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**THE PROBLEM OF INTERPRETATION IN COMPARATIVE  
EDUCATION (INTERDISCIPLINARY APPROACH)**

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***Abstract***

The purpose of the article is to consider the method of interpretation as one of the ways to increase the scientific level of Comparative Education. The authors of the article consider, discuss and analyze the reasons for the practical lack of interpretation method in this field of knowledge. They raise questions on the elimination of problems that stand in the way of using the method in Comparative Education. They are engaged in polemics on this issue, they turn to the opinion of different scientists who study the factors of objective/ subjective interpretation of scientific texts and offer different approaches to interpretation. The problem of interpretation in this article is analyzed in science generally, it is traced historically. The authors of the article pay particular attention to consider the theory, strategies, principles and functions of interpretation in Humanities and Social science. The authors of the article turn to the books of philosophers, methodologists, philologists, sociologists, political scientists, geographers, psychologists and comparativists in search for understanding the meaning of the term «interpretation». The article reveals different understandings of the term. The authors of the article investigate the reasons for the appeal of scientists in different fields of knowledge to the method of interpretation. They consider the significance of this method in different studies. The authors of the article raise the question of place and role of this method in Comparative Education. A special place in the article is given to the consideration of the ethical aspect of interpretation in pedagogical texts.

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**Keywords:** Comparative Education, method of cognition, interpretation.



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## 1. Introduction

An interpretation is a scientific method of science, aimed at understanding the phenomenon under investigation through studying its external manifestations. “An interpretation is a cognitive process and at the same time a result in establishing the meaning of verbal and/ or non-verbal actions” (Demankov, 2003).

To interpret is a procedure to identify the meaning and significance of the phenomenon under study, to understand and explain texts. An interpretation is always a process of reaching understanding (Demankov, 2003).

At the same time, an understanding is always relative. There is always a misunderstanding in it, not everything is obvious. According to E. Husserl, an interpretation is necessary when there is a gap between consciousness and reality (Husserl, 2009). Heidegger also believed that the meaning of being can be detected through the interpretation of human being (Heidegger, 2015).

Since the times of Antiquity many sciences have posed the problem of interpretation. V. Dilthey was one of the first known scientists who raised this problem in Humanities. He argued that the interpretation in Humanities was the understanding of the long-observed life manifestations (Dilthey, 2001).

The method of interpretation acquired great value in Humanities. V.Z. Demankov argued that Philology arose because of the need to interpret difficult texts (Demankov, 2003).

Riker P. considered that an interpretation began to play an important role in the methods of Humanitarian knowledge in the situation of overcoming the distance between the epochs, which belong to the phenomenon of interpretation and an interpreter itself (Riker, 2008).

During the development of Hermeneutics, when such function of Natural science, as an explanation, became an important function in Humanities, an interpretation acquired a special status as a method of scientific knowledge. Thus, H.-G. Gadamer defined an interpretation as the basic method of knowledge in the Humanities (Gadamer, 1988).

The method of interpretation was determined in many ways in different historical periods. In the postmodern period, the method of interpretation is no longer regarded as an objective understanding of the text, reconstruction of the cultural and historical conditions for its creation, but as a merger of the interpreter with the interpreted text. That is why, H.-G. Gadamer suggested that an interpretation should be directed not to the authors of the text, but to the text itself, its content (Gadamer, 1988).

J. Habermas criticized the dogmatic acceptance of the power of traditions. He believed that the meaning of the text was clarified to the interpreter as much as his own world became clear (Habermas, 1990).

## 2. Problem Statement

What does it mean to interpret something? There are different theories of interpretation. One of the well-known theory of interpretation is E. Betti's book «General theory of interpretation». The author of the theory expressed his understanding of the process of interpretation; he described three main actors of interpretation, namely: an author, an interpreter and the representational form that performed the function of an intermediary and interpreted the main problem field of the interpretation process content – «subjectivity».

E. Betti distinguished four basic principles of interpretation: (1) the meaning of the interpreted phenomenon should not be subjected to subjective description, an interpreter should be fenced off from his own prejudices, ideology, opinions as much as possible; (2) the meaning of the phenomenon being under interpretation should be clarified in the process of correlating of the whole and the part of the interpreted one; (3) the thought of the text's author should be transferred to the actuality of the own historical life of the interpreter; (4) an interpretation should be in tune with the author's thoughts and openness to the spirit of the author, who wrote the text (Rossius, 2018).

E. Betti distinguished different types of interpretation in his theory: a recognizing, reproductive and normative interpretation. The purpose of the first type of interpretation is to understand the meaning contained in the source that is being studied. This is, for example, a historical representation. The purpose of second type is to convey the meaning, this type of interpretation is used as an instrument (for example, musical interpretation). The purpose of the third type is to regulate the actions based on rules derived from norms and dogmas. This is a legal, religious or ethical-pedagogical interpretation (Rossius, 2018).

