“Gadamer’s Concept of Language”

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**Abstract**

This chapter presents Gadamer’s conception of language and of its role in the process of understanding. The chapter begins by explaining what Gadamer means when he says that language is characterized by an essential “self-forgetfulness” [*Selbstvergessenheit*] and how this relates to his account of the fore-structure of the understanding. Next, it explains what it means to conceive of a linguistic presentation (e.g., a poem or a lecture) as a hermeneutic event and how this conceptualization is essential to Gadamer’s account of understanding and of the dialectical unity between language and being. The chapter ends by considering how Gadamer’s analysis of conversation further clarifies what it means to be open to the event of language.

Reflections on language have always been an essential part of hermeneutic investigations. This is clear if we consider the importance that language had in the development of hermeneutics in the nineteenth century. Language played an important role in the thought of the early nineteenth-century German philologist Friedrich Ast, who argued for the importance of hermeneutics for understanding antiquity. Ast argued that it was only by grappling with the literary texts left behind by an ancient culture that one could understand the spirit of the culture (Palmer 1969, 76-77). For Ast, language was thus the privileged means by which the spirit of a culture could be transmitted to later people. Not long afterward, Friedrich Schleiermacher would extend these claims, presenting hermeneutics as the study of understanding in general and language as the medium of understanding (Schleiermacher 2006, 72-75). Nineteenth-century hermeneutics thus took language to be both the object of hermeneutical investigation and the mode by which interpretation is accomplished. It should therefore not be surprising that language is one of the central concepts in Gadamer’s thought. Indeed, Gadamer follows his nineteenth-century predecessors in regarding language as both the object and the mode of hermeneutic investigation.[[1]](#endnote-1) To understand Gadamer’s thought, it is therefore imperative that one understand how he conceives of language and its role in hermeneutic inquiry. This chapter thus aims to clarify the way Gadamer conceives of language, the considerations that lead him to conceive of it in this way, and the important discoveries that issue from his exploration of the subject matter.

**The self-forgetfulness of language**

In trying to clarify Gadamer’s conception of language, it is important right away to understand why, for Gadamer, a proper conceptualization of language is rare and difficult to attain. Like his hermeneutic predecessors, Gadamer takes very seriously the way that our understanding is always already mediated by various fore-structures, including what his teacher, Martin Heidegger, had described as the preliminary concepts [*Vorbegriffe*] that we bring with us whenever we understand something.[[2]](#endnote-2) By highlighting the role of such fore-structures in the process of understanding, Gadamer argues that understanding does not take place without the complicity of language and of the interpretive traditions passed down through language. As Gadamer (1977) puts it in his essay, “Man and Language”: “In all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own” (62). Moreover, Gadamer follows Heidegger in insisting that this understanding is not something we engage in from time to time as a deliberate effort when we are perplexed; it is an essential part of human existence itself (Palmer 1969, 42). Linguistic concepts shape not just deliberate attempts to understand something, then; they shape the world that we inhabit and how we inhabit it, insofar as we have the kind of existence that we do. For Gadamer, then, we dwell in worlds that linguistic concepts set forth, and we dwell in them long before we ever relate to these concepts as tools or thematic objects of investigation. Indeed, as Gadamer explains in his essay, “The Boundaries of Language” (2000, 13-14), we dwell in linguistically-mediated worlds even before we start to learn how to verbalize words, and in this sense, we start to become linguistic even before we learn to speak.

