points into the Open of further speaking. More and more is going to be said in the direction that the speaking has taken. This shows the truth of my thesis that speaking takes place in the process of a “conversation” [Gespräch].³⁰

²⁹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 446.

³⁰ Ibid, p. 106–107. Gadamer explains the nature of a statement and its boundaries in a similar fashion: “It can never say all that there is to say. We could formulate this so: everything that constitutes for us a context for a thought initiates fundamentally an unending process.” (H.-G. Gadamer, *The Boundaries of Language*, op. cit., p. 16.)

The quotation on previous page points to an even more significant difficulty in the process of oral translation. When stepping up to his task, the translator, in a way, opens himself to all possible meanings of words and statements, and since a conversation is an endless process (including the conversation of the translator with himself) the real issue here is the answer to the question whether the meaning of a statement in translation can be determined once and for all; looking at the issue from the perspective of Gadamerian philosophy, it turns out that it is impossible. And all indicates we should agree. Language is a specific living process which undergoes constant changes and the meaning of statements is formed not only on the basis of context, but also by a significantly broader situational environment, which includes mainly the partners of a conversation who use different languages and are of various cultural backgrounds, the translators themselves, as well as the place and the time of translation. All of these factors influence the quality of securing the translated statement to the specific foundations of potential understanding, although it is far more difficult in the process of simultaneous or consecutive translation. Here we face the Gadamer's hermeneutical problem of application, namely, the adjustment of the translated statement to the situation in which the interpreter currently is. It is he who makes the decisions about the translation of the given statement, but he bases it on the current situation of the conversation in which only he speaks both of the languages of the dialogue.³¹ At this point it is worth referring to Gadamer's words on the difficulty of rendering a text in one language in another: "Translators usually come to stand, exhausted only halfway done, [...]. It is just an infinite process to succeed in rebuilding the feeling and content of the foreign speaker into the feeling and content of one's own language. It is a never completed self-conversation of the translator with himself."³² It is difficult to disagree with Gadamer on this one. The translator, apart from translating the original statement, "must gain for himself the infinite space of the saying that corresponds to what is said in the foreign language."³³ He must come to terms with the fact that, in reality, every translation, even the best one, will never fully convey the spirit of the original, but rather, as Gadamer puts it, will always make the original idea sound flat.³⁴ Here we should return to the issue concerning the lack of explicitness of meaning of a statement. Since a conversation is

³¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 307.

³² H.-G. Gadamer, *The Boundaries of Language*, op. cit., p. 16.

³³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Man and Language*, op. cit., p. 67.

³⁴ Ibid.

something endless, and language realizes itself in it basing not only on the context, but also on the given situation of the speakers, the same idea can be expressed in various ways, and, consequently, every translation would be different from each other. Translation is a living process which is subject to constant changes; it is an unending conversation, open to the multiplicity of meanings contained in the original statement. Simultaneously, however, the oral translator must be aware of the fact that those multiple meanings are only possible in the original, and the translation – as we said previously – occurs only as repetition and shallowing. Yet to ensure that the conversation is understood at least partially, the translator must avoid any explicitness, and focus rather on finding that internal endlessness we discussed above. Only then can understanding be achieved.³⁵

The case is similar in translating written texts. The task of the translator is not only to recreate the original statement, since, as we said earlier, expressing its multitude of meanings is impossible in translation. This multiplicity is only repeated and shallowed, and in such case there can be no talk of multiple meanings. The issue of untranslatability is closely related – there are, of course, such words in the language of the original for which it is extremely difficult, and sometimes impossible, to find equivalents in the native language. Words expressing emotions constitute good examples of such difficulties. According to Gadamer, translation makes the original sound flat, it recreates it somewhat superficially, which results in the translated text's lack of space, a third dimension that provides the original with depth and multitude of meanings. Gadamer also claims that the belief that the translation is easier in reception is an illusion – rather, it is to the contrary, exactly because of the shallowness of the target text. If the translator only repeats the statement – whether it is written or spoken – he loses meaning. Therefore, instead of recreating the message word by word, sentence by sentence – in other words, instead of recreating only the formal, or superficial, structure of the text – the translator must penetrate deeper into the meaning of the text, and then relate this meaning to himself, to the situation he is in, to find a space for expression, one suitable for the original statement. Only then is there a change for a proper understanding with the reader of the target text, for a proper rendering of the original idea.³⁶ Rosner has accurately addressed this issue in her analysis of Gadamer's philosophy of language. She stated that the translator must, in a way, fuse his own horizon with the horizon of the text he is translating – then this text can actually tell some-

³⁵ Ibid, p. 67–68.

