

HERMENEUTICS: Corrected fragment, lecture 5 (2.0.)
Roman Onufrijchuk, Fall 2006.

First, if you recall, early on in *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research*, Bruhn Jensen draws attention to the fact that the study of communication is a "double hermeneutic." This idea, drawn from Anthony Giddens, is meant to capture the sense in which all social science is a further interpretation of how society and media (media and "Media") interpret reality for people. In this sense, hermeneutics is already a large part of conjecturing animates or companion technologies and is at the base of the research you plan to propose, even if you choose positivist methodologies. When we ask a question, or make a statement, or express a hunch we're already interpreting reality – seeing some things as worth of inquiry, note or attention.

Hermeneutics began as the art, or science, of interpretation of *authoritative* texts. The interpretive methods that emerged over time were directed at the "correct" interpretation of religious texts and legal documents, and developed in distinct though related ways in all three of the text-based monotheisms – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. For Medieval Christian scholars and theologians, hermeneutics referred to the science of interpretation, whereas the term *exegesis* described interpretation. In East Asia, something not unlike hermeneutics is apparent in texts such as the *Art of War*, where the words of Sun Tzu, the author, make only a portion of a book that is full of layers of commentary by generations of readers. In some ways we could say that rhetoric and hermeneutics are two sides of the same coin. If we think of rhetoric as the study (and art) of effective expression or discourse, then we may say that hermeneutics as the study (and we'll see, also the art) of interpretation of expression in any medium or media aggregate whatsoever.

Hermeneutics brings a number of fundamental insights (or assumptions) to the study of communication, indeed all the social and human sciences:

1. Any communication phenomenon is open for, and demanding of, interpretation (making sense of). If someone said it -- signified, indicated, referred, made or did, then these acts, communication "events" or phenomena, are objectively present for someone else to understand, explain, and interpret. When we interpret, as compared to merely understand or perhaps translate, then we speak from knowledge that we have internalized, made "our own," "appropriated it."
2. Any communication or expressive phenomenon can be understood and approaches as a "text."
3. Any text has to be understood as an amalgam (a *gestalt*, though the term is not used in hermeneutic vocabulary) of the whole and its parts.
4. Interpretation is both *incremental* and *creative*; this can be understood both across an individual's reading and the reading of a text through generations of readers.

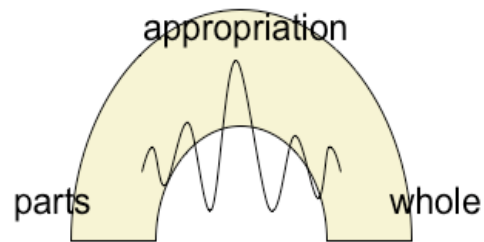
First used in the middle of the 17th century, the term hermeneutics received its current formulation through the work of Dilthey (see below) in the late 19th century.

Dilthey distinguished between the kind of knowledge that can be gained from interpretation from the knowledge we can get from the natural, applied and experimental sciences. These provide us with facts, but unconnected and within no framework, they are of little use: "A useless collection of useful facts," as Innis observed. Such facts become significant when they are integrated into a large whole where they become causal or mediating, conditioning, factors. In short, facts get interesting when they become part of a story. That story is always already an interpretation. Perhaps the most radical formulation of this comes from Nietzsche who observed: "there are no facts, only interpretations."

So, for example, I write you an email with one word on it, "EXAM." Now, we all know what the word means. We can agree that "EXAM" -- like Latin sentences, lions, the Parisian striptease, the petit-bourgeoisie, and saluting Africans -- is part of a code and takes its meanings there from. So, we have an allusion to an important event, and exam, and *no* sense whatever. Hermeneutics, and discourse analysis (a related approach: See below), would say that before there is anything like meaning "happens," there has to be *discourse*: A sentence, a noun, a verb, context, a speaker and action – in effect, a story. In other words, if anything, the smallest unit of spoken or written meaning is to be found in a sentence, and here we only have bare bones. It is in larger statements, texts or discourses, that we actually articulate meanings and contest them, negotiate and recreate reality. Where there is discourse, or any kind, says hermeneutics, there is interpretation.

Hermeneutic practice teaches that interpretation emerges out of a *reciprocal, dialogical, or a dialectical*, relationship between facts and particulars on the one hand, and the meaning of the whole that we slowly build up as we work through the details. We go to the details, facts, data as the parts in pursuit of the narrative or "logic" of what is being expressed, and we return to intuition, erudition (the background knowledge we've built up in the past), and imagination for the whole, to "make sense." We go to the parts for "explanation," and to the whole for "understanding." We swing back and forth, and with each "oscillation" get a clearer sense of the whole, which adds clarity and definition to the parts, as does the return from the parts enrich our grasp of the whole.

