

## Kalbos ir pažinimo filosofija

# THE ONTOLOGICAL DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE IN H. G. GADAMER'S HERMENEUTICS\*

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**Abstract.** *The subject of the analysis is the problem of interrelation of language, understanding, and being in H.-G. Gadamer's hermeneutics. The analysis is focused on Gadamer's equivocal and ambiguous thesis that "being that can be understood is language". The author reveals the fundamentally ontological background of Gadamer's hermeneutical analysis of language, and critically rethinks the interpretation of this thesis by a prominent researcher Jean Grondin.*

**Keywords:** *language, being, understanding, Gadamer's hermeneutics, Grondin's deontologization*

### Introduction to the question

Referring to Gadamer's thematisation of language, we should start with acknowledging the nature of the actualization of language and, accordingly, the status of language. I would like to specify the meaning of the phrase, "thematisation of language" straight away, so as to avoid all misperceptions concerning the nature of language, as if it could be studied as a separate (albeit, the most important) domain of knowledge, deserving the priority among all other knowledge domains. This question is fundamental and it represents the essential

distinction of Gadamer's hermeneutics of language from many other approaches to the analysis of language.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the title of the third part of *Truth and Method*, namely, "The Ontological Shift of Hermeneutics Guided by Language", makes it obvious that the term "hermeneutics of language" is not equivalent to such expression as "philoso-

<sup>1</sup> In particular, it is important in the context of distinction between linguistic philosophy and philosophy of language, which was offered Searle and Hennigfeld. According to Searle the linguistic philosophy is aimed at permission of philosophical problems through the analysis of language, and the philosophy of language does language as a special subject of her studying (Searle 1974: 3). Hennigfeld agrees with Searle in general, but makes one essential amendment: the criterion of distinction isn't "strict", and therefore there are no insurmountable borders between two philosophical approaches to the problem of language (Hennigfeld 1998: 3f).

\* The ideas presented and developed in this paper have been originally published in Russian language (see Laurukhin 2012).

phy of language”, for instance. The title of the third part rather denotes the guiding role of language in a certain transformation of hermeneutics as such, i.e., of the discipline which allowed language as such for the first time to become a “subject” of study. Moreover, language, being the guiding light, shifts hermeneutics to its own essence – to understanding of its ontological foundations. Thus, Gadamer’s idea literally stemmed from the tradition which was grounded by Heidegger’s statement: the question of the essence of language can only be posed in the context of the fundamental question of meaning of being, and, therefore, the way of fundamental ontology of language is the only possible way (method) of comprehending it (Heidegger 1953: 160-161). But at the same time Gadamer’s philosophy of language has caused a lot of controversy in contemporary philosophy. A number of Gadamer’s researchers and interpreters characterize his hermeneutical approach to language holistically – with due respect to the totality of the linguistic and extralinguistic context. The language in such interpretation is perceived in the light of human existence, the functioning of the world or everyday activities, and is represented as a universal medium through which (and in which) the process of understanding takes place (Bronk 1988; Feher 2000; Flatscher 2005; Di Cesare 2007). Other interpreters emphasize the importance of the living speech as the fundamental basis for the occurrence of this phenomenon and add that the meaning of an utterance is formed to a large extent by certain subjective contents provided by the speaker (Pawliszyn 1993; Sallis 2000; Piecychna 2012). The question about the degree of influence of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology of language on Gad-

amer’s hermeneutics of language deserves special attention. Friedrich-Wilhelm von Hermann’s and Günter Figal’s opposite positions are indicative in this context (Herrmann 2008: 427-477; Figal 2002, 2008). Ambivalence of Gadamer’s philosophy of language is clearly demonstrated by the thesis which could be considered as the recurrent theme of all Gadamer’s reflections on language: “Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache” (Gadamer 1990: 478). On the other hand, the brevity of this thesis has led to a quite ambiguous interpretation given by one of the most prominent interpreters of Gadamer’s philosophy Jean Grondin (2001). This article is aimed at the interpretation of the above-mentioned thesis in disagreement with the interpretation given by Jean Grondin.