Not all scientists agree with the separation of types in interpretation, in particular, F. Schleiermacher. We particularly dwell on him, since E. Betti had followed his traditions in the theory. F. Schleiermacher regarded an interpretation as a universal theory of interpretation, where the rules of understanding are not specific with respect to the type of the text. F. Schleiermacher considered that it is necessary to get used to the inner world of the author of the text in any type of interpretation. Meanwhile, he distinguished the comparative and divinatory interpretation procedures. In the first case he considered that utterances were interpreted in comparison with the linguistic and historical context, in the second – the meaning was grasped intuitively (Schleiermacher, 2004).

H.-G. Gadamer also opposed some ideas of E. Betti's theory. In contrast to E. Betti, H.-G. Gadamer considered that the historical conditioning of understanding were the most important hermeneutical principles (Gadamer, 1988).

U. Eco created another theory of interpretation. It is of great interest to researchers. U. Eco emphasized three aspects: history and an interpretation; a text and an author; and the phenomenon of excessive interpretation. U. Eco paid special attention to the roles of an author and a reader. He introduced an additional element of the process of semiosis – the “intention of the text” and arranged it between the intentions of the author of the text and the intention of the interpreter. The author of the theory placed special emphasis to the dialectics of the reader's and text's intentions, as if deriving the author of the text from the brackets. Moreover, U. Eco distinguished two types of authors: the empirical one and the author in anticipation. The first author had a biography and a name, the second one was the one who was in subconscious of the author himself. From U. Eco point of view, it was the empirical author who was of primary importance in interpreting something (Yerokhina, 2012).

In addition to philosophy, theories of interpretation were presented in physics (eg, H. Everett's interpretation of quantum mechanics), sociology (The theory of social systems of N. Luhmann), and other sciences.

One of the modern theories of interpretation is the constructivist concept of N. Luhmann's interpretation, which is closely related to the notion of “truth”. A truth, according to the author of the theory, could be interpreted as a “symbolic code”, a means of constructing and selecting a reliable material. N.

Luhmann considered, that a truth was a symbol, that stood for knowledge. From his point of view the differentiation of truth from knowledge occurred when writing had appeared. It was the text (written communication) that created the conditions to postpone understanding of what was being understood in communication, and therefore created the possibilities for its rethinking. N. Luhmann asserted, that there was a huge number of interpretative possibilities that required the choice of one of them under the understanding of the written text (Antonovskiy, 2006). N. Luhmann believed that cognitive constructs of truth (means of interpretation) were practically automatic procedures for selecting a true knowledge. The means of construction was the medium. It means the following. A constructivist cognition is not about characterizing what exists, but in fact that it transforms the mediums that they opened into new forms. It means the construction of mediums (Antonovskiy, 2006).

N. Luhmann attached great importance to the functions of negative values. According to N. Luhmann, a true was determined by the exclusion of falsehood. He believed that if the true value was responsible for the connectivity of the system, then the value of the untrue represented the reflective function of the system. Thus, N. Luhmann considered that it was falsity that carried a positive potential in itself; since a contradiction arose that should be interpreted (Antonovskiy, 2006).

Among the theories of interpretation there are such ones, in particular in Philology, in which it is asserted that an understanding and interpretation are completely different processes, for example, E.D. Hirsch's theory of interpretation substantiation. The scientist asserted that there could be only one understanding, and there were many interpretations. So, even when using the same interpretation strategy, different researchers can get inconsistent results, since the interpretation is highly dependent on the knowledge, education and individual characteristics of interpreting personality. Hence the conclusion is that it is necessary to reconcile the points of view of different interpreters in order to establish the truth of the interpreted text (Hirsch, 1967).

There are many methods of interpretation. These are the documentary method of interpretation (K. Mannheim, A. Schutz, H. Garfinkel), the method of literary interpretation (G. Moens), the historical-grammatical method, the contextual method of interpretation, amillennialism, allegorical interpretation, mystical interpretation, the moral interpretation (E. Kant), naturalistic interpretation, rationalistic interpretation, analytical interpretation of data, most of which were developed for the interpretation of the Bible. Each of these methods suggests its own grounds for interpretation, its own starting point for understanding of the text or phenomenon.

### **3. Research Questions**

So, it is obvious that interpretation is a method used in many sciences. But what is the situation in Comparative Education? Do educators use this method in the research process? It is known that comparative research in the field of Pedagogy usually has the character of a qualitative study. Comparative educators cannot fail to understand that in this case their actions should be aimed at the extraction of meaning. To understand the educational processes and pedagogical concepts is possible only through interaction with the values of the phenomenon of research. Qualitative data never speaks for itself, therefore, the researcher should understand it. Moreover, qualitative research creates notions, it means that these notions should be identified and explained. Thus, to explain a text (especially the one written in other

culture), means to interpret it. Meanwhile, traditionally psychologists and educators prefer to use the term “analysis” to describe their activities and distance themselves from the “interpretation” method. To one of the reasons for rejecting the term “interpretation” in psychology, C. Willig refers to the desire of researchers to put an end to the accusations that qualitative studies are in fact nothing more than intuition (Willig, 2017).