It is thus a mistake to think that language is a neutral tool of understanding that one can pick up in order to understand something privately on their own. When language infuses our understanding, which it always does, interpretive traditions infuse our understanding as well.[[3]](#endnote-3) For example, when a native English speaker reads an English translation of the Hebrew Bible, they inevitably rely on the interpretive traditions that are carried forward in the English language. Even when one reads a text written in a language that is native to them, interpretation must still proceed through a language that is laden with tradition. In each case, in the course of applying language as a tool of interpretation, one may come to realize aspects of their own linguistic tradition previously hidden from their view. Such realizations may generate in a person a heightened sense of responsibility for their language. They may become mindful of the weight of the words that they use to interpret the world. This is, in fact, the sense of responsibility that, as a teacher, Gadamer hopes to inspire in his students when he advises them to be aware of the weight of the words that they take up whenever they read or write.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Such a sense of responsibility, though, as in so many other instances, is a responsibility for which it is ultimately impossible to make one’s own consciousness fully accountable. The temporality of individual human consciousness never comes fully into convergence with the temporality of language. For as described above, language is never simply the expression of private, inner life, nor simply the expression of an individual consciousness at one particular time. The linguistic traditions that we use to interpret the world pre-date and continue on beyond the individual consciousness of the interpreter. This is what, in “Man and Language,” Gadamer talks about as the “I-lessness” [*Ichlosigkeit*] of language (Gadamer 1977, 65).

The difficulty of arriving at a conception of language, then, is no mere accident. It is rooted in the nature of language and, indeed, human existence itself. It is the nature of language to be inconspicuous. This is what Gadamer calls in “Man and Language” the essential “self-forgetfulness” [*Selbstvergessenheit*] of language. “The more language is a living operation,” Gadamer (1977) explains, “the less we are aware of it. Thus it follows from the self-forgetfulness of language that its real being consists in what is said in it. What is said in it constitutes the common world in which we live . . . .” (65). Put otherwise, it is the nature of human existence for us to inhabit worlds of meaning set forth by language understandingly before we ever make deliberate, conscious efforts to understand that world. It is this peculiar temporality of human existence, then, that makes it so difficult to isolate and objectify language or any particular linguistic concept.

**Language as presentational event**

Above, we saw how Gadamer follows his hermeneutic and phenomenological predecessors by explaining how we dwell in linguistic worlds without giving much mind to this activity of dwelling. This allows him to make the claim that the worlds of meaning that we find ourselves embedded in are always already there serving as the background to any act of reflection. Gadamer, like Heidegger, thus sees linguistic tradition as an important element of the fore-structure of the understanding. We are already embedded in language before we ever reflect on it and before we begin turning some of our linguistic concepts into thematic objects of investigation. Alongside this argument, however, Gadamer is also interested in exploring how language can be an event of truth. This can happen, for example, when I generate a poetic description and it manages to capture something beautifully or when, in thinking along with a lecture, I feel myself gain a better understanding of the subject matter under discussion. In such experiences, meaning is not just operating in the background. I experience it as a hermeneutic event in which truth and understanding are brought forth.

To understand what it means to think about the event of language as a hermeneutic event in this sense, it is helpful to consider the sphere of art – the sphere that Gadamer turns to first in *Truth and Method* to explain the concept of the hermeneutic event. For Gadamer, aesthetic experience has a cognitive dimension to it. It involves encountering a work of art in such a way that one takes away a deeper understanding of the subject matter of the work. In this, Gadamer does not carry forward the distrust of the artists and the poets that Plato’s Socrates often voices. Whereas, in Plato’s works, Socrates often regarded art as doomed to fail in its attempt to bring forth its subject matter,[[5]](#endnote-5) Gadamer argues that, by reconceiving of art’s mimetic activity, we can better account for the efficacy of art’s work. For Gadamer, the work of art is mimetic in the sense that it allows something to come to presentation [*Darstellung*] in a new way. In the work of art, “the thing presented is there [*Das Dargestellte ist da*]” (Gadamer 2004, 117) and, indeed, “has come into the There more authentically [*eigentlicher ins Da gekommen ist*]” (119). Take a portrait, for instance. A portrait is not just a copy. It presents the subject in their essential qualities – qualities that come to light in the presentation itself. In this way, it presents the subject as they have not exactly appeared before, but it does so in a way that allows viewers to recognize them as if for the first time. Similarly, in a great musical performance, an audience can hear a piece of music that they are already familiar with as if for the first time. They can walk away from the performance feeling as though they now better understand the essential qualities of the composition. This is, of course, part of the continuing appeal that a live performance has for us today in this age of mechanical reproduction. To say that art is mimetic in this sense, then, is to say that it presents a subject matter that is already familiar but allows it to be brought forth and thus recognized by viewers in a new way.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Gadamer recognizes that there are many forms of language that work this way too. Take, for instance, forms of poetic description – ways that language can present the being of something through metaphor, metonymy, allegory, and so on. Poetic description can heighten our understanding of a subject. It can make us recognize the essence of a person, an event, or a subject matter. This is why Gadamer insists that Homer’s Achilles is “more than the original,” “more than the being of the thing represented” (Gadamer 2004, 119). What Gadamer describes here is the power of literature to radically transform our understanding. This is the effect of a beautiful poem or a moving novel. In reading such works, one does not simply add a new perspective onto an existing one. Rather, one’s understanding of things is fundamentally transformed. The same, however, can be said of a very effective university lecture.[[7]](#endnote-7) The lecture takes what is already somewhat familiar to the students (e.g., a text that they have read for class, a current event that they are familiar with, etc.) and transforms their understanding of it. Moreover, just as the reader walks away from the beautiful poem with a sense that they now know the subject matter better, students walk away from an illuminating lecture with a sense that they now know have a better understanding of the subject matter. In these ways, both the poem and the pedagogical lecture are hermeneutic events.

