The Primacy of Language in Paul Ricoeur's Hermeneutics

Yohanes Slamet Purwadi*

Abstract

This paper explores the philosophical foundation of Ricoeur's hermeneutics on meaning and truth. Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's existential phenomenology are used as points of reference to disentangle the complexity of Ricoeur's project which aims at self-understanding. Sets out from his critic on meaning and truth within phenomenological tradition, Ricoeur proposes and develops a new hermeneutical method. He places an emphasis on "the primacy of language" as a reference point to grasp self-understanding. Accordingly, "the primacy of subject" in the construction of meaning and truth is considered to be relative. However, it does not suggest that Ricoeur disavows the position of subject altogether. Instead, Ricoeur rejects subject that is understood as self-transparent. By stressing upon "the primacy of language", Ricoeur shifts the focus of phenomenology from "intuition" to "mediation"; from "essence seeking" to "symbol interpretation". Thereby, in formulating his concept of self-understanding, Ricoeur historicizes the subject, that is, subject is no longer understood in its essence, but rather, as constructed and created within language.

* Gajah Mada University, Indonesia, Banawiratma, Duta Wacana Christian University, Indonesia

Introduction

The history of modern western philosophy, to some extent, can be viewed as the battle of ideas to seek the truth, even truth with capital "T". Philosophers in each period attempts to build assumption and argumentation for their own justification. Nevertheless, one point is often missing in this kind of philosophical debate: that philosophical activity is entirely linguistic. One may call an idea as "an idea" when it is already articulated into language. Analogous to this, thinking is not all about a mental process, or even a rational activity, but more pointedly, it is a linguistic matter. Thinking is always verbal. It is language that enables us to think.[1] As an Australian semiotician, Richard Harland, puts it in his rhetorical question: "How could ideas exist in the mind without words?"[2] This is to say that without language, there is no thinking.

This linguistic issue gained its popularity in philosophical discourse during the 20th century. This so-called *linguistic turn*[3] marked the emergence of new sensibility and radical shift in determining the role of language in philosophical discourse. Language is repositioned from instrumental function to constitutive function. It is a common understanding to see language as merely an instrument to deliver concepts or ideas about reality. "Linguistic turn" sheds new light to language. Language is regarded now as a constitutive element in understanding reality. The way we understand reality relies on the way we represent it. Reality exists because it is already represented through language. That is to say, our relation with reality is not direct. It is always mediated by language. Language enables us to connect with reality. What we see as a reality is nothing but kind of

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[1] Richard Harland, *Superstrukturalisme: Pengantar Komprehensif kepada Semiotika, Strukturalisme, dan Postrukturalisme (Superstructuralism: A Comprehensive Introduction to Semiotics, Structuralism and Poststructuralism)*, trans. Iwan Hendarmawan, Yogyakarta: Jalasutra, 2006, 14.

[2] Richard Harland, Superstrukturalisme, 14.

[3] Bambang Sugiharto, *Posmodernisme: Tantangan Bagi Filsafat (Posmodernism: A Challenge to Philosophy)*, Yogyakarta: Kanisius, 1996, 79 – 80

reality that has been mediated by language. Language is not only an instrument to grasp reality, but rather, it constructs the reality.

One prominent theorist who promotes this "linguistic turn" project is Paul Ricoeur.[4] It is important to note that Ricoeur's approach on linguistic is quite different from structuralist approach. Structuralism formulates linguistic issue with radical anti-phenomenology approach, which underlines meaning as independent from subject.[5] It derives meaning solely from the sign system. Whereas Ricoeur embraces hermeneutic-phenomenology agenda that serves as the route to self-understanding.

Ricoeur's interpretation theory sets out from his critique to Husserlian idealist mode of consciousness, through which he further radicalizes phenomenology to hermeneutics. He criticizes Heidegger's phenomenological ontology, wherein meaning is conceived of as "concealing" itself. Taking this lead, Ricoeur moves interpretation to symbolic field.[6] Indeed, language plays crucial role in Ricoeur's hermeneutics. If hermeneutics is to be defined as a process of interpretation that aims at self-understanding, this

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[4] During his study in university, the dominant philosophical discourse was phenomenology and existentialism. His hermeneutical theory was elaborated when he positioned as Professor of Philosophy at the universities in Strasbourg, Paris, and Chicago. Besides, he served as director for Center of Hermeneutics and Phenomenology in Paris during 1970s to 1980s. See: Richard Kearney, On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva, Burlington: Ashgate, 2004, 1.