### **Jean Grondin’s deontologizing interpretation**

The thesis that “being that can be understood is language” concerns three key issues: being, understanding and language. And it was the question of their correlation that caused the problems and polemic bitterness. Grondin’s way of interpretation runs through philological simplification of expression and intervenes between two such extremes as the absurdity, emerging due to insolubility of contradiction caused by acceptance of the positivist thesis, on one hand, and the unacceptability of taking the Heidegger’s standpoint, on the other. Let us provide a more detailed explanation of what was said above. Grondin suggests conducting the philological experiment which implies the reduction of Gadamer’s above-mentioned expression to the thesis of “being is language”, and thus raises the

question of the possibility of its ontological interpretation (in the spirit of Heidegger's fundamental ontology of language). Grondin asked a rhetorical question: "Is it possible to abandon a descriptive definition detached by commas?"<sup>2</sup> He named two reasons for rejecting such version of interpretation. Foremost, it is impossible considering from the positivist, or so-called common-sense, standpoint, i.e., there is being, that is still unrevealed, unknown, not understood and, consequently, not named, etc., which makes the phrase "being is language" absurd. However, this counter-argument, as well as the entire positivist way of reflection, will be less interesting to us, due to the fact that Gadamer's criticism of positivism casts some doubt on the very possibility of such manner of interpretation. Grondin's thesis on the interrelation of Gadamer's and Heidegger's standpoints seems to be an interpretive perspective that is more interesting and, which is crucial, dealing with the heart of the matter. Thus, Grondin noted that, foremost, the simplified expression "language is being" would gain meaning in the context of Heidegger's philosophy: "The thesis of "language is being" is definitely a meaningful idea for Heidegger due to the fact that only a human being, as a *linguistic being*, has access to "being", is able to experience the "miracle of miracles", that, what an entity "is" in the emphatic "ascendant, revealing" (aufgehenden) sense of the word, there "is" being and this ascension, reviling (Aufgang) of being can be sensed in language" (Grondin 2001: 101). Here Grondin also noted some

cognition, or, to be more precise, not complete extraneity ("wohl nicht ganz fremd") of Gadamer's standpoint and the context of Heidegger's reflection on language. However, referring to this expression he finds much more important and interesting its strange "emphasis which sounds alien to Heidegger". It is exactly what marks the second, "not purely Heidegger's" interpretive line. Let's note the essence of Grondin's interpretive intention: "thus, not every 'being' is language, but only the being that can be understood" (ibid.: 101). The meaning of this phrase and the further elaboration conducted by Grondin was focused on proving the thesis, which implied that the Gadamer's hermeneutic approach, innovative (in comparison with the one of Heidegger) is represented by reduction of ontological component and focusing attention on interrelation of understanding and phenomena of language. "It is assumed, as the context of the sentence teaches us, that '*understood*' being has a necessary linguistic character (as opposed the *not* understood being, which is *not* language). In other words, we refer to the thesis, which implies that the character our understanding is essentially *linguistic*. Therefore, Gadamer's expression does *not* elicit the "ontological" thesis of being, and, accordingly, of being in itself (which originally would have been captured in language, which would have resided in the linguistic capture), but considers the thesis of our understanding the one, the human understanding is forced to live in accordance to, in the scope of language in the necessary and the only possible sense" (ibid.: 103). It is interesting that in the first case there is absurdity *if the attention is focused on the necessity* of the ontological constituent, moreover, of the one positivistically

<sup>2</sup> The commas referred to are present in the original German version "Sein, das verstanden werden kann, ist Sprache". They are not used in the English translation of the phrase: "Being that can be understood is language".

understood, i.e., there *is* being which is not understood, therefore, the thesis that “being is language” is absurd. In the second case Grondin’s interpretive line causes a kind deontologization concerning the existing ontological aspect, present due to the apparent coherence of Gadamer’s thought to Heideggerian context of reflection on language. However, both cases assume that there is always some “remainder” of being, concerning which it can never be guaranteed that it is understood. Therefore, interfering, illogical, absurd, “remainder of being” simply should not be taken into consideration due to the fact that, according to Grondin, the area of interest for hermeneutics lies only in the issue of understanding and, consequently, its linguistic expression. Obviously it aims, foremost, at emphasizing the uniqueness of the Gadamerian analysis of language, and, secondly, at defining of this uniqueness as a priority status of the aspect of understanding rather than the aspect of being, and respectively, rather than the question of meaning of being in the horizon of hermeneutical analysis of language. The further line of interpretation elaborates and clarifies this thesis. The elaboration proceeds entirely in the area of interrelation “understanding-language”, and, accordingly, all issues relevant to hermeneutics and its interpretation (for instance, issue of the boundaries of language, and, respectively, boundaries of interpretation) are conditioned by these two main centres of attraction – understanding and language expressing. I would like to note the deliberate use of the phrase “language expressing” instead of the word “language” here, chosen due to the opposition of inner and outer (respectively, outer “language expressing” the inner) being the essential prerequisite for the strategy of Grondin’s interpretation as such.