With this analysis, we can see what is wrong, for Gadamer, with thinking about language *only* as a set of signs (Gadamer 2004, 434). A sign is something that refers to something else but does not mimetically present it. A street sign indicating a pedestrian crosswalk, for example, does not bring forth the crosswalk in a new way. It merely indicates that it is there. While individual words sometimes function this way, this is far from being true for language in general. Things like essays, poems, lectures, and metaphors do not have the function of simply referring to reality. They are mimetic in the way that the work of art is. They allow us to recognize what is essential about their subject matter. Even individual words and phrases can be mimetic in this way. This is not to say that words never function as signs, but if we fail to take into account language’s presentational capacity, we miss something crucial.

**The speculative unity of being and language**

Many would object to Gadamer’s argument that being comes to presentation through language by insisting that, while new interpretations unfold over time and new significance can be found in each of those interpretations, the object of interpretation itself does not change (Betti 1980; Hirsch 1967). Even more to the point, the objection goes, one should be careful not to confuse interpretation and knowledge. Interpretation yields an understanding of the significance of an object *for us* (that is, for a particular subject), but it is an understanding of the object *itself* that is the real mark of knowledge. On this view, linguistic interpretation is incidental to real knowledge, that is, to knowledge of beings themselves, and what we call true speech is really just language that corresponds to beings themselves, that is, to beings as independent of human cognition and signification.

How does Gadamer respond to this objection? Gadamer does not deny that there is some difference to be accounted for. This difference, after all, is what allows there to be an experience of recognition when, for example, an essay allows us to recognize things about a subject matter that we didn’t recognize before. In such instances, we differentiate between two moments of the event of understanding: between the subject matter of the presentation and the presentation itself. For Gadamer, though, this distinction is not absolute. Rather, it belongs to what he conceives of, following Hegel, as a dialectical or speculative unity. [[8]](#endnote-8) As he puts it: “To come into language does not mean that a second being is acquired. Rather, what something presents itself as belongs to its own being. Thus everything that is language has a speculative unity: it contains a distinction, that between its being and its presentations of itself, but this is a distinction that is really not a distinction at all” (Gadamer 2004, 491).

Understanding this argument is crucial for understanding how Gadamer conceives of the function of the human sciences [*Geisteswissenschaften*], since linguistic interpretation lies at the heart of these disciplines. For those who conceive of linguistic interpretation as incidental to reality itself, the interpretation of written tradition that lies at the heart of humanistic research will seem doubly removed from real science. According to this view, it is already a mistake to turn to historical texts if one is interested in truth, since this can only mean leaning on the prejudices of tradition – an approach that the Enlightenment is usually understood to have put to rest (Gadamer 2004, 284-89). It is a further mistake to then try to find the truth of these texts by undertaking present interpretation. If we take seriously Gadamer’s argument about the speculative unity of being and language, though, then we can understand the emphasis on textual interpretation in the humanities and even understand the necessary role that humanistic inquiry plays in the pursuit of truth.

