

LANGUAGE AS HERMENEUTIC
Total Verbal Explicitness Is Impossible
A Primer on the Word and Digitization

Walter J. Ong

Prologue

There is no end to interpretation. In its quite ordinary and simple sense, to interpret means to bring out what is concealed in a given manifestation, that is, in a given phenomenon or state of affairs providing information. We can interpret anything that provides information: a sunset, a roll of thunder, a gesture, a person's attitude shown in various ways, an utterance. We do not interpret what is unconcealed or evident in a manifestation, only what is concealed. And something is always concealed. For no manifestation reveals everything. Interpretation itself is a manifestation, and interpretation both reveals and conceals, and hence calls for further interpretation as occasion demands. The definition of interpretation just provided here itself calls for interpretation.

✓ The term "hermeneutic" or "hermeneutics" are ~~the~~ Greek-based analogues or equivalents of our Latin-based term "interpretation." Because "interpretation" is commonly the more generalized term, let us attend to it first.

Interpretation can apply to any sort of thing and can be realized in all sorts of ways, verbal or nonverbal--raised eyebrows, a gesture, a refusal of a proffered gift, a knowing

grin. One can interpret a nonverbal situation or a verbal remark by a wordless mime. Yet words have special relevance to interpretation. Verbal interpretation always involves more than words, as thinking and words themselves always do, yet, like much human communication activity, interpretation reaches a certain special focus in verbal explanation, in words formulated either externally for others or internally for oneself.

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Interpretation not only commonly involves verbalization, verbal explanation, but it also tends to be called for by verbal utterance more readily than by other matters. Verbal utterance often cries for interpretation more than do other phenomena because verbalization is fundamentally interaction between persons who can constantly look for verbal or other explanation or clarification from one another and because the interpretation provided from either side is never totally conclusive in every way. For practical purposes, persons can and do bring explanation to an end and arrive a truth adequate for the current situation, but there always remains more that could be asked and responded to if one wanted to go further. In this sense, verbalization is always a kind of unfinished business. The meeting of minds, the understanding, in a given situation involves not only words but also the nonverbal existential context, which could be subject to further verbalization.

The reflections in the present work, however, focus basically on verbal interpretation and often, though not exclusively, on verbal interpretation of verbal utterance--which

does, of course, always have a nonverbal context, with which we may at times be concerned. But, unless otherwise specified, these reflections focus primarily, then, on verbalized interpretation of verbalized expression.

The Greek-based term "hermeneutics" or "hermeneutic" commonly means much the same as "interpretation," namely explanation, the bringing out of what is concealed in a given state of affairs. But it more commonly refers more explicitly to verbalized interpretation of verbal texts rather than of oral utterance or other phenomena. And hermeneutics commonly refers to such verbalized interpretation which proceeds on more or less formalized methodological principles, as in interpreting the Bible. Hermeneutics is interpretation (in the sense of verbalized explanation) grown self-conscious. But, as Gadamer has so thoroughly shown in his Truth and Method (see also Neil Gilbert, Renaissance Concepts of Method), the concept of formalized methodology is not entirely clear-cut. The terms "interpretation" and "hermeneutics" can never be totally "scientific." Moreover, other extensions of hermeneutics to nonverbal aesthetic material, such as Gadamer discusses, are not to be denied. But they are not our chief focus here. As with interpretation, our chief concern here with hermeneutic or hermeneutics focuses on verbalized explanation of verbal expression, often, but not always, verbal expression in textual form. However, with allowance, where called for, of the tendency of "hermeneutic" or "hermeneutics" to refer to interpretation of

texts, the terms will often be used here in the more general sense as synonymous with "interpretation," in a way in which they are commonly used today and a way which context should make clear.

All sorts of special hermeneutics, or more or less methodical interpretive procedures and theories, have been developed for different sorts of texts--literary, poetic, political, religious, philosophical, scientific, and so on. Elaborate, often deeply insightful procedures for textual hermeneutics have been devised, notably by theologians such as Friedrich Schleiermacher, Rudolph Bultmann, and Jürgen Moltmann, by philosophers such as Wilhelm Dilthey, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Paul Ricoeur, and by hosts of literary commentators, from the Formalists and the New Critics through the Deconstructionists.

