

SZEGEDI TUDOMÁNYEGYETEM
BÖLCSESZETTUDOMÁNYI KAR
Filozófia Tanszék

Thoughts on the Interdependence of Speech and
Understanding: From *Tao Te Ching* to Literary
Hermeneutics

Témavezető:

Dr. Lamár Erzsébet
SZTE, Filozófia Tanszék
Egyetemi Adjunktus

Készítette:

Fu Zhiqin
Filozófia MA

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Introduction

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”¹ Here in the *Gospel of John*, Logos – i.e. the Word – posed a great challenge to the early missionaries who attempted to translate the Bible into Chinese language. Robert Morrison chose a flatter translation to avoid the challenge – “当始已有言”, 言 means word literally without any further association. But ever since the *Gützlaff Version* was published in 1836, a more audacious translation was introduced – “元始有道”, 道 as the Tao of Taoism – and this translation lived on in the *Chinese Union Version*, which is widely accepted by the Chinese Protestants till today. When I first realized this controversy, I was inspired to examine the virtue and vice of this translation, but after my first thesis on this examination, I unwillingly came to the conclusion that a good translation is either flatter than the original or more interpretive.

There are adequate reasons to claim this translation a fallacy, and adequate reason to render it a genius interpretation, this dilemma is perhaps the nature of a genuine translation. The validity of this translation is hence left to be decided by taste. But one thing still leaves me wondering even after that examination – why is it that understanding and speech are bonded together so intimately in both Logos and Tao? And why did Tao express a deeply skeptical attitude towards speech despite its confirmation of this intimacy? What insight can be inspired by this skeptical attitude?

With these questions in mind I shall make it clear that this text is not a hermeneutic examination about the validity of this particular translation. Instead, now I wish to carry out a reflection on the relation between understanding and speech under the light of translations, and especially with the reappearing example of Tao.

¹ *The Holy Bible - Chinese / English (CU2010 (RCUSS)-NIV)*, National Committee of Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Churches in China, 2016, John 1:1.

1. Is there understanding without language?

1.1. Intimacy between speech and understanding

Speech and understanding are perhaps the mutual criteria to each other, speech is not understood as any random utterance of sound, if no understanding is involved in the utterance, no formulation of thought of meaning, it would not be legitimately crowned as speech. Vice versa, the understanding without the form of speech (the inner speech included) is but an empty and arrogant claim, understanding happens in the speech, and mere utterance becomes speech when understanding happens in it.

The intimacy between speaking and understanding is expressed in both Tao and Logos, and it is the nature of language that gives birth to them. Speech is a proof of understanding, one only claims he understands a subject matter when he is able to put it into words, and through words the subject matter leaves the void and embodies an intelligible form. Anyone who has studied a foreign language has experienced the immense difficulty of speaking that language, reading is almost always the easiest part of language studying, listening already requires more intensive attention and perception, while speaking, expressing oneself is a true achievement of a learner. This difference in difficulty gives us hints about the innate quality of speech.

Gadamer says “where there is understanding, there is no translation but speech”² and that “every translation that takes its task seriously is at once clearer and flatter than the original.”³ Here he casts light on the relation between Laozi and Zhuangzi. Zhuangzi – in his understanding of Tao – did not aim at interpretations of the Tao, nor a further theoretical explanation of it. For Zhuangzi, Tao is not to be treated as a text that awaits anatomy to reveal the subject matter hidden behind, Tao itself is the subject matter in one word. Since the culmination of the interpretation is the translation, Zhuangzi did not translate Tao into his vivid metaphors and prose, but spoke Tao in the language of Tao, or rather, through his speech the Tao talks to us, like a text speaks through a reader. We cannot blame Zhuangzi for not making the subject matter clearer, for his imagination is no less flatter than Laozi, Zhuangzi understood Tao, but did not attempt to translate.

But an intimacy does not mean the gulf between speech and understanding is dissolved for good, they do not become one, even if they are so intimately bonded. Like that

² Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer & Donald G. Marshall. London, Bloomsbury, 2013, 402.

³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 404.

of two lovers, even if burning in the desire to become one with the other, to resume the mystical figure before cutted apart by gods, they remain two individuals, and the intimacy becomes a symbol of an unsatisfiable desire.

1.2. Understanding through action

Understanding must be involved to make a speech become what it is. But now we might also reverse the statement, and ask, must a speech be involved to make understanding become what it is? Are there other forms of understanding without the involvement of speech? We speak even if we don't understand, but do we understand even if we don't speak?

If understanding is regarded in its broader sense, it becomes obvious that there is not only understanding without speech, there may even be understanding without natural language. We look at plastic artworks and we understand it, yet this understanding is not by all means conveyed only by speech. The art critics put their understanding in words, because they are not always artists themselves, and they are speaking a different language than that of the artist's, a critique is but a translation. When an artist sees an artwork, he understands and recreates, reembodying the work in his own creation. Think of Picasso's recreation of Las Meninas, no words, no speech, the numerous drafts show his inner process of understanding. This understanding claims its independence from words, the intimacy between understanding and speaking is not immediately visible here.