Gadamer’s commitment to thinking the speculative unity between being and language is also evident in his claim that one cannot pinpoint the origin of language – be it as a moment in childhood development or a moment in human evolution. With respect to the former, Gadamer argues that, while we often treat the first word uttered by a child as the most decisive moment in their linguistic development, children already inhabit language long before they utter their first word (Gadamer 1977, 63; 2000, 12). We begin to inhabit language as soon as we begin to clue into the beings at issue in the practical dealings of our social group. Our linguisticality thus arises at the same time as we acquire a world in common with others. This means that it is not possible to pinpoint the moment at which we enter language. There is a similar difficulty to face when we try to pinpoint the moment at which a particular concept goes from being a creative description of the world to simply reflecting the world in which we dwell. Again, this is not to say that one cannot make an ontic distinction between words and the world that comes to presentation through them. However, it is to insist that there is an essential relationship and an ontological unity between language and being that makes it difficult to ever completely disentangle the two. In the essay, “Man and Language,” Gadamer (1977) explains the difficulty this way:

What sort of folly is it to say that a child speaks a “first” word. What kind of madness is it to want to discover the original language of humanity by having children grow up in hermetic isolation from human speaking and then, from their first babbling of an articulate sort, recognize an actual human language and accord it the honor of being the “original” language of creation. What is mad about such ideas is that they want to suspend in some artificial way our very enclosedness in the linguistic world in which we live. In truth we are always already at home in language, just as much as we are in the world (63).

To summarize, then, Gadamer rejects the idea that what comes to presentation through language is incidental to being. Instead, for Gadamer, being comes to understanding through linguistic presentation. This, as we have seen, is an important part of his explanation of the importance of the human sciences. It is also the key to understanding Gadamer’s claim that there is no “first word” and no way of isolating the origin of language. In the next section, we will consider the importance that Gadamer places on conversation in the process of linguistic presentation. Before moving on to this important consideration, however, let us first distinguish Gadamer’s argument about the speculative unity of language and being from two arguments with which it may easily be confused.

First, Gadamer’s claim should not be confused with that of nominalism, that is, with the claim that the explanatory success of a language has no bearing on its ontological status.[[9]](#endnote-9) The nominalist denies that the power of language is anything but self-referential. What language offers is a set of preschemas that determine experience in advance, cutting up nature in a particular way *for us*, rather than a way that experience or being actually comes to presentation. Such a reading of Gadamer, however, mistakes the idea of a speculative unity between being and language for the doctrine of linguistic idealism. It misses what it means to say that there is a true *unity* between being and language. Just as being is always coming to presentation through language, language evolves, Gadamer argues, experience come to articulation. In this sense, language should not be understood as some separate sphere from being or experience. As Gadamer (2004) explains, “Experience is not wordless to begin with, subsequently becoming an object of reflection by being named, by being subsumed under the universality of the word. Rather, experience of itself seeks and finds words that express it” (435).

Second, Gadamer’s claim about the dialectical unity between being and language should be differentiated from the stronger claim that every single instance or unit of language (every word, every sentence) is presentational. As argued above, Gadamer takes seriously the phenomenological insight that our use of language reflects how we dwell in the world, inhabiting that world with pre-reflective understanding. Not every sentence, then, is in the business of bringing forth the world in a new way, since if it was, every sentence would be a conspicuous event. Some sentences simply aim to describe something about the world that has already been set forth. Accordingly, Gadamer does not take issue with the claim that some sentences are indeed true or false according to how they correspond with some given, external reality. Indeed, he clarifies that even within an essay or a lecture that one takes as a whole as a mimetic, hermeneutic event, many of the individual sentences within the composition will not function mimetically. Still, the observation that some sentences and words function referentially like this should not lead us to believe that all language functions in this way. In his essay, “The Eminent Text and its Truth,” Gadamer (1980b) explains:

. . . (W)hat is “truth” when a linguistic construct has cut off all reference to an authoritative reality and when it fulfills itself in itself? It should hardly be necessary to say once again that the construction blocks of a poetic construct may possess some reference to the world and, in this respect, they may be true or false. But the construction itself is by no means true or false for this reason. A text which says “many true and false things” without distinguishing between them has, *per se*, no relation to truth (8).

