

## EDITORIAL IMPRESSIONS: FORESIGHT OR HINDSIGHT?\*

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Understanding any text has something to do with our way of looking at the world. Do the people we (ethnologists and folklorists) study think about thinking in the same way as academics? Both possibilities might be illusions. We might wish to see everybody thinking similarly to us. But we might also project a different mode of thinking to always different others in order to create a clear purpose for our explorations.

Hermeneutics tells us that the text is already understood prior to interpretation. Understanding can be achieved by getting symbolically into another consciousness. In order to accomplish this, one needs to use external designators (such as signs). Interpretations constitute the periphery of understanding. Martin Heidegger (2001: 194) assures us that “any interpretation which is to contribute understanding, must already have understood what to be interpreted.” He discusses interpretation as grounded in a fore-having (*Vorhabe*). In every case an interpretation is grounded in something we see in advance, in foresight (*Vorsicht*), and grasp in advance, in a fore-conception (*Vorgriff*). Heidegger (*ibid.*: 191–192) says that our “interpretation is never a presuppositionless apprehending of something presented to us”.

Hans-Georg Gadamer says that the hermeneutic circle of understanding constitutes the existential frame of cognition, given to us before actual reasoning effort. It embodies the potential of the very embryonic mode of perception. But this fore-knowing functions adequately only in the case of methodical analysis:

To be sure, we genuinely take hold of this possibility only when, in our interpretation, we have understood that our first, last, and constant task is never to allow our fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception to be presented to us by fancies and popular conceptions, but rather to make the scientific theme secure by working out these fore-structures in terms of the things themselves. (Gadamer 2004: 154)

This fore-having is historically distinctive, embracing different specifications in particular periods and academic traditions. Application of different (scholarly or popular) horizons of knowledge enables understanding. Thus, meaning is not abstract but is always marked by some culture-specific trace. At the same time, this style of thinking is by definition comprehensive by itself.

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I will try to give a few insights into my own impressions from ethnographic investigations among the Finno-Ugrians, language relatives of the Estonians who live primarily in North Russia, Siberia, and the Volga River region. It seems that, for the Finno-Ugrians, thinking sometimes works in quite the opposite way to the philosophers. Who knows, they may have a different mode for treating the truth. But you can never be really sure, even after years of conceptual negotiations in the ethnographic field. Still, it seems worth discussing the issue briefly, even if I will be not able to settle the problem satisfactorily.

My Komi friend (the Komi people live in the northeastern corner of European Russia, next to the Ural Mountains) once made fun of people who, “even if they don’t know, nevertheless comprehend” (FM 1998). But access to Finno-Ugric understanding is gained otherwise, rather than only knowing in advance. Yuri Vella, a Forest Nenets (the Forest Nenets inhabit the taiga zone of Western Siberia) reindeer herder, poet and indigenous activist, explained this kind of logic as it being normal that deeds and happenings receive their meanings post-factum. This is just how the Siberian indigenous people’s worldview functions. (FM 2000) It does not mean that the hindsight is artificial, proposed only for *ad hoc* purposes. You accomplish something or something just happens, and the significance of it only becomes evident afterwards. For some practices there is no goal despite still having a meaningful result.

This Finno-Ugric approach can also be interpreted in the framework of the concept of ‘native hermeneutics’. According to Thomas DuBois (1996) there are accepted diverse “hermeneutic pathways” for interpreting the same story after the narrative event, manipulating an audience’s expectations. If we treat Finno-Ugric hermeneutics in a way that enables potentially ambiguous comprehension, our syllogistically trained mind starts to feel uncomfortable. But in the ethnographic field, this happens to us all the time.

Eva Toulouze (2004: 58), while discussing the Forest Nenets storytelling practice, has noticed that sometimes the genre of narrative depends on traditional rules that attendants of a storytelling event share. The truth-value of a narrative is recognised after a particular storytelling episode during discussion between narrator and audience. If they agree upon the possibility of the described events in the context of the Forest Nenets animistic worldview, the story is categorised as legend and considered true, even if it is highly unlikely that it could happen in real life (according to a scholarly or agnostic view of the world). But if the story goes beyond animistic probability, it is regarded as a folk tale, a fiction.

