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**THE RELEVANCE OF WITTGENSTEIN'S THOUGHT FOR  
PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS**

**The Problem of Translation between the *Tractatus* and  
*Philosophical Investigations***

**Abstract:** The present paper aims to bring to light the relevance of Wittgenstein's thought for philosophical hermeneutics. In this sense it offers a thorough discussion of the Austrian philosopher's understanding of the concept of translation through a detailed examination of its development from its first formulation in the context of the picture theory of meaning in the *Tractatus* to its reformulation as "language game" and "form of life" within the use theory put forth in *Philosophical Investigations*.

The paper argues that the skepticism towards the history of everyday language implied by Wittgenstein's understanding of translation could be taken as an important step forward in the development of a critical dimension of philosophical hermeneutics.

**Key words:** Wittgenstein, picture theory of language, translation, language games, philosophical hermeneutics, Gadamer

Even though not all of Wittgenstein's manuscripts have been published so far, the insights of the Austrian philosopher into the matters of language and logic are well known, having been a central topic of discussion for the Anglo-Saxon philosophical scene in the last decades. This is why we could say that British and American philosophy would be totally different without Wittgenstein's thought.

In recent times though, some of the most important continental philosophers such as Paul Ricoeur, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Christopher Norris to name only a few, have acknowledged the importance of Wittgenstein also for continental philosophy.

For example, in *The Phenomenological Movement* (1963), when discussing how the problematic of language has become a central topic of investigation in phenomenology Gadamer writes:

"Hence we must still give some attention to the noteworthy convergence of traditions as opposed to each other as transcendental phenomenology and Anglo-Saxon positivism. The connection between intending and speaking (the 'hiatus of the word') acquired a positive side in William James, as Linchoten shows so well. But only in the life and work of Ludwig Wittgenstein does it have its full effect - an impact that was felt first of all in England."<sup>1</sup>

In *Between Phenomenology and Dialectics*, on the other hand, Gadamer acknowledges the great importance of Wittgenstein's thought for his hermeneutical project saying that he regrets he has not had the possibility to read Wittgenstein's later work only when it was too late.<sup>2</sup> And later on, in one of his last published books - an extended interview with Riccardo Dottori - the German philosopher goes so far as to say that he finds himself in complete agreement with Wittgenstein's late thought.<sup>3</sup>

What Gadamer does not tell us though is *why* Wittgenstein's thought can be of importance for his hermeneutic project and for philosophical hermeneutics in general? Precisely *what aspects* of Wittgenstein's thought bear hermeneutic relevance?

As it is well known, ever since Schleiermacher the task of translation is a central theme of hermeneutics. It was touched upon by every hermeneutic philosopher and its importance is shown as clearly as possible in Gadamer's thought, who explicitly tells us that *to understand is to translate*<sup>4</sup>.

For this reason we believe that one of the best ways to answer the questions above would be to bring to light how this problem is put in Wittgenstein and how it is developed between *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations* - the most important works of the first and, respectively, the second period of Wittgenstein's thought.

### **The problematic character of translation in the *Tractatus***

What is translation? What it means to translate a text or a discourse from one language into another? These are the questions through which we have to approach Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. To these questions the answer we find *seems* as clear and simple as possible:

"4.025. – When translating one language into another, we do not proceed by translating each *proposition* of the one into a *proposition* of the other, but merely by translating the constituents of propositions. (And the dictionary translates not only substantives, but also verbs, adjectives, and conjunctions, etc.; and it treats them all in the same way.)"<sup>5</sup>

For someone acquainted with the theory of translation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century this answer sounds like "the principle of the economy of translation" affirmed by Derrida in *What Is a Relevant Translation?*<sup>6</sup>. But does Wittgenstein say this or, better, *only* this? Certainly, according to this proposition, a linguistic utterance, in order to be called a translation of another, would have to have the exact same number of words as the one translated. But, what is interesting is that for Wittgenstein this does not define the "perfect translation", as for Derrida, but any translation whatsoever. It is clear now that Wittgenstein's view on translation has a certain peculiarity. The question is in what resides this peculiarity? In order to arrive at an answer we should get back to the first two parts of the *Tractatus* (traditionally called by the exegesis the "ontological part" and the "epistemological part") where the famous "picture theory" is formulated, for there the meaning of the concepts of "proposition" and "word" are discussed.