To put the point another way, Gadamer’s doctrine of the speculative unity between language and being does not remove the need for interpretation. It is, in fact, something that emerges as a reader is actively engaged in interpreting a text. This means that the hermeneutic event of language is necessarily an interactive event. The reading through which I gain new understanding involves the highlighting of certain passages as important and the relegating of others to background context. It involves a high degree of interaction with the text – e.g., taking parts of the text as claims that I feel addressed by, reflecting on my own preconceptions in response to being addressed, and bringing questions to the text in turn that then might then make other parts of the text stand out as significant. Similarly, a lecture can only function as a hermeneutic event if I interact with it in such ways. I must find allow certain claims to come into focus, feel myself personally addressed by these claims, generate my own questions in response, and so on. Thus, a lecture, like a text, only brings about new understanding when one engages in conversation with it in such ways.

**Conversation as a site of linguistic understanding**

For Gadamer, then, being comes to presentation through language, and when this happens, we not only develop understanding but experience the linguistic presentation at hand as a hermeneutic event. Above, we considered how one can experience this presentational power of language when one listens to an insightful lecture or reads a perceptive text. Presentation in this sense has the character of an event, an occurrence; however, it is an event that involves interpretation. The act of carefully interpreting a text is one important way in which we can be open to events of language in the way that we have been describing. Indeed, engaging in textual interpretation is especially fruitful because the non-immediacy of written tradition requires us to grapple more with the task of interpretation than we are accustomed to when dealing with everyday spoken communication (Gadamer 2004, 407). For Gadamer, though, it is above all in face-to-face conversation where we are likely to find ourselves open to the event of language and, thus, to the power of language to bring something into presentation. Indeed, this is what leads Gadamer more than once to make the claim that language only fully realizes itself in conversation.[[10]](#endnote-10) In the final section of this chapter, then, we turn to explore Gadamer’s analysis of conversation and how it sheds light on the features of language described above.

Gadamer begins the fifth chapter of *Truth and Method* on “Language and Hermeneutics” by describing what happens in conversation. Conversation, he explains, is something we fall into and that yields unexpected discoveries. The discoveries it yields and that make conversations productive are new understandings. In conversation, we can come to understandings that we could not have predicted with any certainty in advance – understandings that emerge immanently within the conversation itself. This gives conversation the character of an unpredictable, disclosive, and transformative event. As Gadamer (2004) puts it:

We say that we “conduct” a conversation, but the more genuine a conversation is, the less its conduct lies within the will of either partner. Thus a genuine conversation is never the one that we wanted to conduct. Rather, it is generally more correct to say that we fall into conversation, or even that we become involved in it. The way one word follows another, with the conversation taking its own twists and reaching its own conclusion, may well be conducted in some way, but the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led. No one knows in advance what will “come out” of a conversation. . . . All this shows that a conversation has a spirit of its own, and that the language in which it is conducted bears its own truth within it – i.e., that it allows something to ‘emerge’ which henceforth exists (401).

Gadamer’s claim that conversation “bears its own truth within it” recalls the above description of how mimetic events allow something to come to presentation, to be *there* more authentically than before. A good essay, like a good portrait, brings a subject forth in this way, providing a new and better understanding of it. Conversation is similar in that it allows a subject matter to come to presentation and for participants to thus gain new understanding of it. This is, of course, what attracts us to conversing with people. Conversations are opportunities to reflect on our own beliefs and to refine our understanding of things. This is why we often intentionally seek out conversations with others – especially when we know that we are confused or unclear about something.

