

Interpretation as Protention: The Temporal Mechanism of the Process of Interpreting

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Abstract: This paper attempts to clarify the mode in which a text is given to a consciousness in time. The original given of temporal objects is not some homogeneous and mathematical points juxtaposed in a homogeneous medium but a whole of some heterogeneous qualities, which he calls duration. These appearances of different signs in time consciousness are connected to each other in the mode of time which Husserl describes as retention and protention, especially protention. The second part of this paper is to focus on multiple characteristics involved in this action of interpretation as anticipation, including its relation to a past as its passive guidance, its applications on different levels of texts, and its possibility of being “disappointed”.

Key words: phenomenology, time consciousness, interpretation, Husserl, Bergson, semiotics

作为前瞻的解释：论解释过程的时间机制

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摘要：本文试图澄清文本被给予时间意识的基本方式。在柏格森和胡塞尔时间哲学的基础上，笔者试图描绘时间意识的两个主要特征。首先，根据柏格森的观点，对象在时间中的原初给予并非一些同质的、数学性的“点”在一个同质中介中的单纯并列，而是一些不同质的感知的整体，柏格森将这种整体称为“延续”。进一步讲，根据胡塞尔的观点，不同符号乃是在时间意识

中被联结的：他把这种原初的时间意识描绘为一个由前瞻和回顾所组成的场域，而解释行为则主要是一种前瞻。本文的第二部分将着重描述这种作为前瞻的解释行为的诸种特质，包括以一种消极综合的方式作为其引导的过去经验，它在不同文本层面上的具体面貌，以及其“期待”落空的诸种可能。

关键词：现象学，时间意识，解释，胡塞尔，柏格森，符号学

Every interpretation is an action of the consciousness, and every consciousness must manifest its contents in time; this means that every interpretation must be temporal in some senses. The problem is how time really constructs our living experience of reading a text. From a phenomenological point of view, I will be trying to answer this question by arguing that an interpretation is always involved with a special form of anticipation or protention, which is guided by our memory about texts in the past. In order to make my analysis as clear as possible, I will organize my paper in the following way:

I will first argue that in order to be interpreted or understood, a text must be able to be divided into multiple individual signs. This process of division cannot be understood in the same way like that in which we separate a line into different segments, because the latter way is only quantitative, while the living experience of interpreting is always qualitative. According to Bergson, the mode which understands time as a homogeneous medium is only a spatialized image of the original experience of time. From his theory, I will attempt to argue that the grammatical mode that describes a sentence as an “axis” is also just a secondary form understanding the original experience of interpretation.

Further, on the basis of Husserl’s phenomenology of inner time consciousness, I will try to describe the mechanism of interpretation as protention; the content in the retention and the primordial present can enable the consciousness to expect content in the protention from the level of words to the level of context, which may or may not be fulfilled by the real content given to the mind.

I. Interpretation as Separation and the Qualitative Feature of This Separation

All texts must be divisible; a special combination of sounds in the stream of consciousness can be treated as a sentence only when it is able to be divided into different but connected parts, namely, into words. For those who do not speak English, a sentence of English is nothing but a mere sequence of noise like the noise of an air-conditioner, because for them there is no meaningful word, but merely a dull continuity of sounds. For example, for such a mind, the sentence “Plato is an ancient Greek philosopher” can be just “pla toisan ancie tegreekphi lopher”, which just makes no sense at all. Therefore, the capacity of understanding the language of English is firstly an ability to separate an English word from another one.

This process of separation, however, is not like what the grammar describes for us. The aim of every school of linguistics is to offer a framework in which the organization of texts can be described rationally. As Saussure points out in his *Course in General Linguistics*, the aim of linguistics is to describe “the faculty of constructing a language, i. e. a system of distinct signs corresponding to distinct ideas” (Saussure, 1959, p.10). For him, language (langage) is an untemporal rational system, while the individual usage of rules and elements from this system in everyday experience is called the “speech” (langue) (Saussure, 1959, p.9). However, this aim itself is different from the way in which a text appears as the content of a temporal consciousness. In other words, the separation which the consciousness holds in time is not the object of linguistic surveys. In the second chapter of his *Time and Free Will*, Bergson argues that in order to be grasped as numbers, objects must be abstracted into identical units:

It is not enough to say that number is a collection of units; we must add that these units are identical with one another, or at least that they are assumed to be identical when they are counted. (Bergson, 1950, p.76)

According to Bergson, the counted numbers are added together simultaneously but not successively, because as identical units, they will

remain one if only successiveness is involved: “if we picture to ourselves each of the sheep in the flock in succession and separately, we shall never have to do with more than a single sheep.” (Bergson, 1950, p. 77) Therefore, the only way to differentiate numbers becomes distinguishing their different positions: “we either leave these sensations their specific differences, which amounts to saying that we do not count them; or else we eliminate their differences, and then how are we to distinguish them if not by their positions or that of their symbols?” (Bergson, 1950, p. 76, note) These different positions must presuppose some “empty intervals” among them, so that they can be separated. This will finally lead to the concept as a homogeneous medium which is the ground for all these positions and intervals. This concept of homogeneous medium is, logically, Bergson’s preparation for his distinction between two different understandings of time. For him, the way in which we grasp time as a homogeneous medium into which abstracted events are separated and juxtaposed is just a spatialization of the original experience of time, which he calls as duration:

[...] when we speak of time, we generally think of a homogeneous medium in which our conscious states are ranged alongside one another as in space, so as to form a discrete multiplicity. (Bergson, 1950, p. 90)

Events juxtaposed in such an abstract time are actually identical “points” when being mentioned; for example, if we write down some notes on the calendar, which is an image of time which describes time as an “area” with determined “parts”, the fact that these notes appear in different places on the calendar can alone make events represented by these notes something which happened in different dates, even though we do not write down any detail about those events. Multiplicities experienced in duration, on the contrary, are “heterogeneous, that of sensible qualities” (Bergson, 1950, p. 97), which means that we cannot eliminate their individualized characteristics; my “memory” about what happened yesterday and my “expectation” towards what will happen tomorrow are actually given to me with different appearances like their numbers of details in our mind, which are all in “themselves”, but not in positions that they hold. Furthermore, these

qualitatively heterogeneous contents are always connected with each other in our original experience of the duration, though can be distinguished from each other:

[...] but states of consciousness, even when successive, permeate one another, and in the simplest of them the whole soul can be reflected. (Bergson, 1950, p. 98)

In the living duration, two impressions are always interpenetrating each other. Or put it more exactly, the original experience of the duration is a stream that “flows” continuously, without “stops” in it like the interval between two spatial points. Of course, this does not imply that all contents in the duration are mixed up, but only means that we should only distinguish them according to their own qualitative features.

Upon Bergson’s distinction between the spatialization of time and the original experience of duration, we can clarify the difference between our temporal consciousness of a text and the grammatical description of it. In order to constitute a system of rules, a grammar must describe the structure of a sentence as composed by abstract elements as “subjects” “verbs” and “objects”. In a system like this, individual words are eliminated of all their specialties: the only reason why they have different functions is that they hold different positions combined in an “axis”. For example, as Saussure says in his *Course in General Linguistics*, “[i]n the syntagm a term acquires its value only because it stands in opposition to everything that precedes or follows it, or to both.” (Saussure, 1959, p. 123) Saussure describes the syntagm as a spatial chain with identical but separable parts, and the only reason why they have different values is that they occupy different places in this chain. Especially for languages like Chinese which do not have form changes of words, the grammatical meanings are strictly tied with word orders: in a Chinese sentence, the first word must be the subject and the second one must be the verb. Even in inflecting languages like Latin, form changes are still not special determinations of particular words, but only the “visible mark” for some abstract positions. For example, in German the affix “-e” is not a part of any particular verb, but only a mark which indicates its position as

following a first-person noun or pronoun.