³⁶ H.-G. Gadamer, *Man and Language*, op. cit., p. 67.

thing to the translator, as well as to the recipient of the target text.³⁷ Still it seems that there is another difficulty implicated in this – since the space of speaking, for which the translator searches, is in its essence endless and, surely, ambiguous, this must also indicate the multitude of approaches the translator may have to the target text. The translator can always improve the message, make it more explicit or profound. At each reading of a ready translation the translator tends to enhance its various spheres, even to the extent of complete change of his understanding of the original – sometimes only upon completion of the translation he sees a proper reading of the original. This relates closely to the way of understanding the original, that is, its interpretation, which is dealt with in the following part of the article.

Translation as interpretation

As we concluded earlier, understanding takes place in language. We must also add that it is realised through interpretation. It is good to return at this point to Gadamer's words from the previous part of this article, saying that every translation is interpretation.³⁸ This concerns both oral translation (which, in English, is called *interpreting*³⁹) and – maybe even to a greater extent – written translation. Therefore, this part of the article is devoted mainly to the translation of texts and its relationship with the process of interpretation.⁴⁰

Referring to the issue of written translation, Gadamer invokes the aspect of understanding of texts. He points to the fact that the translator, irrespective of how he empathizes with the author of the original, must recreate the texts appropriately, and not limit himself solely to repeating the psychical process of writing the original. At the same time he highlights the necessity of interpretation on the translator's side.⁴¹ Without it, the text cannot constitute itself in the structure of linguisticity; in other

³⁷ K. Rosner, *Gadamerowskie rozumienie...*, op. cit., p. 177.

³⁸ In his article entitled *Text and Interpretation*, Gadamer states that even literal translation is interpretation (H.-G. Gadamer, *Text and Interpretation*, [in:] *The Gadamer Reader...*, op. cit., p. 170).

³⁹ However, in this article it was decided to use the expression *oral translation* so as not to mistake it for interpreting and interpretation as questions described in a different meaning and context.

⁴⁰ This article focuses mainly on written translation in the general meaning of the term, without separating it between literary or functional texts. Cf. H.-G. Gadamer, *Text...*, op. cit., where the author analyses literary texts separately.

⁴¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 387.

words, “the concept of text presents itself only in the context of interpretation, and only from the point of view of interpretation is there an authentic given to be understood.”⁴² It seems then that it is in fact interpretation which gives the text the property of being, its originality and capacity for understanding – without it, the text is only a string of words and expressions, an artificial creation with no opportunity of finding understanding. Text – which Gadamer sees as a hermeneutical concept, as a phase in the event of understanding⁴³ – and interpretation are inextricably bound. This is of utmost importance in the context of written translation, because even the first contact between the translator and the text determines the quality of the translation. We must also remember about the mastery of the foreign language by the translator – undoubtedly, the process of translation is also determined by the way the content is understood. Therefore, translation is interpretation. Gadamer specifies the meaning of the term by saying that interpretation takes place when the translator wants to bring out from the original text some extremely important element, and, at the same time, it comes down to concealing or ignoring other elements contained in the text. Therefore, he must come to a compromise – the translator, as an interpreter, focuses on those features of the text which in his opinion are decisive of the final understanding of the message. Hence there is some highlighting in the process of translation. Some elements are drawn to the foreground, while some are completely eliminated. As we said before, every translation makes the original sound flat; a translation can never fully express the full spectrum of colours of the source text, and similarly to the process of interpretation, the translator must present his stance, how he understands the source text, even if the target text contains some elements that are totally unclear:

A translator must understand that highlighting is part of his task. Obviously he must not leave open whatever is not clear to him. He must show his colors. Yet there are borderline cases in the original (and for the “original reader”) where something is in fact unclear. But precisely there hermeneutical borderline cases show the straits in which the translator constantly finds himself. Here he must resign himself. He must state clearly how he understands. But since he is always in the position of not really being able to express all the dimensions of his text, he must make a constant renunciation.⁴⁴

⁴² H.-G. Gadamer, *Text and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 168.

