A Process of the Fusion of Horizons in the Text Interpretation

Kazuya SASAKI
Rikkyo University

There is a philosophy, which takes a circle between the whole and the partial meaning as the necessary condition for the understanding of text. The circle, which was conceptualized by a German philosopher in 19th century, Schleiermacher, is called the hermeneutical circle. The philosophy is called the hermeneutical philosophy or simply hermeneutics. In this presentation I would like to follow the hermeneutical theory of German philosopher Hans-Georg Gadamer and besides explain the theory more in detail for myself to ascertain a phenomenon in text interpretation, i.e. the fusion of horizons. First, I would like to make it clear with my own consideration, what Gadamer describes about the process of the fusion of horizons. Second, I would like to clarify the condition for the possible process of the fusion of horizons in general.

1. The Conditions for The Fusion of Horizons

In Gadamer’s hermeneutical philosophy, and the philosophy which, I think is, hermeneutical in Gadamer’s way, the following points are thought to be the necessary conditions for the text interpretation.

(1) The Text Interpretation Bound by the Cultural Tradition to Which It Belongs

The problem of the hermeneutical circle is not restricted to the circular relation between the whole and parts of the text which is the object of interpretation. The interpreter’s prejudice and the knowledge, which he gains from his new interpretation of texts, make a circle, because they influence each other. The prejudice biases the understanding of texts and the understanding renews the prejudice. The interpreter has his prejudice and view of the world as a “horizon”. The horizon is a situation where one recognizes objects under the restriction of perspectives. “The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from the particular vantage point. (H.-G. Gadamer, tr. By J. Weinsheimer and D. G. Marshall, “Truth and Method”, 2006, New York, p. 301, in the following abbreviated as TM)” One sees everything only in his own horizon. The same thing is seen differently according to the difference of horizons where one stands. A horizon restricts one’s recognition. But one can see beyond it (TM301). One can see the things out of his horizon. This opens the possibility of fusion of horizons. In any way, it functions as a standard of evaluation, whether something is near or far, great or small (TM302). So it is also a prejudice for an interpreter. The prejudice for Gadamer is not a negative concept. “It is necessary
to fundamentally rehabilitate the concept of prejudice. (TM278)” “There are legitimate prejudices. (TM278)” A prejudice is a scheme of recognition or a cause for misunderstanding, when one interprets texts. But a misunderstanding caused by a prejudice is thought to be neither a wrong nor incorrect understanding. Because the hermeneutics considers it impossible for interpreter to read a text in itself. He can read it only under the restriction by his own prejudice. In general, texts must be read by interpreters. Only if they are read, they are truly texts. The unread texts are only physical materials in paper and ink. They don’t have any significance as texts.

The interpreter, the subject of reading texts, has necessarily a particular prejudice. So the understanding of texts is formed through the mutual influence between the interpreter and texts. The prejudice includes a knowledge which the interpreter gained unconsciously, and is formed in the cultural tradition to which he belongs. Those who belong to the same tradition have each personal prejudice and at the same time have the same one of their tradition. They have the common parts in each of their prejudices. The cultural tradition is the most fundamental basis of one’s prejudice. Because prejudices are necessarily accompanied with interpreters and depend partially on the cultural tradition, the text interpretation depends similarly on it.

(2) The Basic Cluster of Texts as the Basis of Interpretation

In this section I would like to say more details of the structures of the interpreters’ prejudices for myself. In a cultural tradition on which a text interpretation depends, there are many texts except ones that are the objects of the interpretation. They are also read and as a result the interpretations of them are accumulated. All of these become parts of the tradition. The interpreter of a text certainly refers to the accumulation of readings and interpretations in the tradition. At least one studies many texts and interpretations by many preceding readers in the school age. In consequence one gets used to read and understand texts in relation to the other interpretations of the same texts. If texts are truly texts only by being read, the texts are mutually connected by the interpreter. Each cultural tradition has its own authentic texts and the accumulation of the authentic ways of interpretations and understandings. On the basis of them each of interpreters accumulates their own reading experiences and understandings. This accumulation, as I think, makes prejudices of interpreters. A group of interpreter that has a particular trend of favorite reading makes a cluster of texts, whose parts are mutually connected by the interpreters’ reading act. The accumulation on the basis of the group and the cluster of their texts forms the second basis for the interpreter. I call this cluster the basic cluster of texts for the interpreter. For the contents of the interpretations and understandings of the cluster of texts makes the essential core of the prejudice of the interpreter as the base.