It is important to be mentioned that the mode mentioned above is not the one which treats the individual experience of a text, but that deals with the rational structure of all semiotic systems. Saussure emphasizes many times that syntagm is not a structure of the speech, but of the language (Cf. Saussure, 1959, pp.124 – 125). The speech, on contrary, has a totally different mechanism: when sounds composing a sentence come through our consciousness, words organize this sentence “enter” and “leave” continually, without intervals. Actually, even a “pause” in a sentence is not an empty interval, but must be treated also as a sign, because in everyday communications, pauses and silences also express meanings. The mind interprets a concrete sentence by distinguishing all the concrete words of this sentence qualitatively: the word “Plato” is divided from the word “is” because they sound differently to us. There is not a visible “line” with determined segments, so that we can put the contingent combination of the letters “p-l-a-t-o” into the first part of this line, and “i-s” into the second. Even when “seeing” these words printed on a piece of paper, the “blank” on the paper will not occur in our mind, let alone the fact that in Chinese and Japanese. There are no spaces, no commas and no punctuations according to the traditional way of writing, whereas people can still make sense from them. In fact, the possibility to understand the “right meaning” of a grammatically “wrong” sentence also lies in this mechanism of grasping concrete words in a time consciousness: “Ich hat ein Buch” is totally wrong as regard to German grammar, but one who speaks German can still understand it as saying “I have a book” but not some third-person singular who “has” a book. This is possible only because for a German consciousness, the knowledge of the concrete word “ich” is already enough without the forms of verbs which only indicate the positions on an “axis”.

Such qualitative action of dividing, as an action of the mind, is always happening “in time”: words distinguished in this way are words in the duration. The problem is, as contents temporally “flowing” away, how can different syllables in this continuous sequence form a word, and how can different words form a sentence to the mind. Or put it another way: how is it

possible that the consciousness combines special sequence of sounds into a word according to “this”, but not another order? How can it immediately understands “Plato” as a word and “is” as another, but not “Pla” as one and “tois” as another? According to the structure described above, qualities of different roots seem to be given a priori, which means that, it has already been obtained by the consciousness before a particular action of interpretation. This, however, is still possible to be understood in a temporal sense. Namely, the learning of a language or other types of sign system is also a mechanism of time consciousness. To understand this mechanism, we may introduce Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology of time, which not only understands time as a continuous stream, but also clarifies the fact that what has passed and what will come are both constitutional parts of a sphere of “now”, which is called as the “living present” by Husserl.

II. Interpretation as Expectation: the Details of Its Mechanism

According to Husserl, the original “now” of a temporal consciousness is not a point which does not extend itself, but a “sphere” in which the “past” as retention and the “future” as protention are both in some sense present:

What is already prominently accentuated in it going from one present to the next and is constituted in the train of presents as a lasting unity of identity is linked together temporally; that is to say, temporal relations are from the very beginning and by essential necessity linked together in being constituted. (Husserl, 2001, p. 180)

Husserl emphasizes many times that every retention or living memory is linked to a further memorial content, while it is passing further and further into a completely remote and empty past: “every now of consciousness, everything actually present belonging to consciousness, is subject to the law of modification: it changes into primary ‘memory’ of ‘memory’, and does so continuously.” (Husserl, 1990, p. 139) These “memories” or retentions are parts of the living present along with the primordial impression, so that the mind can be conscious about a series of impresses in different phases of the continuity as a presented whole. As Husserl writes: “The ordinate taken as a

whole is a memorial continuum, and each later ordinate contains in itself the memory of every earlier ordinate. Everything that the ordinate contains in the way of points (in the way of memories) exists ‘simultaneously’ (as actually present experience) in the time-point of the ordinate”. (Husserl, 1990, p. 343) The mind is always combining multiplicities in retention into the present, while at the same time all contents are flowing further away into a situation as “zero”. It is important that in the original consciousness of time, the distinction between “near” and “far” is not mentioned in a spatial and quantitative way. On the contrary, in Husserl’s theory a “far” retention is “further” than a “near” one only because of the qualitative differences between them;

The expanse of fresh retention, then, continuously passes over into an expanse of empty retention [...]. What is the same in its very sense is still given to consciousness; this is still given to consciousness in the special sense, namely, as affective. But this affective force goes back inexorably; the objective sense becomes inexorably poorer with respect to internal differentiations, thus emptying itself in a certain way. (Husserl, 2001, p. 218)

The criteria according to which we can distinguish far retentions from near ones is the strength of affective force; a fresh memory, for example, that of my lunch today, is always full of details like its smell and taste, while what happened long ago would be only an abstract event for me now. Therefore, the reason why my retention about what happened ten years ago could be described as far is not that it has a longer distance from “now” on a time line, but that the impression of it in my living present is weaker and paler. Like Bergson, for Husserl, the everyday time consciousness is always qualitative and concrete, but not quantitative and abstract.