[5] Structuralism bases itself upon linguistic principles endorsed by Ferdinand de Saussure. Saussure remarks that meaning is not derives from individual, but rather locates on difference existed in language system, or langue as he calls it. To illustrate language as a system, Saussure exemplifies with his well-known chess game analogy. In order to play this game properly, one has to understands its basic rule. Take for instance, knight is able to move two squares horizontally and one vertically (or vice versa). We can call it a knight simply because it moves in a different way with other chessman. Similarly with language, system of language precedes any actual speech. And meaning is determined by its position in a system. See: Richard Harland, Superstrukturalisme, 15 – 17.

[6] Richard Kearney, On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva, 15 – 16.

process will take place in and through symbolical field, through language.

Before commencing this discussion, a brief explanation about Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenological project, particularly which gives insight to Ricoeur's hermeneutic - will be of much help. Ricoeur begins to build his theory from his critique to Husserl and Heidegger's phenomenological project.

Critique to Husserl and Heidegger's Phenomenology

Edmund Husserl is arguably the key figure in phenomenology tradition. He introduces Transcendental Phenomenology; a new theory about consciousness and mode of knowledge. Husserl's main purpose is seeking for *eidos* or the essence of knowledge. To some extent, his very attempt is similar to Descartes' investigation.[7] Like Descartes', Husserl's phenomenological project is based upon 'consciousness'. Consciousness is determined as the foundation of knowledge. However, Husserl and Descartes' project is somewhat different. Both of them differ in how they treat consciousness as prima causa in their philosophical foundation. Descartes' philosophy considers consciousness as introspective, that is, as consciousness that recognizes itself. On the contrary, Husserl's consciousness is intentional. This means, consciousness is always consciousness *about* something. It should be emphasized, however, that the term intentionality used here does not refer to 'character' as applies in common usage. It is not the kind of character that one might possess, such as being "shy" or "fierce". In Husserl's context, intentionality refers to the consciousness itself. It is always directed toward an object. In this manner, Husserl attempts to break down Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object and between consciousness and reality.

Husserl's phenomenological project might be best summarized under the jargon "back to the thing in itself".[8] Phenomenology, then, is an art to understand phenomena as self-manifestation of reality. Phenomena are the reality that shows itself in

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[7] Anton Baker, *Philosophical Methods*, Jakarta: Ghalia, 1984, 108.
[8] Andre Edgar & Peter Sedgwick, eds., *Cultural Theory: The Key Concepts,* London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 271 – 273.

consciousness. For Husserl, phenomenology is not only about epistemology, but also ontology. To this degree, Kantian dichotomy between phenomena and *noumena* is collapsed. Intentionality of consciousness, in Husserl's view, is the reality as it appears itself in consciousness. There is no reality without consciousness. Nevertheless, it does not refer to an idealistic standpoint which views reality as constructed by consciousness. But rather, reality derives its meaning in so far as consciousness persists. What has been called "an objective world" and "genuine" knowledge is inherently inseparable from subjective consciousness.[9] In phenomenological perspective, 'truth' is understood as the reality which shows itself in subjective consciousness; the truth is discovered in "any attempt at relating the conditions of the appearance of things to the structure of human subjectivity".[10]

Therefore, understanding and authentic experience can only be grasped through intuitive mode, by allowing the phenomenon to show itself in consciousness without any mediation. Authenticity appears itself directly and transparently (intuitive) to subject's consciousness. Intuition is kind of pure reflection which operates by directing itself toward an object in order to grasp *theoria*, or the true knowledge. In Husserl's phenomenology, intuitive knowledge is conceived as "a purification of the phenomenological field of consciousness from its spatio-temporal objectivity".[11] Consciousness is understood as "self-contained system of being".[12] Thought may reveal being directly and in transparent way. Based on this assumption, Husserl's phenomenology insists that philosophy is not a concept or interpretation of reality, but, *reality in itself*.[13]

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[9] Theodore de Boer, *The Development of Husserl's Thought*, Boston: Martinus Nijhof, 1978, 398.