(3) The Temporal Distance between the Horizon of Text and That of Interpreter

A text has an author. Based on his own era’s particular horizon the author creates the text. It’s necessarily so by the limitedness of human being. Based on his own particular era’s horizon the interpreter reads the text. This is necessarily so, too. Between the two horizons there is no necessity that they are the same. If the two horizons have a large common section, the interpreter can read the text in the near position to the author who is almost his contemporary. If they are entirely different, the interpreter reads the text either based on the past horizon to which the author belongs, or based on the present one to which the interpreter himself belongs. In the former case the interpreter cannot adjust himself to the past horizon. It is no more possible for man to do this than for the historicist to reconstruct the past history objectively perfectly. In the latter it is an understanding of the past according to the measure of the present. It falls into the wrong historicism which asserts that at present time one can understand the past history in the light of the universal, trans-historical view.
point. Therefore it is not easy to overcome the historical temporal distance between the interpreter and the author. In other words, all that the interpreter can do is to interpret texts only in his proper historical horizon one-sidedly.

(4) The Claim to Truth that Brings the Fusion of Horizons

The historical temporal distance between the interpreter and the author can be overcome only through the fusion of horizons, so Gadamer says. He explains that the fusion of horizons is made possible by the fact that the interpreter accepts the “claim to truth” of a text. When one reads a text, one can have a fore-conception of completeness. “When we read a text we always assume its completeness. (TM294)” “Not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectation of meaning that proceed from the relation to the truth of what is being said. (TM294)” “Since we are now concerned not with individuality and what it thinks but with the truth of what it said, a text is not as a mere expression of the life, but is taken seriously in its claim to truth. (TM296)” That the interpreter can assume text’s completeness means that he takes the content of the text seriously as the claim to truth. It seems as if a text could have a kind of power to attract a interpreter. The origin of the power would be, I think, the reputations of the precedent interpreters, an obligatory requirement for reading the other texts, the order from the academic master or an accidental encounter with the text, and so on. In any case the interpreter finds the text worth reading, i.e. in other words, it demands him to read itself. The ground of his acceptance of its demand is the fact that it can make him take itself as the expression of the truth. This is said to be the claim to truth of the text. It is because of mediation by the truth which is to be universal and trans-historical that the interpreter and text whose horizons are entirely different can be tied mutually. On account of his accepting the claim to truth the fusion of horizons becomes possible. The claim to truth can overcome the temporal distance between the interpreter and the text. From the interpreter’s stand point the fused new horizon makes a new understanding of the text.

(5) The Transformation of the Interpreter’s View of the World

The fusion of horizon means, from the interpreter’s view point, a transformation of his own horizon. In one hand, inasmuch as he belongs to a cultural tradition, he has the characteristics of the newest stage of the tradition in his era as some parts of his horizon, experiencing the life in it. In the other hand, his horizon has the other new parts that are gained through the new experience in the nearest time. In the new parts there is something untraditional. That is necessarily. When the interpreter reads the text in the past time and understand it, then he approach the past stage of the tradition from the present time through the fusion of horizons. This means the transformation of the understanding of the interpreter. According to it he can more profoundly understand his recent experiences and the new texts which are made in the present horizon, and more radically, more traditionally. To say about the old tradition long ago, however, this means that its horizon accept the new elements in itself when understood by the recent interpreter. The tradition functions in the newest era as a restraining condition, the precedent situation for the interpreter. What is made conscious about it by him is made into the conception it. The tradition has the past texts in itself. In them there are some that are called classics and that are able to become the base of the interpretation in the later era. The accumulation of this basic cluster of texts regulates the understanding of the contemporary texts. Simultaneously the newest texts, in turn, regulate that of the basic cluster of texts. In this way a movement in which the both of the interpreting subject and the interpreted tradition are renewed mutually. This is called the “effective history”. 
The effective history occurs necessarily in the cases of reading texts, whether it is conscious or not. But it occurs, even if it is intensively conscious. When one wants to read and understand some texts, one can choose the basic cluster of texts and the accumulation of the interpretation about the cluster for the foundation of the understanding. In the tradition there are many texts and a lot of accumulation of interpretation about them. There is not necessarily a unified system in them. The traditional texts are divided into many ways of basic clusters owing to variety of evaluation which texts are important or not, and into ways of understanding of them, too. One that reads the texts in the tradition must choose one of the clusters and one of the ways of understanding. In some cases, of course, the motives of the choices are unconscious. If the conscious grounds of the unconscious motives are investigated one after another, the investigation turns out to be infinite and finds the grounds unconscious ultimately. Considering the bottomless deepness of the tradition, the consciousness of the subject of interpretation has a limit line which it cannot transcend. Therefore one needs not to inquire into the motives of the choice. Then, if one chooses the cluster of texts and the way of understanding consciously, one is able to control the direction where the effective history is oriented. In other words, in the same tradition there can be diverse ways how one takes the tradition and how one accepts the effect from it. Into this situation Gadamer introduces the concept of “authority” and will unify the diversity into the uniformity. On the micro viewpoint, however, the diverse process of the effective history proceeds in reality. Only on the macro viewpoint, the interpretation in the tradition seems to stream along a fixed uniformed bank on the whole. After all, which stream the tradition chooses as the main large stream depends on the following, which way of constructing the basic cluster of texts the interpreters of the later times approve of and choose as the premise of understanding, and which way of understanding many of them take as the authentic method of text reading. A stream turns out to be the main only in the future ages. That seems now only to be infinite.