Wittgenstein's "austere outline of a metaphysical system"<sup>7</sup>, as David G. Stern puts it, is constituted around three key terms: "object", "atomic fact" and "fact". "1. – The world is all that is the case."<sup>8</sup>; "The world is everything that is the case.". The object, the fundamental unity of Wittgenstein's view on the world, is the substance of what is the case, but it, as such, is not part of it. For the substance of the world - that which is the simple in itself<sup>9</sup> - to become a part of the world it is necessary, on the one hand, to be articulated into an "atomic fact". An "atomic fact" is a *possible determined combination of objects*. Considering the proposition 2.012. of the *Tractatus* which says that:

"In logic nothing is accidental: if a thing *can* occur in a state of affairs, the possibility of the state of affairs must be written into the thing itself."<sup>10</sup>

...we understand that the possibility of this articulation of the object into an atomic fact resides in the object himself.

On the other hand, the substance of the world can become part of the world if and only if the atomic fact, as possibility, is actualized, gains existence. In Wittgenstein's terms, this means that it is transformed into a *fact*.

"2. – What is the case – a fact – is the existence of states of affairs."<sup>11</sup>

Trying to avoid all psychologism in what concerns the matter of how we gain knowledge of our world Wittgenstein says only this:

"2.1. – We picture facts to ourselves."<sup>12</sup>

This possibility to make for ourselves pictures of the facts is due to an one on one relationship between the structure of facts (the determined manner in which the objects enter into relationships with each other) and the structure of the picture. Otherwise put, we can make pictures of the facts because the facts and the pictures we make have in common a "form of representation"<sup>13</sup>. Due to this "form of representation", "In a

picture the elements of the picture are the representatives of objects."<sup>14</sup>, and for this reason "A picture is a model of reality."<sup>15</sup>

In order to understand correctly the concept of "proposition" in Wittgenstein we have to make a clarification. Even though the proposition 2.1. cited above speaks of "facts", when we are talking about the world, the form of representation is the *logical form* and what is really represented is not the fact as such, but the *atomic fact*. The logical form represents the possible within the logical space and this is why a picture of the world can be whether true or false; it can represent the world adequately or not. If what is represented had not been the atomic fact but the fact as such, it would have been impossible for a picture to misrepresent the world, to be false, all pictures being *a priori* true. This is evident in Wittgenstein's text, for the philosopher says explicitly:

"2.225. – There are no pictures that are true a priori."<sup>16</sup>

"2.21. – A picture agrees with reality or fails to agree; it is correct or incorrect, true or false.

2.22. – What a picture represents it represents independently of its truth or falsity, by means of its pictorial form.

2.221. – What a picture represents is its sense.

3. – A logical picture of facts is a thought."<sup>17</sup>

Now the mystery of the concepts of "proposition" and "word" and the perfect symmetry between ontology and epistemology in Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* can be revealed. Considering the fact that the proposition expresses our thought, i.e. a logical picture of the world according to the passage quoted above, we understand that its peculiarity resides in the following characteristics:

1. *The proposition is articulated.* This means that it is not a mixture of words. The proposition has a determined structure which corresponds perfectly to the structure of the atomic fact represented in the logical picture of the world.
2. *Only the proposition has sense* because only it (considered as a whole and as an expression of our thought) can represent the world. Similarly to the object which is the substance of the world, the word as such is the simple constituent part of the proposition which can have only *meaning*. The *sense* is the truth value of the description of the atomic fact; the *meaning* is the correspondent in the logical space of the object. As Wittgenstein says: "3.203. – A name means an object. The object is its meaning. ('A' is the same sign as 'A')." <sup>18</sup>. "3.3. – Only propositions have sense" <sup>19</sup>

Keeping in mind this perspective on the concepts of "proposition" and "word" ("sense" and "meaning") on the one hand, and, on the other, Wittgenstein's formulation of the task of translation quoted above, we understand that for the Austrian philosopher, in contrast to an entire tradition inaugurated by Cicero, what it is to be translated is not the *sense* as such but the *meaning*. Otherwise put, and this is the paradoxical conclusion to which Wittgenstein's insights lead, the act of translation can be fulfilled exceptionally by anyone having a good bilingual dictionary at his disposal and even though he does not have linguistic competence in either the language from which he translates, or in the language in which he translates.