But this does not mean these art forms by any means totally escape from language in their creation, if the language is extended in the sense of langue, i.e. a system of expression, we can still find language in these objects. That is to say, language can not be easily replaced by action in the understanding. There is even a cinematic language, it takes not the form of writing, or arrangement of statements, yet it is perceived and defined as language – D.W. Griffith referred to cinema as an universal language that helps us go beyond Babel.⁴ Neither is Haiku a simple pile of words and pictures, it is like the montage in cinema, something extra, something meaning is created by arranging pictures in a specific order.⁵ In other words, from actions the language also emerges, is spoken by action, and interprets the actions – “The insight that language and action mutually interpret each other is, of course, developed from Wittgenstein's concept of a language-game which is, at the same time, a life-form. The grammar of language-games, in the sense of a complete life praxis, regulates not only the

⁴ Geil, Abraham, “Between gesture and physiognomy: ‘universal language’ and the metaphysics of film form in Béla Balázs's *Visible Man*,” *Screen*, Volume 59 (2018), Issue 4, 512.

⁵ Tarkovsky, for instance, had compared the cinematic montage to the Japanese haiku in his *Sculpting in Time*. (Tarkovsky, Andrey, *Sculpting in Time*. Texas, University of Texas Press, 1989, 66.)

combining of symbols but, at the same time, the interpretation of linguistic symbols by actions and expressions.”⁶

Back to the opening of *Tao Te Ching*, besides interpreting it in the sense of speech and act, and besides our further examination of the languageness of understanding, another approach opens up – perhaps a more instructive approach for our understanding of this text – when we interpret it as a reminder of the speculative structure of language. “To say what one means, on the other hand – to make oneself understood – means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning and to ensure that it is understood in this way.”⁷ When Laozi started with the impossibility of speaking about Tao, he did not end his text right here – partly due to external pressure as we know from history,⁸ but this history is no more reliable than legend since we are talking about such a mysterious figure – and instead went on to discuss Tao. *Tao Te Ching* was studied, footnoted and interpreted over and over again despite the opening “warning” that denies the whole text, because this is not a warning, but a guideline to free the Tao from the restraints made by the statements of this text, to give credit to the infinity of the unsaid. “In a statement the horizon of meaning of what is to be said is concealed by methodical exactness; what remains is the ‘pure’ sense of the statements. That is what goes on record. But meaning thus reduced to what is stated is always distorted meaning.”⁹ Laozi did not go on to give an exact definition of Tao, he avoided a concealing statement about Tao, and talks about its relation to other ideas instead – such as Ren (benevolence) and Yi (loyalty) as a result of the decay of Tao.¹⁰

1.2.1. Language as our medium to encounter the world

As it is mentioned above, even action follows a certain linguistic pattern. Besides, action and language are mutually interpreting. But more importantly, without language there is no world-experience, then we have no objects to act on intelligibly, and no action can express any understanding, because “understanding is inseparable from language and that language is related to reason of every kind.”¹¹

Language is indispensable for our understanding of the world, because in language, the relations between things are made intelligible. “For man’s relation to the world is

⁶ Habermas, Jürgen, “The hermeneutic claim to universality,” In Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as method, philosophy and critique*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980, 185.

⁷ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 485.

⁸ 《老子韩非列传》 in 司马迁《史记》，上海古籍出版社，2011。

⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 485.

¹⁰ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*. Translated by James Legge, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1891, chapter 38.

¹¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 490.

absolutely and fundamentally verbal in nature, and hence intelligible. Thus hermeneutics is, as we have seen, a universal aspect of philosophy, and not just the methodological basis.”¹² There is no isolated understanding of a thing, everything is understood in relation to the infinity of others. “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.”¹³ In language there are no isolated words either, every word in its explanation requires help from other words, in its etymological root we see the whole of tradition and a worldview unfold. A word gains its meaning in its relation to others.

We considered the possibility of replacing language with action, but perhaps in fact it is that language comes so ready-to-hand, that we just neglected how indispensable it is because we took it as guaranteed, and oftentimes it performs too well to be noticed. And understanding, when totally out of the linguistic context, may not be named understanding anymore – animals adapt to nature and their surroundings, but to name this an understanding is perhaps an abuse of this word. For a short-sighted person, he sees things clearly through glasses, and as an habitual outcome the glasses – as a part of the outer world – disappears. When he takes off his glasses, he looks at the blurred vision in vain, he sees not, only through absence will he realize the dependency of this tool. For us the real tragedy is that we can never take off language, even silence – like a rest being intentionally a part of music – is but a part of language. “Language is a medium where I and world meet”,¹⁴ surely Gadamer did not claim it to be the only medium, but any part of the world-experience must be understood in this medium – if this medium is not interpreted as the world-experience itself. Hence “being that can be understood is language.”¹⁵ Language serves as an allegory of our reason. Homo sapiens, homo faber, homo ludens – language is our reason, our tool, and our game. We see THINGS, not just unrelated phenomena, and this vision is described by language in WORDS. Hence “that which comes into language is not something that is pre-given before language; rather, the word gives it its own determinateness.”¹⁶

But we still may ask if there is pre-linguistic understanding. Before language there must have been understanding of certain kinds, otherwise, we are about to claim that understanding and language were born simultaneously. And perhaps this is not an unreasonable claim, because even if there is indeed pre-linguistic understanding, this

¹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 491.