[10] Charles E. Reagan, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricouer: An Anthology of His Work*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978, 76.

[11] Dermot Moran & Timothy Mooney, eds.*The Phenomenology Reader*, Boston: Martinus Nijhoff, 2002, 129.

[12] Theodore de Boer, *The Development of Husserl's Thought*, 398.

[13] Anton Bakker, *Philosophical Methods*, 108.

In his second period, Husserl proposes another key concept in his phenomenology, namely *Lebenswelt* or life-world. It refers to everyday world which is experienced and comprehended by each individual. It is a horizon where primordial experience of individual with and inside its daily life transpires. It is called 'primordial' because this experience has not been redefined by any scientific categories. *Lebenswelt* subscribes to the idea that one's encounter with the world is *prior to* any reflection to the world. It constitutes the world we live in and experience with, where there is no clear distinction between subject-object as suggested by scientific construction. From scientific construction point of view, the understanding of scientific-objective is applied onto daily life. But, long before it is interpreted by scientific method, in fact it is already experienced directly by individual. Scientific-objective understanding is simply an alternative to articulate this primordial experience. Thus, scientific-objective understanding is nothing but the interpretation of *Lebenswelt*.[14]

Heidegger's Existential Phenomenology

Existential phenomenology is proposed and developed by Heidegger as a critical response to Husserlian phenomenology and scientific understanding in general (read: the worldview which tends to objectify and see things as instrumental). Heidegger's phenomenology is existential in a way that it is anchored on existence to explain *reality, meaning, and truth*. Heidegger argues that Husserlian phenomenology of knowledge and understanding is a-historical and its concept about self is trapped into pure transcendentalism, which he calls "immanent consciousness of truth".[15] Husserl urges to set aside and to suspend any cultural prejudices, whether it is in the naive or scientific forms. This is necessary in order to gain understanding, or in this case, to be able to grasp the essence of "things in themselves", which is presumed to be universal and exceeds space and time. Heidegger, on the contrary, rejects Husserl's notion on subject and transcendental and considers it to be impossible.

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[14] Bambang Sugiharto, *Posmodernisme: Tantangan Bagi Filsafat*, 36 – 37.
[15] Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996, 259.

Indeed, Heidegger does not begin with transcendental subject as Descartes or Husserl does. His subject is, rather, *historical*, a kind of subject that inhabits and bound to its daily life. Herein lays his difference with his predecessor as well as tutor, Husserl. Husserl intends to transcend temporality and particularity in order to grasp what he believes as universal essence. In stark contrast to this, Heidegger situates temporality and particularity as conditions of existence which enable understanding and *truth*. Thus, understanding is not located outside the world, due to the very fact that subject is always already in the world (being-in-the-world). Another interesting contrast, Husserl insists on *detachment* as a keyword to knowledge and understanding. While, on the other hand, Heidegger emphasizes *engagement*. Knowledge and understanding base itself upon *concern and interest*. However, kindly note that what he means by concern and interest is not any kind of *self-interest*. Instead, interest here is a 'horizon' of meaning for an individual. To put it differently, reflection toward the world or reality is prior to and become possible due to, the fact that we are part of it and have meaningful relationship with the world and reality that we come to represent.[16] Actually, Husserl has considered this fact, but then he regards it as a prejudice that has to be suspended so that the reality might appear to consciousness as universal essence.

Heidegger's assumption becomes a crucial attack to science that holds objectivistic-positivistic paradigm. Scientific paradigm relies on dualism, such as dualism of subject-object and fact-value. Following Heidegger's argument, that kind of idealism sounds less and less realistic. Take for instance, the dualism of fact and value that applied in social science. Scientists confirm to this dualism as firmly as a religious man believes that heaven and hell exist. To give an example, in our society date of birth is considered to be the most crucial fact of people's biography. One's birth date is recorded in exact manner, which consists of date, month, and year. The prevalence of such fact, however, cannot be generalized to every society. In other society, the question of date of birth might not be considered important to be put in one's biography; neither celebrating birthday nor classifying people based on age. Rather

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[16] Bambang Sugiharto, *Posmodernisme*: Tantangan Bagi Filsafat, 71.

than date of birth, perhaps the day of birth is more relevant to them. It may relate, for instance, to the belief of *good or bad fortune.* This instance shows that fact is oftentimes closely related to *value*; both are not considered contradictory. It cannot be fully separated from the horizon of meaning, and the difference is not as sharp as it is drawn by objectivistic-positivistic paradigm.