If we put this conclusion closer to Gadamer's view on the matter, rephrasing it in the terms of Greek philosophy, we could say that for Wittgenstein the act of translation is related to *techne* (that field of human activity that is governed by rules and that can be learnt) and not to *phronesis* (the knowledge presupposed by the social life, that cannot be learnt, nor thought and in the case of which the rule is not a means but an end in itself, something to which you have to arrive). We see now that Wittgenstein's view straightly contradicts Gadamer's because, for the German philosopher, the case is precisely the other way around<sup>20</sup>. Of course, this is not the problem as such for Gadamer himself can be mistaking. The problem is, rather, is Wittgenstein right or not? The answer to this question, for anyone who has ever tried to translate a linguistic utterance from one language to another, is clearly negative. In the great majority of cases a bilingual dictionary, even a good one, does not help much. Not even the linguistic competence in either of the two languages guarantees the quality of the translation. The act of translation always presupposes something in addition to this and for this reason it is traditionally considered an *art*.

As it is well known, in the 30's Wittgenstein gave up completely the Tractarian perspective (considering it dogmatic) in favor of a view on language formulated in terms of "language games". But, is this new view on language more suitable for an explanation of the act of translation?

### **Translation as language game in *Philosophical Investigations*. Wittgenstein's silent contribution to hermeneutics**

In order to understand the peculiarity of the problematic of translation in *Philosophical Investigations*, in our opinion, the best way to follow would be to clarify firstly the difference between what it is traditionally called by the exegesis "the first" and "the second" Wittgenstein.

The fundamental presupposition underlying Wittgenstein's *Tractatus* is the idea that a sustained analysis or a process of conceptual decomposition, in the case of both the world and our language eventually leads to something that cannot be decomposed any more (for it is the simple as such) and this is precisely the thing that makes them possible. In what concerns our language, this thing that cannot be decomposed any more and which constitutes its possibility is the *word*.<sup>21</sup> In what concerns the world this thing is, correspondingly, the *object*. This presupposition is affirmed explicitly in the *Tractatus* when Wittgenstein says:

"2.0201. – Every statement about complexes can be resolved into a statement about their constituents and into the propositions that describe the complexes completely."<sup>22</sup>

A close reading of *Philosophical Investigations* shows us that this is precisely the presupposition Wittgenstein gives up in his second period after returning to Cambridge in 1929:

"47 – But what are the simple constituent parts of which reality is composed? – What are the simple constituent parts of a chair? – The bits of wood of which it is made? Or the molecules, or the atoms? –

"Simple" means: not composite. And here the point is: in what sense 'composite'? It makes no sense at all to speak absolutely of the 'simple parts of a chair'." (my highlighting)<sup>23</sup>

We now understand that it is nonsensical to speak, in absolute, of simple constituent parts of an armchair because the meaning of a word, in contrast to what the *Tractatus* says, is not simply the object to which the word points. The meaning is also dependent on the *sense* of the proposition in which it is uttered. The most important consequence of this new way of putting the problem of simplicity and complexity is the fact that from now on the meaning is to be identified with the *usage*:

"43 - For a large class of cases—though not for all—in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. And the meaning of a name is sometimes explained by pointing to its bearer."<sup>24</sup>

As David G. Stern observes in *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*:

"In his post-*Tractatus* writing, Wittgenstein gave up the picture theory for the view that philosophy should not provide a theory of meaning at all: one should look at how words are actually used and explained, rather than construct elaborate fictions about how they must work. While his new strategy leads him to stress the how words are used when he discusses attempts to give a general theory of what words mean, he never offered a 'use' theory to replace the picture theory."<sup>25</sup>

But, if there are not simple elements as such, there cannot be atomic propositions (indecomposable propositions that describe a single fact) either. According to the Tractarian view on the matter, inasmuch as every word of a proposition points to an object within the fact it describes, the rule that governs the formation of our propositions is the *structure of the fact* (through the "form of representation"). According to *Philosophical Investigations* on the other hand, inasmuch as the meaning is the usage, every proposition is caught up in a chain of relations with all the others; and the rule that governs its formation is, rather, something like a *road sign* that always leaves open the possibility of a doubt<sup>26</sup>. This means that the rules which govern our use of language vary considerably with the socio-natural context in which they are applied. In fact, as Hans-Georg Gadamer observes, they are very similar to those by which children's games are played.<sup>27</sup> This is why, in this second period, Wittgenstein does not speak of "propositions" any more, but of "language games".

What is a language game? To this question Wittgenstein's answer is this:

"There are *countless* kinds [...] And this multiplicity is not something fixed, given once for all; but new types of language, new language-games, as we may say, come into existence, and others become obsolete and get forgotten. [...]

Here the term '*language-game*' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life.

Review the multiplicity of language-games in the following examples, and in others:

Giving orders, and obeying them –

Describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements –

Constructing an object from a description (a drawing) –

Reporting an event –

Speculating about an event – [...]