¹³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 490.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 491.

understanding may not be able to reach maturity without the aid of language – “Jean Piaget's genetic epistemology uncovers the non-linguistic roots of operative thought. It is certainly the case that the latter can only reach maturity through the integration of cognitive schemes, which emerge pre-linguistically within the sphere of instrumental action, with the linguistic systems of rules.”¹⁷

1.2.2. Speech as an extension of action

Even if the acts are unavoidably linguistic, the question remains whether speech in particular can be replaced – if not fulfilled – by expressive acts in the process of understanding. When Laozi said “道可道非常道”,¹⁸ one may pragmatically interpret that Tao should be practiced and applied. It exists in action, any concept formation that stagnates in language is only an alibi, a proof of Tao's absence at the moment.

But as a matter of fact, even this distinction between action and speech is not that clear, because we can observe speech as the linguistic act. This division between speech and action is indeed a very human – even too human – inability that is not seen in God. In *Genesis*, God's act of creation coincides with his speech, God said so and so, and there was so and so. In a way, the human's capacity of speech has surpassed his capacity of action, it is not rare that we make empty claims that we are not able to realize in action. Promises guide our action, we struggle to fulfill what is said by us.

This active creation is observed in language too, by language we are not just making sense of the world, but to constrain the world under our power. Gadamer spoke of this when he reflected on the problems of our modern society as a consequence of the Greek attitude towards language embedded in our thinking. “We see with increasing clarity today—as Heidegger especially has taught us to see—that Greek metaphysics is the beginning of modern technology. Concept formation, born of Western philosophy, has led the will to dominance as the fundamental experience of reality along a lengthy historical path.”¹⁹

Speech is the very symbol of act, and due to our human constraints, we can never reach the level of speech-is-act. Language with its grammar and vocabulary offers us a repertoire, and we make use of them while performing a speech, during this performance we beheld the happening of understanding. Music happens during the performance of a musician, and the word *performance* is synonymous to act – we say an actor performs, i.e. acts, on the

¹⁷ Habermas, *The hermeneutic claim to universality*, 188.

¹⁸ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 1.

¹⁹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 572.

stage. The *active* perspect of speech appears in dialectics. Speech is hence an extension of action, it extends into territory that simple actions are not capable of reaching, but since I call it an extension, I mean the actuality of action is still very much visible. In other words, speech is an alternative of action, as an alternative it belongs to – or originates from – the latter, ergo we can view the former in the light of the latter.

The linguistic act is reflected first and foremost by speech and writing. Both of them are the active expression of language, while listening and reading is a passive reception – i.e. passive in themselves, because active speech will again be involved when we read a text, the text speaks through the reader. To examine the genuine autonomy of the expresser in these linguistic acts, we shall examine speech; but to examine the alienation of the expresser – i.e. the obedience to an external agency –, writing is what we shall examine.

2. Texts and Words

If speech is so intertwined with understanding, it doesn't seem plausible to define speech without involving understanding. Especially when we realize that speech means more than a meaningful utterance, and inner speech – as an analogy of our understanding – is also included in the realm of speech. But we can still try to define speech by examining what it is not – to compare speech to writing. “The detachability of language from speaking derives from the fact that it can be written.”²⁰ Suppose a more radical detachment, in the case of hieroglyphs, the language not only can be written, it was first written without any indication of sound. But what is language anyway? We may take our first step from etymology: language comes from *lingua*, from tongue, such as *Glossa* in greek, and *nyelv* in Hungarian. We see how it explicitly indicates the immediacy of the biological instance, the sound produced on our tongue.

So far we have not attempted to examine the content of language, to break down language into its logical and formal components. The absence of this approach is first and foremost due to the nature of our general approach – we are aiming at a hermeneutic examination, not a semiotic one. As Gadamer points out, language is the only thing given in hermeneutics, which, in other words, means that it requires no further explanation, since it is GIVEN. It is presupposed that we know what we refer to when we say language. If we were to further examine the content of language, we are to walk into the path of semiotics, to examine the nature of language. But this path is not so desirable, for “the concept of a language system in the sense of *langue* leaves out of account the pragmatic dimension in which *langue* is transformed into *parole*. It is precisely experiences a speaker makes in this dimension that a philosophical hermeneutic is concerned with.”²¹ Hence instead of attempting to define the language system, I propose to examine the writing to bring into light the similarity and difference between writing and speech. The autonomy of writing is an amplified example to elaborate the autonomy of language, an autonomy that the user of language must obey.

“Let us here recall that the task of hermeneutics was first and foremost the understanding of texts. Schleiermacher was the first to downplay the importance of writing for the hermeneutical problem because he saw that the problem of understanding was raised—and perhaps in its fullest form—by oral utterance too. We have outlined above how the psychological dimension

²⁰ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 408.