“There is no word which can exhaust the inner word completely. This inner word is something that we try to bring out stammering”. Moreover, the unavoidable difference between inner and outer (spoken) words is seen by Grondin as the most significant problem of language, and as the hermeneutical problem in its proper sense. “It represents the boundary of language, but also, and, not to a lesser extent, the universality of language scope for hermeneutics, which tries to comprehend this tension between the expressed and the inner words” (Grondin 2001: 105). However, in our opinion, while being fascinated with the rigorous philological analysis of a separate phrase torn from the context, as well as by the idea of vulnerability of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in reference to Derida’s criticism concerning the issue of the boundaries of language and understanding, Grondin in his interpretation misses the most important provisions which concern the “ontological thesis” as such and also overlooks the broader context of Gadamer’s reflection, from which the very expression stemmed.

### **Fundamental ontological premises of hermeneutical analysis of language**

Let us start our interpretation, alternative to the one suggested by Grondin, by quoting the entire fragment which incorporates the above mentioned terse formula:

This activity of the thing itself is the real speculative movement that takes hold of the speaker. We have sought the subjective reflection of it in speech. We can now see that this activity of the thing itself, the coming into language of meaning, points to a universal ontological structure, namely to the basic nature of everything toward which unders-

tanding can be directed. *Being that can be understood is language*. The hermeneutical phenomenon here projects its own universality back onto the ontological constitution of what is understood, determining it in a universal sense as language and determining its own relation to beings as interpretation. Thus we speak not only of a language of art but also of a language of nature – in short, of any language that things have. (Gadamer 2004: 469-470)

Referring to this fragment alone, we can see clearly that understanding and “acquisition-of-language by meaning” are not just indissolubly linked to “universal ontological structure”, but stemmed from it. Therefore “ontological thesis” and, consequently, the question of the meaning of being, are substantial both for understanding and for “acquisition-of-language”. Moreover, as we can notice, in the expression “the fundamental structure of all, understanding generally can be focused on”, Gadamer does not pay any attention to the fact that there is also “the fundamental structure (or a non-structure, i.e., a disorder)” of being which understanding cannot be focused on at all or can’t be focused on yet. On the contrary, Gadamer emphasizes the primacy of the fundamental ontological structure, which substantiates understanding. The very understanding has ontological structure, and without such any meaningful question (including the one on the existence of other planets, which are, yet not understood) is generally impossible. Being of a human being is such that the one can exist only if he understands, and vice versa, as it is the way of one’s being and he was given no other ways, there is no mere understanding (deontologized understanding-within-itself), but there is only being of understanding. In our opinion,

in this sense, the fundamental “ontological thesis” of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is quite coherent with Heidegger’s thesis. Moreover, the clarification of this coherence will not just help to clarify the background and inner motivations of Grondin’s interpretation, but also to obtain deeper understanding of the essence of the “ontological thesis” of Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

In order to clarify the ontological background of Gadamer’s hermeneutics of language, let’s refer to Heidegger’s notion of *existing transcendence*. In accordance with the notion of *existing transcendence*, any self-understanding, mutual understanding, as well as any understanding of an entity, is substantiated by the original disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*) of being, as being of someone, who understands, as well as being of other human being or any other entity. This disclosure embraces the one who understands and the entity to which the one who understands relates. Moreover, such embracing occurs only in the course of the transcending accomplishment “in which the integrated, i.e. self-ecstatic-horizontal disclosure is accomplished through disclosing” (Herrmann 2001: 12). Therefore, the accomplishment of Dasein in a human being turns out to be the accomplishment of transcendence. It is the original ontological pre-structure (ontological fore-transcendence) which has the following aspects: a) an accomplishment of existence by means of the established becoming abandoned, b) understanding casting and interpreting assumption of meeting the inner-world entity, and, finally, c) the way of the interpretive self-indication. This is exactly why any understanding, any interpretation “is not only an interpreting revelation of something I deal with, but it is always also an