(6) The Spatial distance, which the Fusion of Horizons cannot overcome

One must not overlook an important point in the fusion of horizons. It is the fact that the fusion of the interpreter’s and the text’s horizon occurs by the claim to truth only in a particular condition. The condition is that the interpreter and the text belong to the same tradition together. One should say that the fusion of horizons is a phenomenon which overcomes the temporal distance between them. The same phenomenon of fusion doesn’t come into existence, when the cultures of the interpreter and the text have entirely different traditions each other. For the common truth cannot be easily found between them. What is the truth that is called here? It is, Gadamer says, the truth of human sciences (Geisteswissenschaften), which is not found by natural sciences but is communicated with the experiences of philosophy, art, and history (TMxxi). In other words, the truth is a content, which many people with the same horizon can accept as a philosophical, artistic and historical experience, among the contents which the text expresses. It is not a platonic ideal existence that can transcend the time and space as the mathematical or physical truth. Philosophy, art and history bring about an experience which is deep-rooted in the horizon. It is not an experience which can be easily communicated between the two whose horizons are different.

It is not because the claim to truth has the universal meaning that the claim to truth can be received, but because the horizon itself has an element which can transcend the restriction of communication. For the different horizons of the different eras in the same tradition, there is an intermediate era which connects the older era of the text and the recent years of the interpreter. The experience which has been transmitted in the tradition has been continued, however radically the outer form of the same experience has changed. Even if a particular experience became extinct,
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the other experience next to it is maintained. Then the extinguished experience is also supported indirectly by the other, and is maintained. As the tradition of the text interpretation is connected with the understanding of the clusters of texts, and as the clusters are not extinguished, the experience of interpretation in the same tradition is always continuous through its history. If it is extinguished, it has a possibility of restoration. Therefore the horizons with some temporal distance in the same tradition can be always constantly continuous, though they appear different to each other in superficial outer forms.

On the contrary, whether they are the contemporaries or not, the two horizons in a distanced space cannot have the continuousness as those in the same tradition. Then the process of text interpretation on this hermeneutics cannot be valid in the case of the understanding of texts in horizons with some spatial distance. In other words, an interpreter cannot understand text in an entirely different and alien culture, in the process of the fusion of horizons. He can understand the texts only in his proper horizon or in texts’ proper horizon. He cannot assume the completeness of the texts. Each of them is not conducted by the same claim to truth. He understands the texts only one-sidedly.

Now it seems to us that the above-mentioned process of text interpretation and fusion of horizons is not sufficient to the understanding of text in general. The next that we must investigate is how to transcend the limit of the spatial distance with the theory of the fusion of horizons. It will make clear the real condition for the hermeneutical understanding of text in general. In addition, it will open the way to the inter- or cross-cultural communications.