²¹ Habermas, *The hermeneutic claim to universality*, 185.

he gave hermeneutics concealed its historical dimension. In actual fact, writing is central to the hermeneutical phenomenon insofar as its detachment both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader gives it a life of its own.”²²

2.1. Writing is not a recording of speech

To understand this alienation that speech goes through in writing, we must first let go of the naive assumption that writing is simply a recording of speech. In extreme cases like the Chinese language, the division between 白话 (plain speech) and 文言 (textual language) was still very obvious up until the twentieth century, text was written with more condensed format and more refined phrases that didn't often appear in a daily speech. Even without mentioning Chinese, the division can still be observed in the case of theatrical plays in most languages, the refined expressions found in Shakespeare's plays does not seem natural when spoken elsewhere than on the stage. And Plato's dialogues, despite its genuinely down-to-earth style of speech, still appeared to be staged. Besides this refinement and density that differentiate writing from speech in the aspect of proportion, there is a more decisive difference – Writing is alienated speech, because it does not record speech by analog, but by codes.

Speech is coded into writing, and we decipher the writing back to speech and meaning. But since this is not an analog process, the content is alienated from its original nature during the transformation. To make this idea more intelligible, think of analog photos and digital photos. The former records what we see in a smaller picture, yet the totality of this picture corresponds to the totality of the scene, the size changed but not the content. Through exposure to light, the analog film allows the light to leave a direct physical copy of itself. But in the case of digital film, the scene is transformed (or translated) into codes that contain information about the shades of the light, and through the digital device that reads these codes, a picture is recreated, codes are transformed back to picture. In a similar fashion, speech is coded into writing, and we decipher the writing back to speech. But since this is not an analog process, the content is alienated from its original nature during the transformation.

“As we have said, all writing is a kind of alienated speech, and its signs need to be transformed back into speech and meaning. Because the meaning has undergone a kind of self-alienation through being written down, this transformation back is the real hermeneutical task.”²³ But this transformation-back is not aimed at totally recalling, replicating the totality of the speech that was alienated, for the meaning is a child of the original speech, not a

²² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 410.

²³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 411.

doppelganger, hermeneutical task is to give ‘mouth’ to the meaning, and let it make its own speech through the reader – metaphorically like deity speaks through the saman. “What is fixed in writing has raised itself into a public sphere of MEANING in which everyone who can read has an EQUAL share.”²⁴

2.2. Autonomy of writing and the alienation of meaning

Writing is ungraspable for us without speech, just like the mere codes of a digital photo is ungraspable by human eyes. Let us not be distracted by the banal presumption of silent reading, by speech I mean not merely the utterance. Now let’s focus on how this alienation of speech is revealed in the autonomy of writing. This autonomy is of no trivial matter, because if we reflect on the translation of speech into writing, like in literature translation, we assume a consistency is carried on from the original into the translation. This consistency may not be in the form of a strict preservation, but at least a genuine resemblance is expected. This consistency comes at the cost of privacy. We enter a public sphere through writing. A speech can be made to myself alone, but a text, even if written in the utmost solitude in the most remote cell, is intended to speak to the world.

This alienation was often related to transcendent powers in ancient times. Ancient people sensed this power in the creation and usage of writing. The creation and usage of writing is often related to transcendent powers, so is the case in the myth of Cangjie or Thoth. Not to mention that 甲骨文 (oracle bone script) and 金文 (bronze script) were extensively, if not exclusively, used in the rituals. But we shall not rely on these historical facts to reveal the nature of writing, anyway our examination is not following the social science’s approach. Instead, we shall turn our attention to the process of writing.

If we let go of this historical perspective, and return to the process of writing. The first peculiarity in the process of writing is precisely the absence of individual autonomy – the autonomy to express while undisturbed by tradition. This obedience to tradition points to the extracted collective understanding, the understandings gained by the foreusers of the language (who gained them through actions), these are condensed and printed into language. Whoever then uses the language, speaks in the name of all the forbearers. When we write, we become an agent of writing, we have to follow the preset patterns and traditions, and allow consistency to guide our thoughts.²⁵ “Succeeding the Author, the scriptor no longer bears

²⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 410.

²⁵ Examine one example beautifully described by Calvino – “The Koran is the holy book about whose compositional process we know most. There were at least two mediations between the whole and the book: Mohammed listened to the word of Allah and dictated, in his turn, to his scribes. Once – the biographers of the

within him passions, humors, feelings, impressions, but rather this immense dictionary from which he draws a writing that can know no halt.”²⁶ We enter a public sphere through writing. We become the agent of writing, and as Calvino said, “had to deal with the internal coherence of the written language, with grammar and syntax, to channel into it the fluidity of a thought that expands outside all language before it becomes word.”²⁷

Though the involvement of tradition is nothing strange to speech either, each word we use, each phrase we utter, conceals our whole cultural associations. The difference remains that in a live speech we are in discourse with an undefined subject, while the text is definite in the sense that as a subject it has a clear beginning and end, it becomes undefined only during its reception by the reader, by an undefined subject who brings his own undefinedness to the defined text.

“The paradox that is true of all traditionary material, namely of being one and the same and yet of being different, proves that all interpretation is, in fact, speculative. Hence hermeneutics has to see through the dogmatism of a ‘meaning-in-itself’ in exactly the same way critical philosophy has seen through the dogmatism of experience. [...] This is what emerges from the linguistic nature of interpretation. For the interpreting word is the word of the interpreter; it is not the language and the dictionary of the interpreted text.”²⁸

Often we find in our own writing those thoughts which never formed before in speech. A text is no longer an event, a happening, it compresses the past with the present, the history lives through text, and reappears as an object of understanding through our speech. Like musical notes, ancient lyres come back to life through a performer at the present. Then the inner speech became the necessity, a ritual of necromancer to summon the ghost to enter the present, to call them back to life.