interpreting self-revelation, in which I reach clarity with regard to myself in my relations” (ibid.: 13). The fact that interpretation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics made through Heidegger’s notion of *existing transcendence* (the ontological fore-transcendence) is adequate to Gadamer’s standpoint, will be demonstrated by us through analysis of some of the most important aspects of *ontological fore-transcendence* – the disclosure, the accomplishment and the interpreting self-indication. Moreover, we believe that this demonstration by no means is the kind of absorption of Gadamer’s standpoint by Heidegger’s omnipotent notion (broader-thinking). Such kind of interpretation will provide more appropriate basis for educing of the specific innovative peculiarity of Gadamer’s standpoint comparing to Heidegger’s standpoint.<sup>3</sup> The essence of this distinction, above all, lies in far more appro-

priate instance ground, chosen by Gadamer for determining above mentioned aspects of existing transcendence and, accordingly, of the ontological mode of hermeneutics, in order to clarify the essential correlation of being, comprehending and language, meaning the reference to *the experience of a work of art*. It is well-known that the experience of art has become a subject of special attention to Heidegger only in the later period. As for Gadamer, the experience of art was the original, primary instance ground for him, the basis for the essential, ontological clarification of the nature of the hermeneutic experience in triunity of the existential accomplishment, experience of understanding and experience of language.

### **The experience of art as an eminent way of self-indication of ontological structure of language**

Thus, according to Gadamer, art and history are the ways of being of hermeneutic experience. The ontological structural element of beauty is nothing but the universal structure of being as such, Gadamer states, “for us the way of being of beauty turned out to be a sign of universal existential structure” (Gadamer 2004: 562). That is why deontologization of Gadamer’s hermeneutics demanded by Grondin inevitably implies elimination of hermeneutics as such. After all, understanding, as such, is the special structure or predominant way of being of beauty, it reveals itself, protrudes itself, like no other way of being, it attracts attention, it presents itself. Gadamer notes this specific way of being of a work of art, following the idea of Plato. “Indeed, the distinctive character of beauty, compared with the good, lies in the fact that it, evinces itself from itself,

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<sup>3</sup> In the context of the question about the influence force of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology on the Gadamer’s hermeneutics there is separately a concept of *verbum interius*. Because consideration of this aspect goes beyond this article, we will refer only to the detailed research John Arthos, in which the author states the following point of view, coherent to our key thesis: “Gadamer took the leitmotif of the *verbum interius* as a project he carved out for himself, but it was not a departure from Heidegger. In the 1921 lectures on Augustine and Neoplatonism, Heidegger reflects on the *homo interior* (the inner human being) of the Confessions, an interiority in which a voice ‘soundeth, which time deprives me not of’ [et ubi sonat, quod non rapit tempus], a sound that approaches the paradoxical discursivity of the *verbum interius* in the *De Trinitate*. But more importantly, Heidegger sees the complex structure of *Sprachlichkeit* latent in Augustine’s restless crossing back and forth between worldly experience and insight, and this structure is ultimately what Gadamer finds at stake in the *verbum interius*. This habit of crossing leads Heidegger to perceive the oscillating relation between ‘the initially constituting moment of meaning’ in one’s own personal comportment and the enacting fulfillment of life knowledge, ‘a structure in which the possibilities for fulfillment (according to the structure) are inherent in the most multifarious way’” (Arthos 2009: 5).

makes itself explicitly evident in its being” (Gadamer 2004: 556). Let us note that such self-presentation should not be considered as a kind of purposeful, deliberate self-demonstration, demonstrating for everyone to see. What is demonstrated ostentatiously is not consciously or unconsciously constructed reality (illusion). The presentation of itself from itself is a way of being for a work of art and it can’t be otherwise. And, at the same time, it is the genuine phenomenological reality of being: being presents itself (respectively, is seen) in a work of art, not through some other being, but through itself, it evidently presents itself, while self-presentation. “The beautiful, the way in which goodness appears, reveals itself in its being: it presents itself. What presents itself in this way is not different from itself in presenting itself. It is not one thing for itself and another for others” (ibid.: 481). In the parlance of Heidegger, being of art is disclosed in a predominant manner, it ranks above all other ways of disclosure (*Erschlossenheit*) of being.