Thematically, Heidegger's project shares common concern with western philosophy, which investigates the deepest meaning of reality, or as Heidegger calls it- a Being. The novelty of Heidegger's project, then, lies in his method. Through phenomenology, Husserl attempts to provide the new ground to philosophy as a rigorous science. Heidegger, instead, goes further by questioning such ambitious and optimistic project. Broadly speaking, both Husserl and Heidegger agree upon basic principle of phenomenology, which states that reality shows itself.   Nevertheless, the basic assumption they propose, separate them incisively. Husserl departs from intuition, while Heidegger starts from existence. If phenomenology is to be defined as an event where the essence discloses itself, Husserl claims that the essence discloses itself intuitively when the subject puts aside his disposition. In contrast to that, Heidegger argues that the essence will never appear or disclose itself apart from its existence. To put it differently, Husserl conceives meaning as *transcendental*, whereas Heidegger assumes it as entirely *existential*.

Heidegger elaborates a new method on the meaning of Being in order to grasp the fundamental ontology of understanding.[17] Existence is the meaning of Being that conceals itself to us.[18] Understanding the essence of Being is impossible unless we analyze the basic existential condition that defines human (or *Dasein*, in Heidegger's term). From Heidegger's point of view, the basic condition of human is constituted by two primary facts, namely: existence and *being-in-the-world*.[19] Through his existential analysis, Heidegger insists that human being is always anchored in history, bound to its temporality, and always already inhabited

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[17] John Richardson, *Existential Epistemology: A Heideggerian Critique of the Cartesian Project*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986, viii.

[18] Dermot Moran & Timothy Mooney, *The Phenomenology Reader*, 18.

[19] Kees Bertens, *Filsafat Barat Dalam Abad* XX, Jakarta: Gramedia, 1981, 150.

certain cultural milieu. We cannot talk about humans apart from the way they represent their selves and existence, which is mediated by language. One is able to talk about him/her self, and describes his deepest aspiration in so far as it is mediated by language. Language constitutes the existence of human being. Besides, it determines one's position in the world and even the way the reality discloses itself as meaningful to an individual. It is, so to speak, through and of language that *Being* reveals itself to subjectivity.

Existential analysis is about how to interpret human through language. From this point, self-understanding moves from *immediacy* to *interpretation*. Understanding human cannot be directly, but rather, it has to be interpreted through which human existence reveals itself, that is through language. Heidegger argues that "life is about interpretation". The truth, or the disclosure of *Being* through language, is therefore a hermeneutical event. In this way, phenomenology becomes hermeneutical activity because it involves interpretation of the meaning of Being. Yet, Heidegger differentiates the ontological status between *Being* and *Dasein*. *Being* discloses itself within *Dasein*, but it does not suggest that both of them are identical. The position of being is ambiguous though, as disclosure and closure. As Heidegger puts it, truth is *aletheia*.

Ricouer and Primacy of Language

Following Heidegger, Ricoeur criticizes the concept of transcendental-subject in Husserl's phenomenology. From Husserl's standpoint, transcendental-subjects is conceived of as the foundation of knowledge and truth. The intentionality of consciousness is moved into a subjective transparency of understanding. Therefore, Ricoeur concludes that Husserl's phenomenology tends to reduce itself to an idealism.[20] And so does Husserl's intuitive method. With his intuitive method, subjectivity and knowledge is alienated from human existence; whereas initially the world is considered as the horizon of meaning to humans. As a correction to Husserl's transcendental-subject, Heidegger proposes the idea of human existence as being-in-the-

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[20] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva*, 16.

world.[21] Through this concept, human being is not located at an empty space that transcends space and time, but on the contrary, it is viewed as already belong to particular horizon of meaning, a certain time and space.

All this, then, implies hermeneutics of "finitude". Ontologically speaking, "finitude" is related to temporal dimension of *Being*. And, one representation of human finitude takes form of *historicity*. The idea of historicity affects interpretation and meaning as follows: *First*, subjectivity and meaning is constructed in intersubjective relations. *Second*, *Dasein* or human existence is developed and constructed through language in intersubjective dialogue with 'others'. In short, being is being for *others*. *Third*, *Dasein* does not only disclose, but also conceals itself. Being constitutes a horizon of meaning that disclose and conceals itself, hence it is to be interpreted in and through language.