Yet, whatever our intentions going into it, a conversation “has a spirit of its own.” We gain understanding only by following along with the inner necessity of the movement that takes place in the conversation. That inner necessity is dictated by neither participant by themselves but by the subject matter [*die Sache*] itself and is, for Gadamer, what unifies the participants in their inquiry. This is what Gadamer means when he claims that, in conversation, “the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it than the led.” In these ways, conversation is characterized by the same “I-lessness” that, as we saw above, Gadamer identifies in “Man and Language” as an essential feature of language. A conversation is “I-less” in that it requires that one be willing to follow the *logos* of the conversation wherever it goes.

This is not to say, however, that those engaged in conversation must be purely passive, that they must contribute nothing to this process. On the contrary, there are identifiable hermeneutic virtues that enable a conversation to function as a site of meaning and understanding, and there are identifiable hermeneutic vices that inhibit this. The identification and clarification of these virtues and vices is a growing and important field of research in its own right (Cauchon 2016; Fricker 2007; Grondin 2011; Mannies 2016; Schmidt 2000; Wiercinski 2011). Here, however, we will consider two hermeneutic virtues that Gadamer himself emphasizes in *Truth and Method*. First, participants must take each other’s contributions to the conversation as truth claims, that is, as potentially disclosive of new understanding.[[11]](#endnote-11) We do not always take the words of others this way. There are, for example, certain kinds of linguistic exchanges where participants are not there to collaborate in an inquiry oriented toward arriving at mutual understanding. Gadamer points to interrogation (as in the examination of a witness in a court of law) and to the administration of school examinations as examples of linguistic interactions that are not real conversations in this sense (Gadamer 1977, 67; 2004, 403). In these cases, the interrogator and the exam administrator follow a pre-determined plan of questioning and have determined in advance what the potential outcomes are and perhaps even, as in the case of the cross-examination of a hostile witness in court, what exactly they would like the other to say. In such cases, one is not treating the other as a source of new insight, nor is the conversation functioning as a hermeneutic event.

Second, genuine conversation requires that the participants use the conversation as an opportunity to critically reflect on their own ideas. This is what it means, for Gadamer, to exhibit openness in conversation. Here it is important to emphasize what Gadamer does not mean by openness. In keeping with his account of understanding as a hermeneutic circle, Gadamer does not believe it is necessary for one to abandon their fore-conceptions, fore-meanings, and prejudgments in order to engage genuinely in conversation. One must, instead, be willing to put these at risk (Gadamer 2004, 278-80). Because there are always prejudices of various kinds at work in the process of understanding, one cannot simply put aside a judgment or belief that they hold that is relevant to the conversation at hand. However, one fails to genuinely engage in conversation as a process of understanding if they are not willing to put these prejudices to the test when they come under question. Similarly, one will necessarily rely on linguistic concepts to engage in conversation, just as one must rely on them in any interpretation; however, one must also be willing to question and rethink these linguistic concepts if the line of thought that emerges in the conversation demands it. This process, namely, that of “working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves,” is, Gadamer says, “the constant task of understanding” (2004, 280).

Thus, Gadamer’s insistence that a conversation “has a spirit of its own” that determines what occurs in it should not be taken to mean that there is no art of conversation or that every conversation yields new, valuable understanding. Gadamer is, in fact, keenly aware of those habits that can prevent us from the process of questioning and discovery made possible by conversation. In describing what is required for genuine conversation, however, Gadamer explains:

But this activity and this effort consist in not interfering arbitrarily – latching onto this or that ready-made notion as it strikes one – with the immanent necessity of thought. Certainly, the thing does not go its own course without our thinking being involved, but thinking means unfolding what consistently follows from the subject matter itself. It is part of this process to suppress ideas “that tend to insinuate themselves” and to insist on the logic of the thought (480).