Making up a story; and reading it – [...]

Translating from one language into another. (my highlighting)"<sup>28</sup>

Now it seems to be the time to ask again the questions that concern us: What is translation? What it means to translate an utterance from one language to another? In this second period, Wittgenstein does not offer a direct answer as he did in the *Tractatus* but, certainly, this does not mean that an indirect answer cannot be found.

Keeping in mind the fact that Wittgenstein does not reject explicitly anywhere his idea concerning the act of translation formulated in the *Tractatus* we can assume that in this second period still the meaning/word are to be translated. But, because now the meaning is the usage and it depends totally on the language game in which it is "put into play" we understand that translation cannot be identified anymore with something like a mechanical process which can be performed automatically.

So, we can say that for the late Wittgenstein any attempt to render an utterance into another language is obliged to render the entire language game in which the word is found and, on a grand scale, the language as such to which it belongs<sup>29</sup>. On the other hand, inasmuch the rules by which the language game is played are not arbitrary, but depend on a previous agreement of the speakers<sup>30</sup> - on the social and natural context of their lives - the translation of an utterance will be as well the transposition of this "form of life" from one language to another. *In every act of translation what it is to be translated is the meaning of the words, and this will imply the sense of the language game and will engage the entire life of the translator. Again: "Here the term 'language-game' is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life. (my highlighting)"<sup>31</sup>*

These being said we believe that Wittgenstein's relevance for philosophical hermeneutics becomes apparent. As we have noted at the beginning of our paper, for Gadamer, the act of translation is the exemplary case for the problematic of understanding because it and only it can render explicit the linguistic conditions of possibility of any understanding whatsoever. This is why in *Truth and Method* he writes: "every translation is at the same time an interpretation."<sup>32</sup>

Again, for the German philosopher, by contrast with Schleiermacher or Dilthey, to understand a linguistic utterance, be it a text or a discourse, is not to reconstruct the author's subjective intention that lies behind it. Rather, it means to apply the *entire* linguistic horizon<sup>33</sup> of the text or discourse to yours, to transpose the language as such in which the text was written within your language, opening in this way the possibility for a *fusion of these hermeneutic horizons*:

“Understanding, rather, is always the fusion of these horizons which we imagine to exist by themselves.”<sup>34</sup>

And again as for Wittgenstein, for Gadamer language is not simply a tool or an instrument for our communication, but *the* means through which we make the experience of our world and the medium in which we live. Otherwise put, language is a “form of life” specific to the community of its speakers.

We now understand that Wittgenstein arrives to the exact same fundamental conclusions as Gadamer. But, Wittgenstein’s greatest merit and, through this, his silent contribution to hermeneutics is given by the pathway he has chosen to follow. In contrast to the entire hermeneutic tradition, for Wittgenstein “A philosophical problem has the form: ‘I don’t know my way about!’.”<sup>35</sup> and this is why, in his view the task of philosophy is a grammatical one. As the philosopher himself puts it:

“Our investigation is therefore a grammatical one. Such an investigation sheds light on our problem by clearing misunderstandings away. Misunderstandings concerning the use of words, caused, among other things, by certain analogies between the forms of expression in different regions of language.”<sup>36</sup>

There is here a sensitiveness to the grammar of our propositions, a skepticism about the history of our everyday language that, in our opinion, it is very much needed in hermeneutics. Knowing that any thought is a thinking from within a tradition, almost all hermeneutic philosophies have the tendency to take for granted any view upon a matter at hand that language brings about, that is, it has the tendency to overlook some of its prejudgments. This is why it can be said along with Habermas that all hermeneutic projects lack the appropriate distance for the possibility of critique.

Probably, the most striking example in this case is given precisely by the interpretations *Truth and Method* received in the ‘60s and ‘70s, right after its publication. Just because in *Truth and Method* Gadamer speaks of *Wirkungsgesch Bewusstsein*, of “effective historical *consciousness*” the first interpreters of his work have mistakenly believed that he wants to point a way for acquiring a superior knowledge of history. But, in fact, what this term designates is related rather to *being* than *consciousness*<sup>37</sup>. The accent should be put on *-sein* rather than *Bewusst-*, for the “effective historical *consciousness*” does not have anything to do with knowledge, but with the *way we live our lives*.

It is clear that what we have here is “The tendency to look for something in common to all the entities which we commonly subsume under a general term”<sup>38</sup> against which Wittgenstein warns us in *The Blue Book*. And again, it is clear that a careful look to these “tendencies” identified by the Austrian philosopher would help any hermeneutic research to be more honest and more truthful to its goals.