This process unfolds over time creating what has been variously called a Hermeneutic "circle," "arc," and sometimes "spiral." The goal, in simple English, is "getting the meaning" of the totality. This is sometimes called "appropriation," in that while we can agree on the meaning of the text, it can bear a special and personal meaning for each of us individually and may become completely integrated into the way we experience ourselves, and our relations with others and the things of the world. When the meaning of any "text" becomes so integral to whom we are, an hermeneuticist would say that we had "appropriated it." Appropriation is an imaginative and creative task or labour. We have "made it our own," by integrating this meaning into the system of meanings and values we already possessed, perhaps allowing it to transform us in some way.



Just as individual can appropriate a text through the process of the hermeneutic arc, so can a society or social group. A text – and this term can pertain to a book, a set of laws, a sacred writing, an institution, a cultural practice, music, architecture, the layout of entire cities – changes its meaning as we read it, and as whole societies, cultures and civilizations move through time (history). Some texts remain central, some evolve in importance, and others disappear. Still others are revived, as was opera meant to be a revival of Greek tragedy, or the case of the Romantic Era's rediscovery of JS Bach.

Here we have a *radical* departure from the ground that semiotics occupies: Hermeneutics is *diachronic* in its approach, that is to say that it is *historical*. Semiotics, on the other hand, is *synchronic*, that is, it is concerned with describing all the sets of interrelationships within a system or code, but to achieve this the thing being studied and the setting must be frozen in time so change is held at bay and the variables and forces shaping the object of study can be revealed within its structural set of co-interrelations with other phenomena. Hermeneutics rejects the synchronic approach, precisely because the meanings of a text change with time and to delimit it into a structure that is static, from this POV is to run a serious risk of misreading the matters at hand.

Just as no *significant* word can exist in isolation from all systems of other words, so no "text" exists without a "con-text," an "along with," "beside" of that text. This has to be factored into any hermeneutic (interpretive) undertaking. Bruhn Jensen¹ lists three contexts that must be included (though more could be added):

1. Where does the text we're interpreting "fit" among the relevant texts that preceded it? Where among the contemporary texts with which it might be in dialogue or polemic? Which texts has it influenced since.
2. Who were the text's original readers, what was their world like? How did they understand this text? Why this way and not some other? How did they engage with the text, how did they read, "practice" their reading and in which ways did the text befriend and/or alienate them in their world? Which meanings informed which of their practices?
3. Which other texts create the "hermeneutic environment" through which we approach this text? If in rhetoric we can refer to the rhetorical setting, the instance of expression, then with hermeneutics we can think of an interpretive setting or environment, that set of values and understandings,

¹ Bruhn Jensen, Klaus, ed. *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research*. London: Routledge, 2002.

meanings and apprehensions, which we bring to this text. Which meanings do we derive from it now? Does the text enable us or constrain, enrich or enfeeble, befriend or alienate us in, and toward, our world. What do we tell our children of this text? and so on.

Thus, in addition to the unfolding coherence that the text discloses through the reader's oscillating journey between the whole and parts, the text brings a context with it; and the text "emanates" a context affecting the way it's been understood since and how we interpret it in the present.

Through the 20th c., hermeneutics has been recast in a number of ways. Paul Ricoeur (see below) suggests that there are two main tendencies in hermeneutic undertakings. Such projects are either informed by an "hermeneutics of tradition" or an "hermeneutics of suspicion." In the "hermeneutics of tradition," the interpreter attends carefully to the text in pursuit of the insight or wisdom that lies hidden under its surface. The "hermeneutics of suspicion," on the other hand, is concerned with reading texts carefully to show the interests, agendas, and ideologies interwoven and concealed in their often innocuous-sounding narratives.

If rhetoric provides us with a study and theory of the tools by which ideas are organized in whichever media, then hermeneutics provides with the theory and tools to understand the means and modes of reception, and can be subsumed to discussions of epistemology as such. To use the semiotic vocabulary, if rhetoric is *encoding*, then hermeneutics is a sister study of *decoding*. Just as there are many derivations of and alternatives to the vocabulary of rhetoric for describing the human expressive faculty, so also we have legion derivations and alternatives to/of/from hermeneutics – discourse analysis (see below), audience studies, reception theory, and so on.

Definitions of Hermeneutics on the Web:

(Sources for quotes available at:

<http://www.google.com/search?hl=en&lr=&client=safari&rls=en&q=define%3AHermeneutics&btnG=Search>, Downloaded and reformatted June 8, 2006.)