For Gadamer, the two most instructive models in the history of philosophy of this “true method, which is the activity of the thing itself” are the writings of Plato and Hegel (Gadamer 2004, 479-80). For Plato’s dialogues and Hegel’s *Logic*, the method and content of philosophical investigation are ultimately one and the same.[[12]](#endnote-12) This is what it means to say that both proceed dialectically. The dramatic character of Plato’s dialogues are especially helpful here, as the dialogues present us with characters who embody hermeneutic virtues as well as those who sorely lack them. Socrates exemplifies the commitment to questioning and to the path of inquiry needed for genuine conversation. He is a lover of *logos* – not in the sense of loving to win at arguments, as others so often accused him, but in his affection for conversations that functions as sites of new understanding, new discovery. As Darren Walhof explains, “The goal in Socrates’ exchanges is not to win every argument but to persist in questioning ever further, as a means of pursuing the truth about something, a subject common to the participants in the dialogue” (Walhof 2017, 39). This comportment, so similar to the patient, interpretive comportment required to read and learn from Plato’s dialogues themselves, is what allows Socrates to experience the contributions others make to the conversation as meaningful, insightful hermeneutic events.

To be clear, following the inner necessity of a conversation does not mean sticking to a pre-determined topic for discussion. Indeed, just as the discoveries made in the course of a conversation cannot be determined in advance, so too must the subject matter of the conversation unfold through the dialectical movement of conversation itself. This is a tricky point though. Those who engage in a conversation must have some notion of what the conversation is about such that they feel able to contribute and to follow along with the inquiry. Yet, the subject matter must, on the other hand, come to light through the discussion. As Günter Figal puts it, it must be “grasped as yet undetermined and nonetheless as this determinant thing” (Figal 2002, 108). Here again, Plato’s writings provide a helpful allegory. In Plato’s *Meno*, the title character, Meno, despairs about his ability to engage in philosophical conversation with Socrates about a subject matter that he does not know (*Meno* 80d). In response, Socrates offers him an account of knowledge as recollection (*anamnesis*) meant to encourage him by making clear that, even in his present condition of unknowing, he is able to proceed productively in the inquiry (*Meno* 81a-d). In fact, Meno’s condition is the necessary condition of all participants upon entering a conversation. In order for there to be a genuine conversation, participants must be familiar enough with the topic under discussion to engage and to entertain questions about it, but they cannot have full knowledge of the subject matter yet, or the conversation would not function as a process of understanding at all. Contrary to Meno’s fears, then, the fact that the subject matter is not fully determined at the beginning of an inquiry does not mean that understanding is impossible. It means only that understanding emerges through a dialectical, dialogical process: the process of “working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed ‘by the things’ themselves,” which Gadamer takes to be the ongoing task of understanding (Gadamer 2004, 280).

What should now be clear is that Gadamer’s analysis of face-to-face conversation allows him to better articulate the full process by which one comes to understanding through language. In the earlier sections, we saw that, for Gadamer, language is always already at work in human understanding. It is the medium of understanding – an understanding that is not limited to deliberate, intentional efforts but that includes those pre-reflective forms of understanding that shape our very mode of existence. Earlier we saw how this claim is born out in terms of human development. As soon as we begin inhabiting a meaningful social world at all, we begin to participate in language and in linguistic forms of understanding. Our understanding is therefore always already linguistic. To say that language is the medium or method of understanding, though, is also to say that it is the object of our understanding, if by method we mean what Gadamer describes as “true method,” that is, as what is immanent to the thing itself (Gadamer 2004, 479). It is this double role that language plays in the process of hermeneutic inquiry that leads Gadamer to claim famously that “being that can be understood is language” (Gadamer 2004, 490). Yet understanding, for Gadamer, is not a set of fixed pre-schemas that we apply indifferently to experience. Although we are thrown into forms of understanding from the start, events of linguistic presentation – texts, lectures, and so on – provide us with opportunities to expand our understanding by putting our fore-meanings and preconceptions to the test. We do this, Gadamer argues, by engaging in the same dialectical process with the text as we do with an interlocutor in conversation. In fact, Gadamer’s analysis of conversation as the process of coming to an understanding (Gadamer 2004, 403) provides valuable insight into the conditions that must be in place for one to be open to the hermeneutic event of language. Moreover, his articulation of these conditions, what I’ve referred to here as hermeneutic virtues, sheds light on his account of the process of understanding as the ongoing critical examination of our preconceptions. In these ways, language is of central importance for Gadamer. His conception of language is integral to the accounts he offers of the fore-structure of the understanding, the hermeneutic circle, the dialectical process of understanding, and of the general character of the subject matters that are at issue for us when we engage in the process of inquiry.