From the perspective of hermeneutics of finitude, existential phenomenology reveals "the expanding of subject's horizon" as the significant implication of the interpretation. Besides, interpretative horizon which is widely open to the hermeneutic existential-phenomenology constitutes a new position of language in the process of interpretation and meaning construction. Hence, language becomes the new field for philosophical investigation and interpretation of *Being* that relates to and takes place in symbolical space.

In the perspective of hermeneutic existential-phenomenology, meaning relates to the capacity of Being in revealing the possibilities: "Being discloses itself through existence (*Dasein*) which understands itself through its own possibilities."[22] Or, as formulated further by Richard Kearney:

> "Ricoeur emphasized the primacy of signifying intentionality. This new emphasis leads him to advance a general hermeneutics where phenomenology confronts its

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[21] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva,* 16.

[22] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva*, 1.

own limit – that is, where the intuition of essences ends and the interpretation of symbols begins."[23]

To sum up, human is no longer understood directly and transparently in terms of substance or essence, but through a "round about route" mediated through symbol. Symbolic world – in specific language – constitutes a field wherein humans "create" and reveal themselves. The answer to the very question of "What are we?" and "Who are we?" is to be pursued in and through language.

Taking his clue from Husserl's phenomenology and Heidegger's existential phenomenology, Ricoeur advances his hermeneutical project. He concentrates mostly on the relation between existence and hermeneutics which base itself on "interpretation as a mode of being". For Ricoeur, we are what we interpret to be. This idea is crucial indeed as a foundation to interpretation, that is, the project of meaning as "manifestation" and "projection". If hermeneutics to be simplified as a matter of interpretation, as in phenomenology and existential phenomenology of Being, the root and the horizon of existence, or *Dasein*, will become the starting point to move into the most crucial issue in hermeneutics. The interpretation of "meaning" originates from the idea of finitude of human consciousness which is always in constant tension between the past and the future: "As Heidegger's phenomenological ontology clearly showed, consciousness is bound by a relation of belonging to past sedimentations and future projects of meaning [...]"[24]

Ricoeur's hermeneutics of finitude, precisely, elaborates how the concept about meaning is contingent in the context of human existence. For him, the most fundamental hermeneutical problem lies in the fact that existence provides a mode of interpretation since, "life is the bearer of meanings so that understanding is made possible through interpretation of life". Or, as the following hermeneutics maxim suggests: "life interprets itself". This is equivalent to saying that interpretation is a mode of being. It is not one among many instrumental activities, but rather a fundamental activity which constitutes human existence.

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[23] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva*, 13.

[24] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva*, 16.

To comprehend this concept, we have to analyze the relations between 'subject' and 'the world' and how it influences our mode of understanding, as well as our interpretation. Here, world and contingency take the role as horizon of meaning and understanding to the subject. Being-in-the-world implies that subject always already sees the world from certain 'perspective' and understanding. The world is never being as non-meaning. The term "world" in this context has specific meaning. Ricoeur himself formulates "the world" as "the most concrete horizon in our existence".[25] Heideggerian concepts on temporality and "practical world of life" are applied in Ricoeur's following argument: "Before objectivity, there is the horizon of the world; before the subject of the theory of knowledge, there is operative life".[26] The world initially exists as *Lebenswelt*, as a world of meaning, long before it is objectively defined in scientific term. In this sense, world becomes "the horizon" of all attitudes and understanding.

As a critique to objectivism, phenomenology introduces the term "world horizon" to hermeneutics, which is the pre-given world that represents retrospective dimension of interpretation. The referential point of this retrospective dimension of interpretation is Ricoeur's critique to Husserl's transcendental subject. In Husserl's transcendental subject, meaning and truth is conceived of as self-transparent. In this sense, the subject is assumed to have the capability to grasp the appearance of essence of object intuitively with no mediation needed. Subjective consciousness constitutes the very foundation of meaning.[27] But, the idea of self-transparence and the immediacy of meaning is relativized by Ricoeur by embracing Husserl's idea of intersubjectivity. Meaning is no longer immanent in subjectivity, but rather situated in intersubjectivity and embedded into *Lebenswelt*. *Lebenswelt*, Ricoeur asserts, represents a pre-given world that denotes "the level of experience anterior to the subject-object relation".[28] In contrast to the principle

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[25] Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, Northwestern University Press: Evanston, 1965, 193.