Prophet tell us – while dictating to the scribe Abdullah, Mohammed left a sentence half finished. The scribe, instinctively, suggested the conclusion. Absently, the Prophet accepted as the divine word what Abdullah had said. This scandalized the scribe, who abandoned the Prophet and lost his faith. He was wrong. The organization of the sentence, finally, was a responsibility that lay with him; he was the one who had to deal with the internal coherence of the written language, with grammar and syntax, to channel into it the fluidity of a thought that expands outside all language before it becomes word, and of a word particularly fluid like that of a prophet. The scribe’s collaboration was necessary to Allah, once he had decided to express himself in a written text. Mohammed knew this and allowed the scribe the privilege of concluding sentences; but Abdullah was unaware of the powers vested in him. He lost his faith in Allah because he lacked faith in writing, and in himself as an agent of writing.” (Calvino, Italo, *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller*. Translated by William Weaver, GB, Vintage, 2023, 182.)

²⁶ Barthes, Roland, “The Death of the Author,” trans. S Heath, *Image, Music, Text*. London, Fontana, 1977, 147.

²⁷ Calvino, *If On a Winter’s Night a Traveller*, 182.

²⁸ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 489.

A text speaks through the reader, but the reader is never able to translate the totality of a text into this speech, only what is relevant to the reader, what is understood by the reader can speak to him. Imagine the case of reading a foreign language text, the reader doesn't not understand every word in this text, and even with the help of a dictionary, he can not grasp the fine nuance of some wording, his understanding of a text is restrained to his own knowledge of this language. Plato claimed that the fault of the written text is that it can not speak to its reader selectively,²⁹ this claim is not always true, if we consider the fact that during the translation from written text to speech, it is the reader who decides how the text will speak to him. This dialogue is no longer between the author and the reader, because in this case indeed the author can not select his words to make his idea most efficiently cross in the reader's mind, but between the text and the reader, and text does select its words depending on the reader.

Just as every interpretation is an act of highlighting, certain aspects of a text are picked out to form an interpretation, a distortion is made for the sake of understanding. Just as Logos originate from Legen, the act of picking, choosing, gathering,³⁰ the cost of intelligibility is the conscious giving up on the totality of the subject matter. Understanding is closely related to the task of the hermeneutic, for "the hermeneutic problem concerns not the correct mastery of language but a proper understanding about the subject matter."³¹

Hermeneutic task is about the understanding of text. Text is the alienation of meaning. Text is a coding of the subject matter of understanding, by reading the codes we wish to recreate the meaning preserved, re-presenting it in front of us. Returning to the example of a digital photo, the information of all the light shades of objects in the frame are coded at the moment of shooting, the digital device with its software decodes all the humanly unreadable codes, representing (recreating) a picture in front of me. I see this photo, I understand, because I am capable of making sense of reality. This digital device understands the codes, but it does not understand the picture. What are we, if we are forever trapped in the understanding of texts, but never able to glance and grasp the meaning outside of the text, or the code. An understanding outside of the text is needed to give significance and value to the understanding of the text. Otherwise, as Yeats would say "Bald heads forgetful of their sins,/"

²⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, in *The Collected Dialogues, Including the Letters*. Ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1963, 275e.

³⁰ Heidegger, Martin, *Heraclitus: The Inception of Occidental Thinking and Logic: Heraclitus's doctrine of the Logos*. Trans. Julia Goessler Assaiante & S. Montgomery Ewegen, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018, 203.

³¹ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 403.

Old, learned, respectable bald heads/ Edit and annotate the lines/ That young men, tossing on their beds,/ Rhymed out in love's despair/ To flatter beauty's ignorant ear."³²

The autonomy of writing reflects the speculative structure of language. When we write, we tend to imagine ourselves as the mere creators of our text, we write down what we saw, hence we tend to fantasize ourselves to be firsthandly translating our world-experience into language. But when we experience the world, we too often experience it through the medium of language. Imagine ourselves to be the fictive characters in a novel, what we say as characters are always reflecting the totality of the novel, nothing meaningful can be said out of the blue, every word a character whispers is in coherence with the theme of the novel. While fictive characters are the polyphone mouthpieces of the author, we too are instruments of a greater power named language, we are the translator of it. "It is language which speaks, not the author; to write is, through a prerequisite impersonality, to reach that point where only language acts, 'performs', and not 'me'."³³ A translator enjoys his craft – like a shaman summoning a spirit to possess his body – by becoming the mouth of a great mind, yet different from the pleasure of a copyist, he is entitled to be at the same rank with the author, co-writing a text that will have its own independent supplement in meaning, independent of the original text. "A text is not to be understood as an expression of life but with respect to what it says. Writing is the abstract ideality of language. Hence the meaning of something written is fundamentally identifiable and repeatable."³⁴

2.3. Autonomy of words

To understand this autonomy of writing, we don't even necessarily have to examine the texts, even in the case of single words, this autonomy is already visible. But again this is not exclusive for the writing alone, writing merely brings this autonomy onto the surface. Even in the case of one single word, the hermeneutic practice is still involved, for the language is like a spider web (an analog from an analytical philosopher), touch a single knot on it, the whole web resonates, cut a knot off, the structure fails. A single word is also a translation, and the most problematic and disputed translations are those of the single word which contains too rich a meaning. "Every word causes the whole of the language to which it belongs to resonate

³² Yeats, William Butler, "The Scholars," *The Poems*. ed. Daniel Albright, London, Everyman's library, 1992, 190.