During the 1970s and 1980s, psychologist Peeter Tulviste (1984; 1986) explored several groups of illiterate indigenous peoples and argued that they lack skills of abstract reasoning and think about everything through experience. Tulviste proved his argument by using, among other examples, an experiment he conducted among the Nganasan people in Taimyr Peninsula, Siberia. Tulviste interrogated his informants, asking them questions that were culturally adapted versions of classical syllogisms. It appeared that the Nganasans did not accept Aristotle’s logic when it contradicted practical reality.

For example, Tulviste presented two assumptions: Saiba and Nakuptee always drink tea together; Saiba drinks tea at three o’clock. Then Tulviste asked his respondents: Does Nakuptee drink tea at three o’clock as well? The Nganasans gave various answers to this question. They argued that even if these two men made this kind of awkward

agreement, it is still impossible for them to keep the promise. Two men are just unable to always drink tea at the same time. (Tulviste 1984: 63–66; 1986: 101)

This means that the illiterate Nganasans did not follow abstract reasoning but consider logical situations that are possible in reality. Syllogistic thinking does not sound valid to them. The Nganasans need to feel a certain coherence between a story and reality in order to consider any argument true.

But sometimes it seems that storytellers intentionally lead an audience away from reality. In a traditional setting, Komi hunting stories are supposed to confuse a skilled audience proficient in the hunter's life. Researchers become even more bewildered during these narrative events. The most distinctive rule of Komi hunters' storytelling is that a lie must seem to be the truth, and vice versa. The desired effect of narration is to puzzle listeners so that they cannot tell for sure what the truth-value of spoken stories is. (See Leete and Lipin 2012; 2015; Leete 2017b: 40)

During an ethnographic field encounter the situation is not much better among the Khanty people of Western Siberia. In the early 1990s, my Khanty friend who had recently married told me a true story about gods executing his wife in her childhood. After completing the story, the man looked at me with sincerity and anticipation (FM 1992). At a moment like this, it is not easy to decide how to view the story. However hesitant this story makes a listener, one needs to react, and you must indicate the way of perception you choose. So I wondered: do I need to take it as the truth or laugh about it, as this is obviously a joke? The story was surrounded by slightly obscure Finno-Ugric logic. But nobody was available in the Siberian forest to teach me how to respond on this kind of occasion. The fact was that my friend's wife was still alive, decades after the moment when gods supposedly killed her. (See also Leete 2017b: 43–45)

Sometimes, drawing a line between truth and joke is not an easy job for indigenous experts either. Yuri Vella has written an autobiographic miniature recalling a time when he worked as a mailman in the taiga. Once he arrived at the forest camp of the Khanty elder Koshpi-iki. The old man announced that he just cut off his thumb but managed to put it back quickly. Koshpi-iki even demonstrated his recovering thumb to his younger visitor. Yuri wrote that he could not laugh on this old man's performance because he felt that "something tells me that this is something else" (Vella 2011: 21–22).

Finno-Ugric hindsight is not an ironic mode for justifying everything with no matter what. It is an age-old indigenous habit of perceiving the world, the way to produce cognitive harmony. Understanding manifests itself to these people only afterwards. This Finno-Ugric wisdom whirls slowly around the welter of being. However, even this Finno-Ugric way of reasoning or indigenous hermeneutic pathway that leads through hindsight may have its shortcomings, as we see from the Koshpi-iki case. Understanding may remain shy and nothing can be said definitely about the Finno-Ugric worldview and ways of reasoning (comp. Leete 2017a: 30).

But are scholars actually so different from Finno-Ugric hunters and reindeer herders? When we start to interpret our empirical data, do we, in principal, already know the answers due to the laws of reasoning based on hermeneutic fore-having? Or do meaning and understanding appear only at the end, when we finish our analysis? Initial scholarly hesitation is supposed to serve as a foundation for elaborating definite arguments. But perhaps it works in an opposite way as well – however strong our evidence is, it always leads us towards endless hesitation.

Let's return to a philosophical argument. Paul Ricoeur (1995: 3–4) aims to overcome the repetitive passage of the hermeneutic circle and argues that understanding is the art of acquiring meaning. If so, this hermeneutic sensibility brings us close to the endless play of deconstructed reasoning and intuition. Does this kind of performance of reasoning take place in a juxtaposition of original Finno-Ugric logic and scholarly venture? Would it present us academic foresight or indigenous hindsight?

## SOURCES

FM = Fieldwork materials of the author.

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