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- <sup>1</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, "The Phenomenological Movement" in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 173.
- <sup>2</sup> H.-G. Gadamer, "Entre phénoménologie et dialectique. Essai d'autocritique" in *L'Art de Comprendre. Ecrits 2*, 12. Another reference to the Austrian Philosopher, stating the same thing, can be found in the *Preface to the Second Edition of Truth and Method*.
- <sup>3</sup> Gadamer notes: "I could very easily say, 'You see, I am really in complete agreement with the late Wittgenstein, and I call that hermeneutics!'" (See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy. A Conversation with Riccardo Dottoli*, 74)
- <sup>4</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 346.
- <sup>5</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 25.
- <sup>6</sup> "To make legitimate use of the word *translation* (*traduction, Übersetzung, traducción, translacião*, and so forth), in the rigorous sense conferred on it over several centuries by a long and complex history in a given cultural situation (more precisely, more narrowly, in Abrahamic and post-Lutheran Europe), the translation must be *quantitatively* equivalent to the original, apart from any paraphrase, explication, explicitation, analysis, and the like. [...] This quantitative unit of measurement is not in itself quantitative; it is rather qualitative in a certain sense. It is not a question of measuring a homogenous space or the weight of a book, nor even of yielding to an arithmetic of signs and letters; it is not a question of counting the *number of words*, of lexical units called words. The unit of measurement is the unit of word. The philosophy of translation, the ethics of translation - if translation does in fact have these things - *today* aspires to be a philosophy of the word, a linguistics or ethics of the word. At the beginning of translation is the word." (See J. Derrida, *What Is a Relevant Translation?*, 179-180).
- <sup>7</sup> David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, 9.
- <sup>8</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.
- <sup>9</sup> "2.02. Objects are simple." (See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 31).
- <sup>10</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6. See also 2.0123.
- <sup>11</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 5.
- <sup>12</sup> *Idem*, 9.
- <sup>13</sup> See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 2.15., 10.
- <sup>14</sup> *Idem*, 2.131., 10.
- <sup>15</sup> *Idem*, 2.12., 9. In the German edition of the *Tractatus* the word that stands for "transposition" is *Modell*.
- <sup>16</sup> *Idem*, 12.
- <sup>17</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 12.
- <sup>18</sup> *Idem*, 15.
- <sup>19</sup> *Idem*, 16.
- <sup>20</sup> For Gadamer, as it is well known, the act of translation has the character of a model for the act of understanding, and the knowledge presupposed by understanding as such is a kind of *phronesis*. (See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 345 - 351 and 278 - 289).
- <sup>21</sup> "3.23 - The requirement that simple signs be possible is the requirement that sense be determinate." (Cf. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 15).
- <sup>22</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 7.
- <sup>23</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, 21.
- <sup>24</sup> *Idem*, 20-21.
- <sup>25</sup> David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, 41.
- <sup>26</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, # 85, 39-40.
- <sup>27</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Phenomenological Movement in Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 175.

<sup>28</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #23, 127-128.

<sup>29</sup> Wittgenstein himself in *The Blue Book* says: "The sign (the sentence) gets its significance from the system of signs, from the language to which it belongs. Roughly: understanding a sentence means *understanding a language*. (my highlighting)" (See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 5).

<sup>30</sup> Even though it might sound as such, this conclusion does not lead to relativism. We should be very attentive to this point for, as David G. Stern rightly observes, "Wittgenstein distinguishes between what is said in language, and the agreement that language presupposes" (See David G. Stern, *Wittgenstein on Mind and Language*, 102) and this can be seen as clear as possible in *Philosophical Investigations* where the philosopher states: "So you are saying that human agreement decides what is true and what is false?" – It is what human beings *say* that is true and false; and they agree in the *language* they use. That is not agreement in opinions but in form of life." (See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, # 241, 210; see also #240 and #242).

<sup>31</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #23, 127.

<sup>32</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 346.

<sup>33</sup> Because of the "speculative character of language" what is said in a proposition is always caught in a chain of relations with the unsaid, with the totality of language if we can say so. (See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 415-416).

<sup>34</sup> *Idem*, 273.

<sup>35</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical investigations*, #123, 49.

<sup>36</sup> *Idem*, #90, 43.

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer himself offers us this explanation in *Entre phénoménologie et dialectique*, 12.

<sup>38</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue Book*, 17.

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