³³ Barthes, Roland, "The Death of the Author," trans. S Heath, *Image, Music, Text*. London, Fontana, 1977, 142.

³⁴ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 410.

and the whole world-view that underlies it to appear. Thus every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning.”³⁵

Opposed to Habermas, not any language can be translated into any language, it is not a simple *replacement* by the more familiar words, more often than not language and language were put into communication, a foreign language is able to teach the other language some experience which the other – or people living in the other language – has never experienced. Language bestows upon people the power to overgrow his own limited direct experience. Language is public, it is the collective creation of the human race, the babel tower had collapsed, but humans continued this project in the realm of language. We could hardly just point to something and say that it presents the totality of a word, yet we all to some extent have a complex understanding of the meaning of this word, all of which makes the meaning appear.

Under the light of etymology, in words we see traditions with which we are already in agreement without choosing to agree. “In fact, language is the single word, whose virtuality opens for us the infinity of discourse, of speaking with one another, of the freedom of ‘expressing oneself’ and ‘letting oneself be expressed’.”³⁶ Language is our medium of conveying our world experience, in other words, it is our world-view itself as Humboldt puts it. By submitting our instant experience to language. By living in the language, we are actually in discourse with the ancestors, we adopt their world-view. By living in this language, we are already in agreement. A simple example: 男 means male, that is, someone who use his strength (力) in cultivating the field (田). This definition roots deeply in the agriculture tradition, many modern men would not satisfy this criterium, but yet we agree to it without realizing what we agreed to. Words are tools that come ready-to-hand, used by us without being thoroughly examined, but when we stop for an instance, and question the words we use, they suddenly speak to us by relating to the totality of a language. When we write down this word, we are merely using it without understanding it, but to understand it, we need to see the relation between the components of this one word, and this relation is made clear by a speech made internally.

Again the autonomy of single words does not fully describe the autonomy of writing, a text is not simply a combination of individual words, it is an organism formed by words, and putting unrelated body parts together does not make a live human, it only creates a Frankenstein, words are related, arranged in a way that a subject matter comes into being. We

³⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 474.

³⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 575.

do not only use words, we play with them, in the play of words we discover our freedom from the mere necessity of survival. But as the players of the game, we are actually the agents through which the game plays itself out – e.g. chess is but a system of set rules, these rules give possibility to all the alterations of complex combinations of moves, and it is the players who discover the unlimited combinations and pure life into it by submitting themselves to the set of rules.

To further understand the alienation of meaning in text, and the role of translation during our reading of a text, we may compare it to the metaphors. “Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions- they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins.”³⁷ The sudden revelation we experience in a metaphor is precisely the transformation from *langue* into *parole*, when we break free from the “what is said”, and march into the “what is possibly implied”. Metaphor gives life to a text, the greatest metaphors never lose their truth in translation.

What are metaphors? Metaphors are vivid illusions, sharp images that present themselves to us directly, any attempt to translate a great metaphor into logical propositions ends up not only in a flatter interpretation, and even sometimes in a mocking jest.

Metaphors have different values – a bad metaphor confuses the understanding and brings doubt to the truth of the subject-matter. But how is it that we are able to judge a metaphor when it itself is already free from the restraints of the public sphere, already transformed into *parole*? The value of a metaphor can only be relative, and this value is a communicative value. It is communicative not in the sense of how much it conveys the subject’s message, but how clearly can this metaphor unveil the subject-matter to the receiver. Just like the value of rhetoric lies not merely in the immanent quality of the expression, but more in the promise of reception, and often the former is defined and judged according to the latter.

The charm of a metaphor lies in the unambiguity of the unsaid. I say it is unambiguous, not because the unsaid will be broken down into the same propositions each time when interpreted, but because an unmistakable playground is drawn by it – we have a common possible ground of focus when interpreting a metaphor, and within this focus there are still numerous possibilities. Zhuangzi saw Tao appear both in 庖丁’s skillful butchering

³⁷ Nietzsche, Friedrich, “On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense,” *Truth: Engagements Across Philosophical Traditions*. ed. José Medina & David Wood, Cornwall, Blackwell, 2005, 17.

and in 鲲鹏's mythical lifespan.³⁸ None of these give Tao a definite description, because both are just flux of appearances, examples of an undefinable. We don't define colors – the scientific “definition” is but put in another relational structure that suppose certain concepts as beings, just as out of naivety people see objects as beings in themselves instead of phenomena – and colors are not visible without us, without our sensation. We say the sky, the ocean, the hyacinth of spring, is blue *for us*. No wonder that language speaks us. When we speak language, we suppose that through language we made ourselves understood, vice versa, language made itself understood through our speech and act. But language does not make itself understood *by itself*, it makes itself understood *by us*, this breaks the symmetry of this twist, and points to the fact that the subject of understanding is always us human.