This mechanism of retention can be treated as a model for that of protention, which is more important for our study of the living experience of interpretation. Like memories, contents in the future must be in some sense already presented in the sphere of the “now”, although these contents are at the same time something “new” to the mind: “[...] proceeding from familiar tones, we would come to tones that we have never heard at all.” (Husserl,

1990, p. 14) The protention is both something which “grows” from the ground of past and something which is an opened possibility.

First, though protention is always towards something new, towards a field with open possibilities, it does not mean that the mind is facing a totally empty and superficial area when expecting. Rather, an expectation is always expecting something familiar to occur, which is determined by the “awakening” of some contents in the past, in the retention:

The occurrence of something futural is expected through its similarity to what has occurred in the past, like already happens in the most primitive case of a steady protention. (Husserl, 2001, p. 237)

As a special modification of the temporal consciousness, an interpretation is also involved with such protention; even when only the first syllable is given, the mind is already expecting a completed word, with all its syllables presented as protention. The consciousness is always expecting the next few syllables to come, which can belong to the same word with those in the primordial present and even in the near retention. For example, the syllables “sophy” as a part of the word “philosophy” can be expected when “lo” is in the primordial present and the “phi” has already passed into a near retention. This protention on the word level can be easily applied to the sentence level, because the mind must at the same time have the first few syllables of “the next word to come” in order to distinguish those of the word in its primordial now from them. When the first two syllables of “philosophy” have been given, the mind is also expecting a verb or a link verb, and even adjuncts or objects to offer predicates to the “subject”. We are able to expect these contents, because we are awakening some familiar sentence structures at the same time. However, such familiar sentence structures are not “recalled” as a geometrical image with such and such an architectural structure. As Husserl puts it, the far retention which can be awakened as an example for a protention is also an impression in a living now, therefore also has, and even still has the same temporal form like the primordial present, which is not quantitative but qualitative. Actually, the way in which we awaken them is not like that in which we recall some knowledge when dealing with a quiz or

test; even children who have not learned about any grammatical knowledge will rely on their memory or retention of expressions they have repeatedly heard about.

The expectation on the level of sentence also is a basic structure for understanding non-linguistic texts. Consider the last few seconds of a tied basketball game; confronted with such a circumstance, a basketball fan will definitely look forward to a buzzer beater, which may be the result of a series of movements like screens for the shooter and the shooter's own running. We expect a scene like this because we have seen similar scenes many times before, but those scenes do not need to occur to us actively. Using Husserl's own words, "they are 'familiar' —not individually, but rather according to their type". (Husserl, 2001, p. 241) This means that when expecting a buzzer beater, we are not actually "playing back" any particular one we have watched; rather, for most people all the games that we have watched are actually in an empty retention and have already loses all their differentiations. Games that we watched provide us a type according to which we can expect contents in the game we are watching "right now" only because they have happened repeatedly, which is correctly described by Husserl as an "empirical certainty".

Furthermore, the protention is also constitutional on the level of the whole text, or of the context. The meaning of the first few sentences or even first few words will make us anticipate what the whole text will be talking about; an essay which begins with something about Plato or Kant will stimulate an expectation for contents about philosophy, because the belief that Kant or Plato must be mentioned along with philosophy has an empirical certainty for us.

What is important is, however, an expectation can not to be "satisfied" in every case. As Husserl himself points out, the opportunity of an expectation to be fulfilled already opens its possibility of being disappointed;

If a has repeatedly emerged under certain circumstances or as a final term in a regular sequence, and if the corresponding expectation is there through associative awakening, then the absence, the non-occurrence becomes salient, the expectation is disappointed; the present temporal field, that is, the sense-

field is filled out, but filled out “otherwise”. (Husserl, 2001, p. 239)

A consciousness whose expectation is disappointed is not the one which has no contents entering its living present, but is the one which has contents that it “has never imagined about”. Multiplicities given to the mind can have fewer or more parts than the type according to which the mind has been expecting. Regarding the area of interpretation, the interpreter can be failed by the particular text that it is reading in every level of this text. The word may be spelled in a wrong way; the sentence may have a strange order, and the content of the whole text may come from a totally new angle. These forms of failure may, or may not arise from mistakes; an English sentence may disappoint one’s expectation because it is grammatically wrong, but can also be a line from a poem, which is “twisted” by the poet deliberately.