It is exactly due to such predominant disclosure, that being of a work of art becomes the most favorable ground for clarifying both the structure of being and the structure of understanding, phenomenological hermeneutic understanding. Indeed, for Gadamer being of art prevails precisely due to its excellent correspondence to the maxim of phenomenological intuition (viewing of the essence) – to view evidently the self-presentation of the thing. “The hermeneutical experience, as the experience of traditionary meaning, has a share in the *immediacy* which has always distinguished the experience of the beautiful, as it has that of all evidence of truth” (ibid.: 479). Understanding corresponds its

nature only when it aims to be true (genuine understanding). And the truth, in its turn, is not the result of virtuosity of autonomously taken understanding as such, removed from its ontological scope, but, “rather, it is a genuine experience (*Erfahrung*) – i.e., an encounter with something that asserts itself as truth” (ibid.: 483). Therefore, the hermeneutical experience, in the ontological aspect, partaking in immediacy of the experience of the beautiful not only discloses in predominant way, but it also interpretively, in understanding, reveals itself.

The above mentioned rank of ontological priority of a work of art can also be seen in the fact that language, for the first time, acquired clear evident self-displaying self-sufficiency exactly in experience of art.

The word “literature” didn’t gain an estimating meaning in vain, the one which implies that belonging to literature represents the special distinction. The text of such kind doesn’t just represent the capture of speech, but it also has its own authenticity. The character of speech usually accomplishes, when a listener immediately penetrates the speech through and rushes fully to something, which the speech informs him about, but in this case language gets self-revealed in its distinctive inherent way. (Gadamer 1997: 352)

And, as it was mentioned above, this self-sufficiency should not be considered a separate knowledge domain of language or as an expressing of the inner experience of thinking (inner word) in outer (spoken word), but in the experience of art, language, for the first time, clearly presents itself as a way of being, discloses itself linguistically in the interpretive self-indication. “Being is *language* — i.e., *self-presentation* — as revealed to us by the hermeneutical experience of being, then there follows not only

the event-character of the beautiful and the event-structure of all understanding” (Gadamer 2004: 481). Therefore, language as the interpretive self-indication of being can’t be considered to be just the instrument of conveying or transferring of information due to the fact that it accomplishes it. “We have seen that the words that bring something into language are themselves a speculative event” (Gadamer 2004: 483). Here Gadamer again refers to a metaphor of a game, emphasizing its specific being – to be in accomplishment (*Ereignis*). “The weight of the things we encounter in understanding plays itself out in a linguistic event, a play of words playing around and about what is meant” (ibid.: 484). The accomplishment of language is coherent to the accomplishment of a work of art, regarded as a specific disclosed way of being, so doing of a deed. The specificity of art lies in being perceptible in its attractive elusiveness of an accomplishment. “It appears suddenly; and just as suddenly, without any transition, it disappears again.” (ibid.: 476). But that’s exactly why “both the appearance of the beautiful and the mode of being of understanding have the character of

an event” (ibid.: 479). And, in turn, “the thing itself compels us to speak of an event and of an activity of the thing” (ibid.: 2004: 479).

Let’s summarize our reflections. As we have shown, Grondin’s thesis of the “remainder of being” contradicts the very essence of the hermeneutic experience, since, accepting it, we are indeed facing the situation absurd for hermeneutics: there is being which doesn’t substantiate understanding and understanding which is not substantiated by being. On the contrary, Gadamer considers the accomplishment of the genuine hermeneutic experience, the essential trinity of accomplishments of being, understanding and language. An accomplishment of understanding will not be genuine, if it is in no way linked to the question of the truth, of the meaning of being. The genuine experience, in its turn, as meeting with that being which declares itself to be the truth, “such an encounter takes place in verbal interpretation, [...] that the phenomenon of language and understanding proves to be a universal model of being and knowledge in general” (Gadamer 2004: 564).

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## ONTOLOGINIS KALBOS MATMUO H. G. GADAMERIO HERMENEUTIKOJE

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**Santrauka.** Straipsnyje analizuojama kalbos, supratimo ir būties santykio problema Hanso Georgo Gadamerio hermeneutikoje. Tyrimas sutelktas į Gadamerio ambivalentišką tezę, kad „būtis, kuri gali būti suprasta, yra kalba“. Autorius atskleidžia fundamentaliai ontologinį Gadamerio hermeneutinės kalbos analizės kontekstą bei kritiškai permąsto šios tezės interpretaciją, kurią pateikia žymus tyrinėtojas Jeanas Grondinas.

**Pagrindiniai žodžiai:** kalba, būtis, supratimas, Gadamerio hermeneutika, Grondino deontologizacija

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