⁴³ *Ibid*, p. 169.

⁴⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 388.

Every translator, then, is an interpreter. The interpretation of a translated text is a specific hermeneutical task – giving meaning to the written signs. It is the translator – as an interpreter – who brings the matter of the text to life. Gadamer compares this to oral translation, which facilitates reaching an agreement precisely because the translation is present at the conversation. In the case of written translation, the interpreter must take part in the meaning of the text; therefore he must also take part in a specific conversation, but here – according to Gadamer – it is a hermeneutical conversation. In many respects it resembles an ordinary conversation between two people, because here also we must agree to one common language, understood by both parties, and the process of working out this common language overlaps the process of reaching an understanding and getting to an agreement. The interpreter communicates with the text in a similar fashion to the partners in a conversation – his task is to work out a common language, and this is done by means of understanding the message, and, in a way, reaching an agreement in terms of the content and the subject described in this message.⁴⁵ Gadamer compares interpretation to conversation by saying that it is “a circle closed by the dialectic of question and answer.”⁴⁶ If we relate this idea to the process of translation, it means the the source text presents some questions for the translator. If he understands these questions, it means that he understands the text as well. If the translator reaches this specific horizon of questions, he will also understand the text itself, which also contains the questions to the said questions. However, what is important here is reaching the so-called hermeneutical horizon.

As we said before, the interpreter, or, in our case, the translator, takes part in the meaning of a text. This means that the ideas and views of the translator, that is, the so-called horizon of the interpreter, also have a say in the process of translation. Gadamer goes as far as to claim that in the process of interpretation, we cannot avoid interference from our own thoughts or concepts, because without it the meaning of the text becomes completely unclear.⁴⁷ Gadamer highlights, however, that although this horizon is significant, it is only important when it presents an opportunity, or a view, which can facilitate in understanding a text.⁴⁸ It seems that interpretation and understanding are two aspects of the same process, and we can say

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 389–390.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p. 391.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p. 397.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p. 390.

that the two intertwine each other. Interpretation is in fact, according to Gadamer, a means of realizing understanding,⁴⁹ although it does not lead to coming to an understanding, but is rather its constituting element. Understanding determines interpretation, and interpretation determines further understanding. How a translator interprets the contents influences how the recipients of the target text understand it. Interpretation is, in a way, bringing life to the text and allowing its being – thanks to it a text can actually say anything, especially in reference to the readers of a translation. Without a doubt, however, since the process of interpretation involves the interpretation horizon, it must remain unusually subjective. There is no proper and established interpretation. We can see this clearly in the case of translation: firstly, it is reflected in the degree of difference between the translation of the same original text; secondly, every recipient of a translation reads it differently and colours it with his interpretation, which creates, in a way, an infinite circle of interpretation – a circle of endless questions and answers. One text (in this case, the source text) becomes an infinite spectrum of possibilities of expressing a statement. This is of particular relevance to written translation – a translator can ask the source text numerous questions, and receive equally numerous answers. The recipients of the target text, the translation, share a similar situation as the translator. Each of them approaches the translation in his own specific fashion, burdened by his own life experiences, including those of a sociological, psychological, or cultural nature. They also interpret the text they are given. They understand the ideas contained in the text precisely because they can supplement them with their own views and opinions. When we approach a text too literally and we do not enhance its message with our own thoughts, the text becomes something really unintelligible, its sense washes away and cannot be specified.