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**Notes**

1. Jean Grondin calls this Gadamer’s “first great thesis on language” (Grondin 2003, 125). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. This is Heidegger’s famous doctrine of the fore-structure of the understanding [*die Vorstruktur des Verstehens*], which Gadamer takes up in the second part of *Truth and Method* (Gadamer 2004, 278-84). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Darren Walhof (2017) argues that Gadamer’s theory of language should be understood in contrast to an instrumentalist view of language, which sees language as a set of tools that subjects use to express thoughts. According to Walhof, “Gadamer thinks that this picture causes us to miss something fairly profound about the way that we indwell language and the way it structures the world for us. Speaking is not merely putting preexisting thoughts into words but participating in a language that precedes us and that, therefore, enables thought and constrains it at the same time (Walhof 2017, 19-20). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. “This is obviously true for poetry and the like, but for philosophy too I take care to tell my students: you must sharpen your ear, you must realize that when you take a word in your mouth, you have not taken up some arbitrary tool which can be thrown in a corner if it doesn’t do the job, but you are committed to a line of thought that comes from afar and reaches on beyond you” (Gadamer 2004, 574). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For more on Gadamer’s understanding of Plato’s critique of the poets, see Gadamer’s 1934 essay, “Plato and the Poets” (Gadamer 1980a, 39-72). On the interpretive questions that confront readers who attempt to derive Plato’s doctrine from Plato’s literary, dialogical texts, see Gadamer’s later essay, “Plato’s Unwritten Dialectic” (Gadamer 1980a, 124-55). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. It is common for narratives about the history of aesthetic theory to identify modern aesthetics as a movement away from conceiving of art in terms of imitation [*mimesis*] and representation [*Darstellung*], since accounts of art that rely on these concepts usually ignore the productivity of art, that is, art’s ability to generate its own meaning and to determine the being of its subject matter. Gadamer’s theory of art, however, offers a way of making sense of how art can be both representational and productive. Similarly, while it is common for theorists of poetics to read modern poetry as shifting away from representation, Gadamer’s theory of language offers a way of seeing how a poem can be a site of both representation and new meaning. When engaging in artistic representation, Gadamer (2004) argues, one “allows what he knows to exist and to exist in the way that he knows it” (117). [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This example comes from Shaun Gallagher (1992) whose book, *Hermeneutics and Education*, explores the various ways in which educational experience is a hermeneutic event. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. For Hegel’s account of the logico-metaphysical relationship between essence and appearance, see “The Doctrine of Essence” in *The Science of Logic* (Hegel 2010, 337-505). [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Richard Rorty (2004) argues that Gadamer’s theory of language is a nominalist theory in this respect. I follow Rorty’s definition of nominalism here, but I take issue with his claim that Gadamer is a nominalist in this respect.  [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer (2004) writes that “. . . language has its true being only in dialogue, in coming to an understanding” (462) and later in “The Boundaries of Language” (2000) that “. . . language is realized not in statements but as conversation, as the unity of meaning that develops out of the word and answer” (16). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. In genuine conversation, Gadamer (2004) explains, “each personopens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says” (403). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This describes what Hegel means by the “absolute method” that characterizes his own investigation in the Logic. In *The Science of Logic*, Hegel (2010) clarifies that absolute method does not proceed by way “of external reflection but takes the determinate from its subject matter, for it is itself its immanent principle and it soul” (741). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)