2.4. Difference in reception – reevaluating the difference qualitatively

So far I have described the peculiarity of writing as its autonomy, which for the user of language is rather an authority to be obeyed. But suspicion might arise that speaking is not much different from writing – in the sense that when we speak we are also in a constant struggle with the words and grammars. This autonomy is then the nature of language, only that writing exhibits this nature more abundantly than speaking. If it were indeed so, this difference between writing and speaking is only quantitative, then the speech's intimacy to understanding remains unexplained. That's why I suggest we turn our attention to the receptive aspect of language instead of the expressive aspect, i.e. to examine text and speech instead of writing and speaking.

2.4.1. Speech as the context giving

In the reading of a text, the first thing to be noticed is the absence of context. During a speech, we are well aware of the location and occasion – i.e. the context of a speech, which offers us a common and immediate base of reference. “An obvious and major difference between reading and all forms of social interaction is the fact that with reading there is no *face-to-face situation*.”³⁹ A text is ripped out of the context, a text is but what is written, but it must be put into context to become intelligible for the reader. The reader hence undertakes the task of recreating a context with the guidance of the text, but the idea of a perfect recreation of the original context – despite how humanly impossible this idea is – does not

³⁸ 《逍遥游》and《养生主》In 庄子《庄子》，上海古籍出版社，2009。

³⁹ Iser, Wolfgang, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*. London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 166.

guarantee an accurate understanding of the meaning of a text. Because even if the reader were able to be emerged in the original context again – despite the implausibility of this claim –, the reader cannot erase his own prenotions to receive a text the way it was “supposed” to be in the given occasion. A time traveler remains an outsider even in his own home. “Now it is the very lack of ascertainability and defined intention that brings about the text-reader relationship.”⁴⁰

A text is cast out from the world where it was written, but brings with itself an implicit system of implication, i.e. the indispensable *unsaid*, that can be reconstructed through its explicit statements, i.e. the limited *said*. Hence a reader “is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said. What *is* said only appears to take on significance as a reference to what is not said; it is the implications and not the statements that give shape and weight to the meaning.”⁴¹ A ground of permitted liberty is presented to the reader, he constructs the context to his own liking as long as the text doesn’t fall into contradictions. Thus when we say text is translated into speech, it refers to the situation that text is embedded into a live context – with which a text is able to interact –, hence becoming a live speech through the immediacy of interaction.

But the problem arises that there is no criteria for the adequacy – though for accuracy there may be – of the aforementioned context reconstruction. “Now there can be no doubt that the determinacy of a work arises out of its concretization, but what *is* open to doubt is whether each reader’s individual concretization can be subjected to criteria of adequacy or inadequacy.”⁴² This uncertainty does not only result in the dispute of the readers, but also the author losing his total authority over the text – i.e. even the context intended by the author is no more adequate than the readers’. In this case, the “original” context is but one of the many possible reconstructions. While a speech relies immediately on the speaker to provide it the live context constantly, a text carries the implicit context with itself, even the author will – or even will have to – consult the text and not just himself. The text comes to have its own life like the ivory sculpture by Pygmalion.

In short conclusion, speech is necessitated during reading when it is able to concretize the context and able to interplay with the context, this very function can serve as an analogue to the nature of speech in general – inner speech or oral speech alike –, speech makes the surrounding world intelligible, then react to and/or act upon the surrounding world. This

⁴⁰ Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 166.

⁴¹ Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 168.

⁴² Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 171.

making intelligible and *(re)action* seem to have blurred the receptive and expressive aspects I promised to differentiate, but this is due to the immediacy of the reception of speech – not only in the sense of temporal immediacy, but also spatial.⁴³ A text is not merely what is written down, it is the linguistic expression that got detached from the live context where it was expressed, a preservation at the cost of alienation from context.

2.4.2. Death of the author?

With the text having its own life detached from the author, it is reasonable to ask: are we – or should we be at all – in conversation with the author? An author is essentially what he writes, we seem to leap into conversation with the author through text, but this author is only a shadowy figure that concludes and represents the totality of the text. Since a text is submitted to the interpretation of the reader – every text is translated into speech by the reader, the text thus speaks to him, but every translation is an interpretation –, the shadowy figure of the author utters only what the reader intends to hear. “The reader is the space on which all the quotations that make up a writing are inscribed without any of them being lost; a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination.”⁴⁴ The outcome – as provocative as it sounds – is that the reader is often carrying out a distorted monologue in the form of a dialogue, like a puppeteer who interacts with the puppet under his strings. But if this is indeed so, how is it that we are able to learn anything from a text if we are only blinded by ourselves in the process of reading? Since “if communication between text and reader is to be successful, clearly, the reader’s activity must be controlled in some way by the text”.⁴⁵ The aforesaid provocativeness springs from the counter-intuitive conclusion that can be drawn from it – i.e. we learn nothing new about the world or about ourselves from the text –, but I shall further explain the statement to exclude the sinister outcome of this conclusion.