Perhaps, this statement could be applied to researchers in the field of pedagogy. But, unlike Pedagogy, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century the situation in Psychology began to change. C. Willig and S. Rogers argue that qualitative psychology has turned to interpretation and in recent years the interpretative turn continues to gain momentum, which led to the publication of complex qualitative analyzes (Willig, 2017).

In Comparative Education, the researchers still use the method of “interpretation” extremely rare. Here it is appropriate to say that we have more in mind Pedagogy, and not Education. The comparative texts on educational systems, especially in Economic sciences and Sociology, as well as in well-known large International studies and a number of comparativists studies dealing with education, are often accompanied by data interpretation in the context of its historical, economic and social development. Thus, J. Bereday considered interpretation as one of the main methods of research in Comparative Education (Bereday, 1967). We can also found the mention of this method in a number of contemporary books (Ivanova, 2012; Marchall, 2014; Matheson, 2015; Phillips & Schweisfurth, 2014).

But we find practically no trace of the application of this method in pedagogical texts, except, of course, texts where the interpretation of quantitative indicators is carried out. We are talking on qualitative research.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

Let's try to understand what is the reason not to use an interpretation as a method in Comparative Pedagogical qualitative research?

#### **5. Research Methods**

Analysis, synthesis, description, interpretation.

#### **6. Findings**

The analysis of scientific literature allows us to assert that the main reason not to use interpretation in Comparative Pedagogy can be explained by ethical problems, since the interpretation of the comparative pedagogical text is a cultural issue. Such texts should be disclosed through civilizational codes, national characteristics of the educational systems, mental characteristics of the people, i. e. specificity of the pedagogical phenomenon. But where can researchers get such information, how can they be sure of its reliability and objectivity? It can be assumed that the national character is described in the literature and researchers can operate, extracting it from texts. But, despite the fact that the scientists making research in the Humanities are convinced that the civilizational code of the people does not change (see the article and books, written by M. Kozyreva, V. Rastorguev, A. Shchipkov and others (Kozyreva, 2016; Rastorguyev, 2015; Shchipkov, 2015)), there is no evidence for this statement.

Accordingly, every researcher asks the question: how much characteristics in literary works are adequate to our time of globalization? Denying literary data, one can turn to modern neuropsychology. It can be assumed that such science as neuropsychology has already collected objective data on the national features of different peoples' thinking (see, for example, the articles and books, written by Y. J. Aleksandrov R. Nisbett and others (Aleksandrov & Aleksandrova, 2009; Aleksandrov & Kirdina, 2012; Nisbett, 2013), but the data they obtained is not mass results, so they should also be cautiously referred to.

The outstanding interpreters, in particular F. Schleiermacher, offered one more source of interpretation – to get used to the world of the interpreted (Schleiermacher, 2004).

Today this approach is considered again. A number of modern researchers argue that one can understand the foreign culture environment only by plunging into it (Grane, 2016; Strauss & Corbin, 2001). Other researchers disagree with this approach, arguing that an objective interpretation of the phenomenon can be ensured only if the interpretation is carried out with the help of specialists for whom the interpreted reality is their native environment (Smelser, 2003).

There are arguments of another order. Some researchers believe that no one who lives or who has become accustomed to one or another culture can adequately assess it. Modern interpreters, in particular A. Skupin, S. Fabrikant, M.F. Goodchild and D.J. Jenell, suggest another way of interpretation, which can help to remove a number of serious ethical issues. They believe that the interpretation of the phenomenon is expedient to carry out by describing and explaining the concrete space (place) and time of the event (Goodchild & Janelle, 2010; Skupin & Fabrikant, 2003).

The same approach was suggested by R. Cowen and M. Bray (Brey, 2002; Cowen, 2002).

Modern scientists argue that exclusively spatial thinking contributes to objective interpretation, since it refers to the construction of knowledge of abstract spaces. Spatial thinking helps the researcher in the process of visualization, discovering patterns of these spaces and contributing to the improvement of his / her scientific insight (Goodchild & Janelle, 2010; Skupin & Fabrikant, 2003).

But is it a simple task to get used to space, to visualize it, even in spite of the fact that information about space is widely available in digital and analog sources? How can we learn to read it? Today it is exactly the problem of Comparative Education, which requires its solution. In our study, we found only one proposal, one strategy for implementing such interpretation. It was proposed by I. Williams and S. Morrow. The researchers suggested: to strive for (1) integrity of data; (2) balance between reflexivity and subjectivity and (3) to communicate (Williams & Morrow, 2009). At the same time, I. Williams and S. Morrow suggested to pay special significance to the amount of data (Williams & Morrow, 2009).

## **7. Conclusion**

Comparative Education researchers attach great importance to the method of analysis. They do not practically use the method of interpretation. Meanwhile, it is the interpretation that can raise this area of knowledge to a higher scientific level, since it will allow researchers not only to describe educational events and concepts, but also explain their origin, ways of development and specificity with respect to the cultural diversity. Pedagogical interpretation can avoid ethical problems, get rid of subjectivity if it starts to address to the study and explanation of the place and time of phenomenon's development. Thus, Comparative Education has prospects for methodological development.

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