2. The Possibility of the Process of a New Fusion of Horizons

(1) Investigation for a New Fusion of Horizons

We have seen that it is necessary to accept the claim to truth of the text, if a text understanding is formed through the fusion of horizons. The claim to truth can be received with each other only by the subjects in the same tradition. Therefore in order to form the understanding in the different horizons one must establish a new common tradition between them. Of course it must be distinguished from the concept of “invented tradition”. This is one made by Eric John Ernest Hobsbawm. It is quite different from the genuine tradition. It is “invented” to pretend to be an old traditional item in the recent years by an intention of the political power or communities, with an aim of gathering the people into a nation. It is not a naturally grown tradition, but one that is made up for a particular end and with a special planning, and that is constructed politically by an upper section of a state. The new tradition, which here we says, is not like it at all, but is formed rather from the bottom to the top as the naturally grown tradition. The formation of the new tradition has an end that it makes the claim to truth and the fusion of horizons function validly, but has neither intention nor expectation of the direction of it. It can never be planned in advance. This fact depends on the way of the cluster of texts on which the text understanding bases.

Forming new common clusters of texts has an important clue to solve the problem.

To say the text understanding, the interpreters in the different cultural traditions don’t have the common basic clusters of texts. To take the Confucianism as the traditional Japanese thought, one has a large cluster of texts to interpret the texts, to understand them and to live one’s life with it. These are the Chinese and Japanese classics on Confucianism. In the basic cluster of it there is not any European philosophical text, especially modern philosophical text. On the contrary, in order to understand the European modern philosophy and to live one’s life with it in Europe, one must have the basic cluster of texts. But in them one has no texts of Confucianism in classical Chinese
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or Japanese. Then Japanese traditional thinker interpreted the European philosophical texts only in the accumulation of understanding its own basic cluster. It means that he understood the texts of a different culture entirely one-sidedly, and this understanding is a kind of distortion. European philosopher would do the very reversal interpretation exactly.

The fact that the interpreters in the same culture have a common cluster of texts means for them to put the texts of the other culture into own basic cluster of texts. The texts of the other culture are received with a restriction by the horizon of accepting culture, when they are situated in the other’s cluster of texts and understood in the other’s culture. Even in the same cultural tradition, a text needs a long time to be situated as an important element of the basic cluster of texts. It spends much time to become one of the classical texts. A recently accepted text of the other culture is only one of newly added texts in the accepting culture, even if it is an important classical text in its original culture. So the accepted text cannot function as one of the basic cluster of texts in the accepting culture.

Then it is intensely demanded that the two cultural traditions make efforts to persuade each other how the texts put into the partner culture are worth reading as classics in its own culture, how they can function as the basis of the text interpretation, and how helpful for understanding each other it is to receive the other’s texts into its own basic cluster of texts. But this cultural communication is accompanied by difficulties.

(2) An Asymmetrical Relation

Generally speaking, there is an imbalance of the power relation between a pair of communicators, especially with the theme of text understanding. There cannot be any perfectly balanced relation between them. According to the themes a relative superiority or inferiority is necessarily brought about between them. It can be so only relatively in their mutual connection. If the third party intervenes, the relation can be changed. The relation between them, in the first place, depends on the themes which they choose as the objects of discussion. So the relation can be changed on account of the state of balance between them and of the themes they choose. A relation between a pair of communicators is variable according to changes of circumstance or situation.

When one communicates with a partner with different cultural tradition whether to accept his texts as some of its own basic cluster of texts, the power relation affects the way of acceptance.

Causes that result the imbalance between two different cultural traditions are various. Above all, the economic, political and military power, the cultural influence (e.g. that of previous China to Japan), the currency of language, and the social scale, which are all produced by the cultural tradition, are important. They are essential for the text understanding in case that they have no relations with the contents of the texts. Whether one has a superiority or inferiority to the partner, depends on whether those elements of the partner’s culture are inferior to those of his own culture or superior on the contrary. This relation of advantage or disadvantage can be easily reversed according to the chosen theme. In the relation between USA and Japan, for example, USA stands on the superior position to Japan in many realms. But in the realm of comics (manga) and animations Japan is said, in turn, to stand on the superior position.

In the following, I would like to simulate a changing relation between the two in which there is a clear distinction of superiority and inferiority, in order to examine the problem more clearly.