This process of interpretation is significantly more complex than in the case of a conversation between two people. While in a conversation or oral translation we can use gestures, repeat, or, simply, explain certain phrases, in the case of written translation the translator cannot communicate with the original author when reading the source text (although there are some exceptions to it). Gadamer points here to the fact that the text itself must open a horizon for interpretation and understanding. Writing is not only recording that which had been said, but it also takes into account what happens outside it – it considers its reader and wants to know how he

⁴⁹ Ibid.

understands the text he reads. The author always looks for an understanding with his reader.⁵⁰ Following Gadamer's thoughts we can come to a conclusion that in the case of translation, the written translator seeks an understanding with the author of the source text. Due to the fact that the translator can be described as a secondary author, he strives also to establish an understanding with the readers of the target text, but he does so by making a specific contact with the primary author. The translator tries then to grasp the primary meaning of the message, or, using Gadamer's terminology, the original message. Both the author and the reader, and therefore, also the interpreter (here: translator) must make the text speak again, to make it be heard. The person who reads and understands the text restores its original authenticity. The interpreter always appears when the contents of the message are disputable and when its understanding is extremely important. According to Gadamer, "a text is not an object but a phase in the fulfillment of an event of understanding."⁵¹ The meaning of a message comes down therefore not to that which the author would say, but rather to that which a partner in a conversation would say, if he was a real person. This is especially relevant in the process of written translation. If we assume that a text is a phase in coming to an understanding, the role of the translator is surely not the recreation of this text, but rather creating it anew, after agreeing to its meaning.⁵² The translator creates a new quality of the text – it is both something secondary to the original, but also something primary to the readers, and to the translator. Since, as we said before, the translator, as an interpreter, enhances the text with his own experiences, thoughts, and ideas, we must also highlight the fact that in his interpretation he is already creating a text specific only to himself. Therefore we can conclude that no text is a being established once and for all, no text is a being-in-itself, but is rather a starting point for the creation of a multitude of meanings, a starting point of an endless hermeneutical conversation composing of questions and answers.

We have concluded that understanding and interpretation remain inseparable. What remains to be added to the hermeneutical process is, as mentioned above, application. Gadamer claims that a text is understood

⁵⁰ H.-G. Gadamer, *Text and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 172–173.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 173.

⁵² This meaning is essential in the process of translation. Gadamer goes as far as to claim that the translator should recognize and eliminate the so-called filling material (rhetoric) which does not have any influence on the meaning of the message. However, the case is completely different in literary works. (H.-G. Gadamer, *Text and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 177.)

only when we look at it differently every time, always from a different perspective.⁵³ Every translator, when reading a source text, understands it in his specific fashion – as we cannot establish one universal mode of understanding. At the same time, it does not mean that every translator who translates the same message, is conveying a different message. The meaning is usually the same, but each rendition of a text is characterized by its unique features determining its reception among readers in the target language. The role of the translator – to emphasize once again – is not to recreate it, but rather to place it in the situation the text is currently in, and the situation the translator is currently in. Here is where that hermeneutical process fulfils, the process whose elements are understanding, interpretation, and consequently, understanding.

Finally, let us briefly discuss the role of the translator as the interpreter. To invoke Gadamer once again, the role of the interpreter, and therefore, of the translator, is to eliminate from a text the element of the specific foreignness, an element which obstructs the proper understanding of a message. The interpreter is an individual who acts as a proxy between, firstly, the author of the source text and the readers of the target text; secondly, between the source text and the target text; thirdly, between the target text and its readers. Gadamer also highlights the fact that upon achieving understanding, the interpreter is no longer needed and completely disappears. This does not mean that his contribution to the text ceases to be visible – the interpreter disappears in the text, but not as the text itself.⁵⁴ And indeed, when we read a translated text in a target language we are usually unaware of the the translator's (acting as the interpreter) contribution to the final, translated product – with the exception being, of course, the situation when the translation is confronted by a translation scholar or linguist, who evaluates the text from a completely different perspective than the so-called ordinary reader. Let us once again quote Gadamer, who says that if the interpreter manages to overcome the said element of foreignness in the text and contributes to a better understanding of the message by the reader, then, in such case, the interpreter disappears; yet it “is not a disappearance in any negative sense; rather, it is an entering into the communication in such a way that the tension between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader is resolved.”⁵⁵ When translating a text, the translator will for-

⁵³ H.-G. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, op. cit., p. 320.