[26] Don Ihde, The *Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 9.

[27] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricoeur: The Owl of Minerva*, 16.

[28] Don Ihde, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 8.

of self-transparency, Ricoeur views the process of interpretation and meaning as indirect. It is indirect in a sense that it is mediated through others. Meaning originates and develops itself through 'the others'. The linguistic character of existential-phenomenology shows the intersubjective dimension of understanding to the extent that "we are constructed by language". It relates to the fact that we construct our world intersubjectively through the preexisting worlds of others. As Ricoeur puts it, the world "[...] is always-already-before and I come too late to express it".[29]

Ricoeur goes on to argue that our existence is characterized by historical horizon of language wherein language precedes our subjective consciousness. Our existence is indeed designed by language. The world appears as meaningful reality because language shows that it does. Due to language, nature transforms itself into culture, hence a "world of meaning". This transformation continues to persist through language. It transforms the unknown into the known. What is meaningless becomes meaningful. Culture, or say "the world", is simply an alternate name for nature (which is articulated and intelligible). We do not have direct access to the reality or the real, even to our very self, unless mediated by language. Thus, language is the most explicit manifestation of historicity and subjectivity. Anthropologically speaking, we are indeed *a linguistic being.* Ricoeur remarks: "We belong to language that has been shaped and formed by others before we arrive on the existential scene".[30] This is what constitutes the horizon of hermeneutical activity.

Besides the historical horizon, language actually has another dimension, namely 'transcendental' horizon. The seeking for meaning is encouraged by the human facticity wherein language plays a central role as transcendental medium for interpretation. The concept of "hermeneutics of finitude" will be used to describe the process of meaning construction. "Hermeneutics of finitude" implies that the understanding process is not direct. This means, meaning does not originate from subjective consciousness, it

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[29] Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 194.
[30] Paul Ricouer, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981, 145.

instead, derives from "the others", which is produced through language. This mediation should be considered as social-historical text which is linguistically in nature. As a hermeneutical discourse, this idea shows the crucial transition from pure phenomenology that starts from consciousness to hermeneutics that begins with interpretation of symbol, or symbolical meaning.

The aforementioned concepts have several implications. *First*, the heart of understanding moves from consciousness to language. Human's interpretation and the process of understanding do not base on consciousness, but on language. Language is an access toward (or, to explain) humans. To interpret humans is not to analyze their consciousness, but to interpret their *symbolical expression*. The question about self (about what are we and who we are) is to be answered through language. If Ortega Y. Gasset argues that human does not have any essence, but history,[31] the very same expression can be applied in Ricoeurian hermeneutics; we can say that human does not have an essence, but language. The historicity of human crystallizes itself in language. Human is what s/he expresses in language. *Second*, truth is neither transcendental nor universal, it is purely existential. Truth is constructed through language, and language mediates between us and reality. Truth, however, is not a correspondence between mind and reality, but rather it constitutes our point of *existing*. Following this assumption, it would be better to understand the truth as an ongoing process of expressing and transforming the self. Meaning is not waiting somewhere "out there" to be found; it does not lie outside our articulation in language. Indeed, there are millions of possible meaning can be articulated. Language has million possibilities to create meaning. Thus, truth and meaning – thanks to the intervention of language – is the possibilities as well as the potentialities of existence.[32] If interpretation of meaning in Ricouer's hermeneutics is to be defined as an event of interpreting meaning in and through language, interpretation is a creative and

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[31] Quoted with slight modification from Ernst Cassirer, *Human and Culture: An Essay of Human (Manusia dan Kebudayaan: Sebuah Esai tentang Manusia)*, Jakarta: Gramedia, 1987, 260.

[32] Paul Rabinow and William Sullivan, eds. *An Interpretative Social Science: A Reader,* Los Angeles: University California Press, 1979, 129.

transformative event. It "creates itself" in and through language; meaning, we transform ourselves as well during the interpretation process.