The superior side doesn’t positively accept the basic texts of the inferior into its own basic cluster of texts, on which it depends to interpret all the text. Rather the superior reads the texts of the inferior, even if they are classics in the inferior’s own tradition, on the accumulations of the interpretations on the superior’s basic cluster of texts, in other words, in his own horizon. If the
inferior wants to persuade the superior to recognize its own classics as that of the same significance in the superior’s tradition, it has many difficulties. At first one of them is a problem of language. In general the language of the superior is used to mediate the two traditions. The inferior must use the main concept which is the essence of the basic texts within the range of the concepts of the superior. The concept which the superior doesn’t have in its own sphere of texts or in its own language cannot use the inferior. And it uses its main concept in accordance with the horizon of the superior. That means that the inferior transforms the concept into a different form and, accompanied with it, a different content. Second, the part who judges whether the communication on the acceptance of other’s main concept is accomplished or not is the superior. The inferior must be subordinate to the evaluation of the superior. Third, the communication space and the way of communication are set on the rule of the superior. Therefore the contents which are out of the sphere of the superior’s rule are not up for discussion from the beginning. For example, a theory which explains an interpretation of a text proper to Japan within the Japanese circumstance of thinking culture is not interesting for the European intellectuals except the Japanologists or those who are especially interested in Japanese culture.

On the contrary, the inferior is willing to accept the basic text of the superior into its own basic cluster of texts. Or rather it accepts the superior’s text as more important element of the basic cluster of texts than its own traditional basic one. The inferior treats the new accepted text as invaluable as if it were the canon, and doesn’t read it critically on the base of its own basic texts and the way of understanding. It functions literally as the basic text on which reading of all the text must be based, for the inferior. The accumulation of understanding of the new “canon” text is in the same way. The standard understanding of the new text is just transplanted from the superior’s original horizon. The addressing of the superior is very persuasive to the inferior. For the inferior wants to catch up and surpass the superior and take the tactics and strategy form the superior, not from himself. The inferior is always ready to hear the superior. The efforts of superior to persuade the inferior can be easily paid off. For the three conditions mentioned above applies to this case, too, but quite reversely.

Therefore we must investigate some more conditions in order to have the common basic texts so that the two parts can produce a new tradition.

(3) The Condition to Have Common Basic Texts

In order to have common basic texts and to produce the third tradition, it is necessary to resolve the difficulties which were mentioned above.

At first, the asymmetrical relation between languages must be overcome. This means necessarily that all the people should be multilingual. For all the people need not understand directly all the cultural traditions of the world and need not be understood by them all. Rather one cultural sphere should have some knowledge of many foreign languages in balanced proportion. Now that the inter-violation of border is ordinarily seen everywhere, anyone in any cultural sphere is not allowed to remain in its own sphere or in the next sphere, and merely to understand the world within the spheres. One should study as many languages as possible, and make efforts to express the text understanding in own language according to the fusion of horizons, which is made with different horizons whose language one has studied.

Second, both of the two parts should evaluate the results of the intercultural communication. The communication must not be one-sided in every sense. They should compare their evaluation each other and make efforts to find the balanced point with which both of them can agree.

Third, the rule of communication should be diverse. It might be thought that the only rule of
the world standard could make communication easily. If the unified rule were not made of existing
rules of the superiors but of the ideal rule objective for all the cultures, it would be received to be
the rule of communication for the fusion of horizons. It is difficult, however, to make a rule which
is thought to be fair for all the rules. Then it is realistic to adjust rules and make a fair new rule
between two cultural spheres. They compare their rules, investigate the identity and difference
between them, and make a new rule from it jointly. It would be a violent process to fuse many
rules of cultural traditions into an only rule by the “existing standard”. The process of the fusion of
horizons should be accomplished between the two cultural spheres and, farther more, between the
two results of the fusion of horizons, and so on.

If added one more condition, forth, the superior should make efforts positively to transform
himself. From the beginning, the fusion of horizons prompts transformation of interpreters. So the
interpreters must transform themselves in the fusion of horizons. If in an asymmetrical relation
the superior stays in a state of the least self-transformation, while the inferior transform drastically
himself, it is a deviation from the true fusion of horizons. It is vital for the human sciences (Geistes-
wissenschaften) to make oneself relative in the trans-cultural communication and to accept the
self-transformation. That behavior of understanding of texts is just right for the hermeneutical
understanding.

The four conditions mentioned above are the condition on which the new trans-cultural
tradition depends.

(4) Conclusion

The fusion of horizons in text interpretation which Gadamer explained is restricted to the
relation between texts and interpreter both of which are in the same cultural tradition. But if
requirements of the four conditions are satisfied, the interpreter in the different tradition from the
text can accept the claim to truth of the text and understand it hermeneutically in the process of the
fusion of horizons. So I think now.