- The pursuit of meaning following specified principles of interpretation. Originally hermeneutics referred to the process of interpreting religious writings. However, much literary criticism amounts to a secular hermeneutics. Notably exceptions include most structuralist and post-structuralist criticism. These non-hermeneutic approaches focus not on discovering what a text means but rather on how meaning is deployed or subverted.
- The word was derived from the Pagan Greek myth of Hermes. A study of methods used to interpreting the Bible.
- The science of the methods of exegesis.
- The study of the methodological principles of interpretation. Historically, many ancient texts -- such as the Bible in Western religions and ancient Chinese texts including the writings of Sun Tzu -- have accumulated layers of commentary, which are published along with the work. In each layer, subsequent reviewers comment on the original text, the historical context of

its writing, the nature of translations over time, and on the contexts of earlier interpreters.

- The science or practice of interpretation. Assumes that the text remains as written, painted, or recorded but that its interpretation changes between historical periods, across cultures, etc.
- Formal study of methods of interpretation. Following Gadamer, the hermeneutical process is often regarded as involving complex interaction between the interpreting subject and the interpreted object.
- In a general sense, this is the philosophical study of interpretation. Originally, this was the field of Biblical interpretation, but has come to be the study of the interpretation of not just texts but human existence as well. Friedrich Schleiermacher and Wilhelm Dilthey were important forerunners for contemporary hermeneutics, and some important contemporary hermeneutic thinkers include Paul Ricoeur and Hans-Georg Gadamer.
- Ordinarily covers the whole field of interpretation, including exegesis, it is also used in the narrower sense of seeking the contemporary relevance of ancient texts (Fee & Stuart).
- Dualistic cognitive theory, in which the observer and the observed are locked in a tight embrace of interaction; the science of interpretation.
- The theoretical examination of the understanding and interpretation of texts. The apparent paradox in which we cannot understand the whole of a work without understanding its parts but that the understanding of the parts presupposes some knowledge of the whole. (Quinn 146).
- The art or skill of interpreting Scripture; the word comes from the name of a Greek god named "Hermes" who was the messenger of the gods (usually depicted with winged sandals) or the one who brought to man the words of the gods; thus, the process of skillfully interpreting Scripture brings the Word of God to man. In comparison to exegesis, hermeneutics is more the theory of interpretation whereas exegesis is the practice of interpretation.
- The principles, rules, or methodology of interpretation.
- The art or skill or theory of interpretation: the method of coming to an understanding of a text.
- Hermeneutics (Hermeneutic means interpretive), is a branch of philosophy concerned with human understanding and the interpretation of texts. Recently the concept of texts has been extended beyond written documents to include, for example, speech, performances, works of art, and even events.

Related phrases: [hermeneutics and criticism](#) [biblical hermeneutics](#)

Further web references and resources.

[Hermeneutics - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#)

[Hermeneutics](#) (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

You can get a sense of how the field has been expanded through [Expanding Hermeneutics](#), by Don Ihde. In his work, Ihde combines hermeneutics and phenomenology, and has a great deal to say about communication and media.

Some Principles of Phenomenological Hermeneutics (John Lyle, Brock University). <http://www.brocku.ca/english/courses/4F70/ph.html>

And an example in application, *Hermeneutics and the Phenomenon of Information*. Rafael Capurro. <http://www.capurro.de/ny86.htm>

Current “paradigm-makers”:

HANS-GEORG GADAMER (1900-2002)

[Hans-Georg Gadamer - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#), [Hans-Georg Gadamer](#) (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), and [Hans-Georg Gadamer](#) (*Mythos & Logos* site, many links)

PAUL RICOEUR (1913-2005)

[Paul Ricoeur - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#), [Paul Ricoeur \(1913-2005\) \[Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy\]](#) and [Paul Ricoeur](#) (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

“Origins”:

WILHELM DILTHEY (1833-1911)

[Wilhelm Dilthey - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#), [Wilhelm Dilthey](#) (*Mythos & Logos* site, many links)

MARTIN HEIDEGGER (1889-1976)

[Martin Heidegger - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia](#), note the caveat on the page. Heidegger is “problematic” at least, outright dangerous at worst, incomprehensible to some and profound for others. That his ideas have been influential in the social and human sciences, philosophy, the arts and letters, and in many polemics of the 20th and early 21st centuries, is beyond dispute.

[Existentialism: Martin Heidegger](#), and <http://mythosandlogos.com/heidegger.html> (*Mythos & Logos* site, many links).

How would we apply such an approach to research emergent media? First we’d need to identify something we could understand as a text – a coherent (though not necessarily explicit) discourse, objectively and concretely in the world, which we would set out to interpret.

For example, we could take what is called “the myth of the mechanical servant,”