What is interesting is that the possibility becomes larger and larger from the level of word to the level of context. The expectation towards the completion of a word is seldom disappointed, because the spelling or the pronunciation of a word is strictly determined, otherwise the combination of letters or sounds will simply lose its wordness, while what can disappoint an interpreter is a word spelled wrongly. On the contrary, a sentence allows more possibilities than a word; a noun can be followed by a verb, a linking verb or a clause, which can all be anticipated by the mind while failed it at the same time. What is important is that such a disappointment does not have to undermine the understandability of the sentence. This phenomenon is explicit in cases of inflecting languages; like in the example which we have used above, the verb “haben” in its special form “hat” is strangely or incorrectly connected with the pronoun “ich”, which truly disappoints a consciousness anticipating a correct German sentence, while the sentence itself is still perfectly understandable. Finally, an expectation towards the meaning of the whole text, as what is the vaguest and emptiest modification of protention, is most likely to be disappointed; a text which mentions Plato can be actually about the history of ancient Greece or about the homosexuality issue when being expected to be a philosophical essay. The conclusion might be that the more open a structure is, the more possible it disappoints an expectation, while still making sense to it.

The last point which must be mentioned here is that, the familiarity of similar contents in an interpretation does not function actively, but only passively. With the words “active” and “passive”, Husserl distinguishes two modes of givenness; the object of one of them is directly “aimed at” by the consciousness, while that of another one is only “co-given” in the background. It is on the basis of this very distinction that it is possible that the attention of a consciousness can turn from one part of the circumstance to another one, which is actually making what was formally in the background to the foreground, and *vice versa* (Cf. Husserl, 1998, p. 225). The familiar structure which guides our interpretation has already sunken into the indifferent limit of zero, but the way we use it as a meta-language is not to recollect it actively. This far-distant structure actually functions like a near retention, which, according to Husserl’s own metaphor, is “belonging to every perception like a comet’s tail” (Husserl, 2001, p. 459). The primary attention of the ego is still on the body of the comet, and the tail of it still has some affective force on the ego, though the intensity of that force is weaker when the same content is in the primordial present.

That is to say, our past and repeated experiences of structures (like basketball games which we have watched and ended up with a buzzer beater) is not reproduced, because they are not the object in question, but only the motivation which stimulates the ego towards some similar but new contents. In order to use a language, one does not need to memorize the concrete knowledge that he or she has read from a text book, though structures which are the same or familiar with examples in such a book are always there with a low degree of attentive force. It is still true that in anticipating there is a turning of the attention, but it is not turned to the past structure, but to the content anticipating itself. In hearing the word “Plato”, our attention will be led to the following words like “is” or “says” or whatever, which themselves can be treated as passively co-present, but in a different manner with the past guidance (Cf. Husserl, 2001, p. 239).

Conclusion

From the analysis offered above, this paper can briefly portrays some

fundamental features of the interpretation as a special form of our temporal consciousness.

A text can be grasped in two ways; either as the object of a grammatical system or as the content manifold in a living temporal consciousness. The latter should be considered as the primary givenness of it, which is mainly organized by the structure of protention, while the grammatical or linguistic approach is based on the spatial representation of the original consciousness of temporal contents. Both Bergson and Husserl realize that in our primordial experience, multiple impressions are treated as “in” different times not because they hold different positions in a homogeneous “chain”, but because they have different “degrees” of empirical richness or clearness. Only on this qualitative understanding of time, can we apply Husserl’s analysis of retention and protention to the survey of interpretation. An interpretation is a protention in the way according to which contents in the future can be “expected” but not “experienced” because they are vague than those in the primordial present. It means that when interpreting, we are not counting identical units juxtaposed together, but a series of impression which penetrate each other qualitatively. The interpreter can expect the text to be fit to the “type” from texts which the interpreter has met before. Such an expectation, as something coming from the empirical certainty, serves as a basic structure for our living experience of a text from the level of word to the level of context, while all such expectations can be disappointed by the real content given to the primordial living present.

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