The process of reading is a monologue, because the reader is the only speaker – the text only “speaks” through the reader –, the reader is hence in a conversation with himself. But this monologue is a distorted one, in the sense that it is not a monologue where the speaker express himself, but a monologue where he imagine himself to be someone else –

⁴³ So far I have only been maneuvering on the ground of theories. A short interlude that suddenly brings the technology into discourse seems rather untimely, but as the discussion unfolded, it might be sensed that the differentiation between text and speech – especially considering the unprecedented physical mediums offered by technology – can be obscure for us. For instance: Is a recorded speech rather considered text? Is instant text message not a form of speech? These questions may seem trivially pragmatic, but they challenge us to the soundness of our differentiation. If we stand by our definition, then it seems that we might need to refuse certain banal prenotions about speech and text, especially those from our daily encounterance with technology.

⁴⁴ Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 148.

⁴⁵ Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, 167.

e.g. the shadowy figure of author, which again is nothing but an embodiment of the totality of the text – to utter, he is like the actor on stage, attempting to make it authentic that he embodies the fictive role. “In ethnographic societies the responsibility for a narrative is never assumed by a person but by a mediator, shaman or relator whose ‘performance’ – the mastery of the narrative code – may possibly be admired but never his ‘genius’.”⁴⁶ In other words, even in this monologue we are able to learn new things – and not just new things about ourselves – because we allow ourselves to be the other, however unavoidably our personal traits are stamped in this performance.

But this *other* is imagined from the reading of the text, which still remains an invention by the reader – like creation bears the mark of creator. Hence the reader is never in direct conversation with the author himself. Suspicion might arise – if one were more inclined to pessimism about communication – that neither is a speech received without the involvement of individual prenotions of the listener. “Though hearing, they do not hear or understand.”⁴⁷ Even so, in a dialogue one who attempts to understand will have more feasible access to the person speaking, while the speaker also has a better chance at adjusting his expressions exclusively to meet the destination (the receiver). Speech thus offers a space where communication is possible, while the text, on the contrary, already constantly excludes the author.⁴⁸

The death of the author may be symbolically – if not unorthodoxically – exemplified by the scarcity of historical records about Laozi. All we may know from the *Records of the Grand Historian* are Laozi’s name, occupation, his alleged meeting with Confucius, and his departure to seclusion. Nothing about him tells us any more about *Tao Te Ching* than what *Tao Te Ching* itself is capable of telling. Laozi, as an author, did not precede his text, and the text was not written as a spontaneous expression of the author, but upon the request of a reader. After *Tao Te Ching* is thus written, “言道德之意五千馀言而去, 莫知其所终”,⁴⁹ Laozi departed, and his fate was unknown from then on. The author disappears after the ‘birth’ of his first reader. Almost akin to a modern scriptor, he “is born simultaneously with the text, is in no way equipped with a being preceding or exceeding the writing.”⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 142.

⁴⁷ *NIV*, Matthew 13:13.

⁴⁸ It must be noted that even though Barthes’ thought on the death of the author seems to be fitting in the general theme of our discussion, the paradigm of poststructuralism is not to be confused with Iser’s hermeneutics of reception. While Iser still preserved a place for the author in the dialogue taking place between the reader and the text, Barthes aimed at a more radical dismissal of the author.

⁴⁹ 《老子韩非列传》 in 司马迁《史记》, 上海古籍出版社, 2011.

⁵⁰ Barthes, *The Death of the Author*, 145.

Conclusion

If we return to the starting point, and ask, what does Laozi have to say about language? “无名天地之始, 有名万物之母” (“Having no name, it is the Originator of heaven and earth; having a name, it is the Mother of all things”),⁵¹ it reminds us of *Genesis* – “God said ‘Let there be light’, and there was light”,⁵² but before light was, He created heaven and earth. Only through light is anything visible, and only through language is there anything given to our reason. Gadamer had already drawn this parallel between language and inner light of ours.⁵³ Without language, understanding is not possible, or at least not mature. This was the conclusion of the first chapter. Action can never take the place of language, language can not fully interpret itself without action. Understanding, in the most pragmatic aspect, is proclaimed when action correctly interprets the language and plays out the language game.

Writing and speaking are in fact linguistic actions, the difference between them are more quantitatively than qualitatively. The autonomy of writing – in the grammatical or logical or vocabular form – is but an exemplification of the autonomy of a language, which any writer or speaker of this language must follow. But the differences between text and speech are no longer quantitative. They do not describe an active process, but a hermeneutic object. In this aspect, text differs from speech, and this difference is reconfirmed by the necessity of translating text into speech.

The question that if action can replace speech is easily made absurd, if we neglect how the two could coincide. Speech is the active use of language, albeit speech cannot equal physical action – due to our human constraints, it nevertheless expresses the same interpretive quality that blurred the seemingly strict division between them. In other words, speech is an extension of action, action can not replace its extension, but also need not, for an extension is unstable without the base from which it extends.

The intimacy between speech and understanding is made explicit through a comparison to text – in the process of reading, the (inner) speech reconstructs a live context for the meanings in the text, and only in this context will the meanings be applied. Speech is the very act of ‘making sense of’ due to its immediate application and reaction to the surrounding world – a world made intelligible by language –, while text remains an object to be acted upon.

⁵¹ Laozi, *Tao Te Ching*, chapter 1.

⁵² *NIV*, Genesis 1:3.

⁵³ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 498.

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