Function of Language: Re-description

In Existential-Phenomenological Hermeneutics' perspective, linguistic interpretation has its reference in the idea of the world. In the process of interpretation language works by deciphering the hidden signs of *Lebenswelt* or life-world and human existence. This kind of hermeneutics immediately criticizes semiologist's view which sees language as a closed system of signs, as believed by Ferdinand de Saussure.[33] More than self-sufficient within its own linguistic structure, in this process of understanding, language operates in dismantling symbolic power, and thereby it elevates existing situation and textual order toward new modes of existence.[34] This is to say that, the distinctive function of language is to *re-describe reality in symbolic level*. Language, "as signifying milieu, must be referred to existence".[35] Language has a transcendental ability to create new meanings to the given and present situations, to re-describe new awareness and experience that, in turn, brings new way of looking at things.

Language, therefore, brings epistemology to ontology in two correlative senses. On the one hand, language brings interpretation to existence where our consciousness *reaches* the world, on the other; it discloses possible modes of being-in-the world as well. In this sense, for Ricoeur, "to interpret is to understand a double meaning",[36] namely to move beyond existing reality (disclosure of meaning), which is symbolic, but without losing the reference. The Heideggerian idea that 'Being discloses itself' could not be placed

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[33] Charles E. Reagan, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 87.

[34] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva*, 25.

[35] Don Ihde, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 16.

[36] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading*, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1992, 347.

in an immediacy of self-reflection but within and through linguistic mediation.[37] The basic nature of language is to say *about* something.

The deeper layers of meaning are then constructed through the discourse of text deciphered by language.[38] The profound and distinctive function of language to 'disclose' reality is actually not weakened by non-immediacy in constructing meaning: "[…] Language itself (in some sense almost intersubjective consensus) offers a more valid claim to constitute the bedrock uncovered by meta-critical exploration than 'methods' or 'explanations' which operate at a higher or more derivative level of abstraction."[39] In terms of intersubjectivity, language generates intersubjective definition of truth that discloses 'true knowledge'.[40] And, in terms of derivative level, we need to underline 'meta-critical exploration' *of* language. This means that attention is paid to investigate the imaginative and creative power of language more than it is allowed in explanatory method found in scientific abstraction. The imaginative and creative powers of language are distinctively found in the analysis of metaphoric and narrative language. Through the analyses of metaphor and narrative, Ricoeur sees a 'higher' derivative level of linguistic capacity; language has ability to bring new possibilities for imagination and vision. In other words, language leads the openness of consciousness to new understanding of human life and the world.[41] Indeed, metaphor presents possibility rather than *actuality*.[42] In such a way, metaphor provides 'imaginative discourse' whereas imaginative discourse will "open new understanding more directly rather than descriptive and scientific statements."[43] This means that metaphor has the capacity to create meaning 'closer' to reality.

Besides, from the phenomenology of imagination, Ricoeur reconsiders the living vitality of symbolic power of language. He observes that language articulates meaning not merely as an

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[37] Don Ihde, *The Conflict of Interpretations*, 17.

[38] Charles E. Reagan, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 91-92.

[39] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 359.

[40] Paul Ricoeur, *History and Truth*, 159.

[41] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 351.

[42] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 352.

[43] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 352.

abstract mimesis of events in reality. Meaning is more than a 'concept', that is, "meaning is not event to be abstracted".[44] To see the symbolic-interpretive power of language, Ricoeur elaborates the so-called 'poetic language'. Metaphoric language works by a kind of poetic image. In Ricoeur's analysis of poetic imagination in metaphoric language, it is explained that a poetic image contains insights that stimulate the *ways of becoming* which proposes decisive difference from *the ways of existing*. The process of becoming in poetic imagination gives a potential access for verbal expressions. Then, the verbal expressions exercise specific function to provide imaginative 'catalyst' for a 'becoming', namely *becoming of our being in our mind*. However, what distinctive here is that language has also a capacity to correlate "verbal potentiality and non-verbal actuality",[45] words and act. It is parallel with linguistic ability to break the rigid relations between words and the world. In other words, it presents an imperative description that is even beyond the description of 'seeing as', beyond what realized as it is. This is because poetic language follows the path of the 'reverberation' of the poetic image into the depths of existence".[46] Furthermore, to gain a deeper understanding, we must notice the following theory of phenomenology of imagination as reformulated by Richard Kearney: "The poetic image thus points to the very 'depths of existence' where 'a new being in language' is synonymous with 'a growth in being' itself. It is because "there is poetical imagination that words dream being."[47] Thus in this sense, it is possible for language to incorporate productive connection between words and our being, imagination and transformation.