A literature is developing that shows how radically the recent growth of hermeneutics as a special verbal activity separate from other verbal activities depends upon writing. Gadamer views formal study of hermeneutics as having been first rooted in the study of texts (Truth and Method, 353). The reason for this, to be discussed in detail later, is that writing provides a visually (and tactilely) fixed set of words to which one can address other words as though the textualized words were somehow things, coming out of the past and set off from the movement of living discourse. Such a scenario is quite impossible to imagine in primary oral cultures (cultures with no

acquaintanceship with writing at all or of its possibility). The text as such seems to be constituted as separate from oral discourse, is given a special status, by the introduction of a technology, writing, which produces a seemingly separate and totally fixed, controllable "object," visual and tactile. On this object, the activity of hermeneutics or interpretation seemingly can be carried on more effectively than on spoken words. However, in ancient Greece of Socrates's day and later, literate but with a high degree of residual orality, hermeneia did not yet have this explicit textual focus but applied equally to spoken words. Paradoxically, of course, interpretation, too, can be and often is ultimately put down--in several senses of this expression--in a text.

This present work consists of reflections on interpretation or hermeneutics rather than of exhaustive analyses. It concerns matters treated in various other ways by persons in many active, and indeed often very fashionable, fields today, literary, linguistic, philosophical, and other. These reflections in many ways cross through works on intellectual and cultural history and the history of consciousness, through phenomenology, structuralism, deconstructionism and antideconstructionism, speech-act theory, reader-response criticism, through a bit of existentialism, and through the vast hermeneutic tradition in philosophy (and sometimes theology) stemming from Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, and others into Gadamer's masterful Truth and Method, as well as through Ricoeur's work and that of

others which focuses many philosophical questions quite explicitly around questions of language.

However, the present reflections do not derive primarily from any of these traditions. Rather, they have been generated more specifically out of concern, spanning the past thirty-five years and more, with the evolution of verbal communication and the gradual but inexorable transformation of verbal expression and of thought from the original spoken word through the technologies of writing, print, and electronics. Hermeneutics or interpretation will differ of course from culture to culture. These reflections are centered on the cultures of the West.

The reflections here presented are, I hope, in many ways closer to readily accessible common experience and common knowledge than are the lengthy formal philosophical traditions concerned with hermeneutics or interpretation and the many other formal and complex linguistic and literary and philosophical traditions mentioned above with which the reflections intersect and interweave and to which they are obviously indebted. Some of the reflections may be commonplace, but in settings, one can hope, which make them less so than they would otherwise be. Some connections with other lines of thought will of course be made explicit, but not all, if only because, as these reflections often bring out, although we should normally strive for all the explicitness a given situation calls for, total explicitness is impossible.

The overall thesis of these reflections is that all use of language from the very beginning is interpretation or hermeneutic. A subsidiary, but still central thesis is that each successive application of a new technology--writing, print, electronics--to language moves language toward greater and greater digitization (reduction of everything to numerically distinct units), creating a greater and greater need for a complementary, integrative interpretation or hermeneutic which is counter-fractioning in its drive to relate everything to everything else, to put all together again, to resituate all in the unbroken web of history, to ambition not fractioning but unitive truth. Moreover, digitization, while it moves in the opposite direction from the holistic drive of hermeneutic, can, paradoxically, be used by hermeneutic to assist hermeneutic's own work, and, conversely, hermeneutic can be applied to explain digitization, as digitization itself can never do but as this work undertakes to do within its own obvious limits. Advanced digitization and advanced hermeneutic are both marks of our age.

Postscript to Prologue

Something needs to be said about the sensory phenomenology at work at the beginning of this Prologue in the statement that "to interpret means to bring out what is concealed in a given manifestation." The terms "concealed" and "manifestation" as well as "bring out," in the fashion common at least since Plato, takes the sense of vision as the analogue for intellectual

knowledge. Intellectual knowledge, which we are doomed to think of as analogous to sensory knowledge, is like seeing, not like hearing or smelling or tasting or touching. In fact, it is like all these sensory activities, although it is true, as many philosophers have been aware, that sight is the sensus maxime cognoscitivus, the sense that gives most "information" (and thus the sense most closely allied to computerized "knowledge" in our day.

But it is not exhaustive to think of interpretation or hermeneutics simply in visualist terms of concealment and information. It is possible to consider explanation or hermeneutics as making what is said or what is in a text "more resonant" (sense analogue for intellectual knowledge, hearing), or "more pungent" or "more odoriferous" (sense analogue, smell), or providing "fuller savor" (sense analogue, taste), or "more palpable" (sense analogue, touch--which would include hotter or colder, or rougher or smoother, or softer or harder, etc). Touch is so minimally abstract that no one knows exactly how many individual senses it encompasses--Geldard has calculated 27--see Ong, Presence 165, 170.

Nevertheless, despite the relevance of these other sense analogues and the greater richness they can bring to our sense of interpretation or hermeneutics, the distancing and dissecting power of vision gives it peculiar power as an analogue of intellectual knowledge in interpretive and hermeneutic operations. For, whatever else they are, these operations are dominantly abstracting and fractioning--which means both advantaged and

constrained. Hermeneutics or interpretation is of itself not without built-in deficiencies.