⁵⁴ H.-G. Gadamer, *Text and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 168.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

ever remain in it, but not in a visible manner,⁵⁶ but rather as a fixed element of the process of reaching an understanding which penetrated the structure of the text and enabled further understanding, interpretation, and application, and, therefore, further hermeneutical conversation. To quote Gadamer, thanks to the interpreter “the tension between the horizon of the text and the horizon of the reader is resolved. I have called this a «fusion of horizons».”⁵⁷ We can also add that in the prepared translation the horizon of the translator also disappears. Because of the fusion of all of the possible horizons, a new quality is born – that of understanding.

Conclusion

The article presents the specificity of the act of translation, both oral and written, in the light of Gadamer’s hermeneutical philosophy of language. According to the philosopher, translation is a specific hermeneutical experience, and as such is as multidimensional as hermeneutical conversation. Translation is, first of all, a linguistic act involving individuals who, in most cases, communicate in two different languages. Therefore, their communication is obstructed. Translation doubles the hermeneutical process and is a situation of a specific distance between the translator and the other party of the conversation – no matter if the message was uttered by a person, in the case of oral translation, or if the message is a source text written by a concrete author, in the case of written translation. This distance poses a significant barrier for the translator to overcome. Yet there are also other obstacles in achieving an understanding, such as insufficient language proficiency of the translator, setting the message in an incorrect context, assuming a stance which is far from being neutral to the ideas or views of the participants of the conversation, multitude of meanings contained in the source message, lack of compromise against aspects of untranslatability, or difficulties stemming from the possibility of translating the source message in multiple ways.

The understanding of the source and target text is closely connected with its interpretation, an issue intrinsic to the process of translation. Translation, seen as interpretation, causes the text to appear in somewhat exaggerated or discoloured or, in some cases, to be significantly downgraded.

⁵⁶ Here we do not take into account the concept of translator’s visibility, manifested, for example, in explanatory footnotes.

⁵⁷ H.-G. Gadamer, *Text and Interpretation*, op. cit., p. 168–169.

These issues are, however, unavoidable in translation. The translator, acting as the interpreter, faces a specific hermeneutical task – he enables an understanding which would otherwise be only partial, or totally impossible, at that. The translator is a part of the meaning of a message – a specific hermeneutical conversation comprising in an exchange of questions and answers. Interpretation, which always is a strictly subjective process, is immediately connected with understanding, and consequently, with reaching an understanding. The translator, in his labours, aims at developing an understanding between the author of the source message and the recipients of the target text, which also illustrates the specific doubling of the hermeneutical process. Therefore, the translator creates a completely new text, a new message. Translation cannot be reduced to simple recreation, and should rather be regarded as an original text developed on the basis of a separate message, spoken or written. The translator, according to Gadamer, should be seen as a negotiator – a person who mediates in the process of understanding. In a way, the translator is always present in a text, not as a concrete person, but as one of the elements of the process of achieving an understanding between the two parties.

Gadamer's remarks and comments remain astonishingly valid in contemporary translation theory. They present a wide spectrum of possible interpretations and original thoughts on the process of translation and the translator's role in it. They also prove to be great nourishment for critical thought on the specificity of the phenomenon of translation and can allow for the development of new solutions that would improve the quality of new translations.

S U M M A R Y

The aim of this paper is to present H. G. Gadamer's point of view in relation to the process of translation and the role of translator. The ideas come from the following sources: *Truth and Method*, *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, *The Gadamer Reader. A Bouquet of the Later Writings*. In this article the act of translation is seen as a specific hermeneutical experience and described in terms of obstructed understanding and interpretation. The translator, according to Gadamer, faces many difficulties and barriers that are closely linked to insufficient language proficiency, setting the message in an incorrect context, not being neutral to the ideas or views of the participants of the conversation, multitude of meanings in the source message, lack of compromise against aspects of untranslatability, or difficulties arising from the possibility of translating the source message in many different ways. What is more, it turns out that the translator is an interpreter and a negotiator, and its role is to allow for an understanding

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between two parties of conversation, including hermeneutical conversation. Gadamer's views on the process of translation are still applied today in modern translation theory and can inspire many translators to look at the phenomenon of translation from a completely different perspective.