Further, linguistics has the capacity to 'reverberate' the zone of new possibilities in our being through the creative process of poetic imagination, namely to create firstly new inner expressions *within* language itself. This process demonstrates that 'becoming in language' could also be becoming in the sense of 'making possible' in our mind. This shows the capacity of language to *express us by*

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[44] Charles E. Reagan, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur*, 103.

[45] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, London: Routledge & Kegan, 1978, 215.

[46] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, 215.

[47] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva*, 53.

making us what it expresses. Here "expression creates being".[48] This is 'linguistic effects' of interpretation and understanding. In such dialectical expression, language brings us to the depth of reality along with the growth of our own being. It is, at this point, that we are recreated by language. In the process of re-creation by language, "we discover reality itself in the process of being created".[49] So, language serves as a creative instrument to interpret meanings from the texts of life in the process of becoming in existence. As Ricoeur puts it: "Language in the making celebrates reality in the making".[50] It is in this sense that we can transform the world first as 'ideality' under poetic imagination, and then it leads us into the symbolic 'increase' of becoming in our being in the world.

In terms of Heidegger's theory, our understanding is shaped by our mode of being, that is, by the structure of being-in-the world.[51] And one of Heidegger's key philosophical concepts is that language is the house of Being. Language is the only way to understand our being and existence. Thus, the relationship between mode of being and interpretation could be understood in terms of constructing the *possibility of being* through language. But, the rich reference for interpretation should come from human existence or being-in-the world. Following Heidegger's inspiration, according to Ricoeur, the distinctive function of language is to disclose Being by *re-describing reality in new ways*[52] as a 'potentiality-for-Being'.[53] In explaining how metaphoric language re-describes reality, Ricoeur uses Heideggerian vocabularies to correlate subjective consciousness and language. For Ricoeur, Heidegger's ideas of 'state-of-mind', 'Being-attuned' and 'mood' in subjectivity are not merely 'subjective', but rather, considered as ontology,[54] namely, as a certain way of existing, a suggestive ontology for *becoming.* The

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[48] Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor*, op.cit., p. 214-215

[49] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva*, 53.

[50] Richard Kearney, *On Paul Ricouer: The Owl of Minerva*, 50.

[51] Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan, *An Interpretative Social Science*, 129.

[52] Charles E. Reagan, *The Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur* 104, 108.

[53] Anthony C. Thieselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 351.

[54] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 352.

centrality of language can be seen here in that a *becoming in language* takes place first in such ontological reflection before a *becoming in being*. Consequently, human world is a creative construction of language. The words become the world. Therefore, the function of language can also be explained in Aristotelian term: to "present a creative poeiesis (making)".[55]

In the perspective of hermeneutic, language provokes the awareness of our being and reality 'in the making', and this represents our modes of being. As a result, the re-description of reality by language signalizes a 'reconstructive power' of human understanding and action (praxis) in the world as well.[56] For Ricoeur, linguistics constitutes a key tool of hermeneutics, especially in correlation to textual model of interpretation. The nature of language, therefore, cannot be portrayed simply as the 'picture of reality' as stated by Wittgenstein I. In Wittgenstein's point of view, the world and language constitute an absolute parallelism. In this regard, the valid language is the 'positive language' representing its objective correspondence with reality.[57]

Conclusion

The shift from "consciousness" to "language" marks the shifts of phenomenology to hermeneutics. In Ricoeur's hermeneutical stance, language plays a significant part in constructing meaning and self-understanding. Through the primacy of language, key issues in modern western philosophy, such as subject and truth, are redefined. By insistence on language, the firm position of transcendental subject with its self-transparency is indeed historicized through language. Concrete subject is not the transcendental subject that transcends space and time, but rather, a historical subject that expresses itself in and through language. And to talk about truth: truth is no longer 'an equation' between mind and reality, but rather, it is the process of expressing and transforming the self.

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[55] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 352.

[56] Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, 355.

[57] Anton Bakker, *Philosophical Methods*, 123.

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