Language, hermeneutics and epistemological activity in Physical Education

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Abstract: This paper seeks to bring to the Physical Education scientific community a set of notes on language as understood by Philosophical Hermeneutics. This framework allows us to redimension the question of knowledge, since it implies an inflection in understanding the hegemonic rationality in western philosophy, with its due implications for different fields of knowledge, among which we find the resizing of epistemological activity.

Keywords: Language. Hermeneutics. Epistemology. Physical Education.

The world has become once again 'infinite' to us, because it contains within itself the possibility of infinite interpretations (Nietzsche)

This essay aims to emphasize the contribution of a framework which I believe is capable of stimulating debate within the Physical Education field, in particular, the epistemological debate. I start with the theme of language as understood by philosophical hermeneutics. First I will explain the origins of the term hermeneutics, making use of Ruedell’s (2005, p. 224) brief explanation:

the roots of the term hermeneutics are in the Greek verb hermeneuein, usually translated as interpret, and the noun hermeneia, that means interpretation. The establishment and use of these words, in its turn, refer to Greek mythology, more precisely, to Hermes, the messenger god. Hermes is associated to transmutation, the transformation of

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1 O mundo se tornou mais uma vez ‘infinito’ para nós, porque ele contém em si a possibilidade de interpretações infinitas
everything that is above human comprehension, making it accessible to human intelligence. As God’s messenger, he brings to men the message of the world of gods, announces it and makes it understandable; he brings near and explains what was distant and obscure.2

Philosophical hermeneutics is characterized, according to Ruedell (2005), for not being concerned with “how”. It is not, therefore, a technique and does not provide guidelines for interpretation. According to the author, based on Scholtz, philosophical hermeneutics aims at understanding what makes it possible to interpret and understand, in other words, it asks about the conditions for the possibility of understanding (RUEDELL, 2005, p. 226-227).

I see in this framework, and in particular in the theme of language, a capacity for inspiration to think about the questions of knowledge from a perspective still little explored in our field. I am interested in this framework because I agree with Fensterseifer (1999, p. 173) when he says that "what interests us in the epistemological activity are the discursive forms"4. Therefore,

the primary task of epistemological criticism is the thematization of language as a “medium” of production of meaning. It (the

2 as raízes do termo hermenêutica encontram-se no verbo grego hermeneuein, usualmente traduzido por interpretar, e no substantivo hermeneia, interpretação. O estabelecimento e o uso dessas palavras, por sua vez, remetem à mitologia grega, mais precisamente, a Hermes, deus mensageiro. Hermes associa-se à transmutação, à transformação de tudo o que está acima da compreensão humana, tornando-se acessível à inteligência humana. Enquanto mensageiro divino, traz aos homens a mensagem do mundo dos deuses, a anuncia e a torna compreensível; aproxima e explica o que era distante e obscuro.
3 Exercise, in this sense, can be found in the text Body and Language (FENSTERSEIFER, 2004). In the educational field, I suggest reading Hermann (2002) and Berticelli (2004).
4 “são as formas discursivas que nos interessam na atividade epistemológica”

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language) is our means of access, not the being, but the discourse about the being.  

Once this prerogative is accepted, I think epistemological activity is not possible without the use of language, since, and here I agree with Berticelli (2004, p 89), "the experience of the world is translated into language. There is not another possible translation of the experience of the world other than language" (apud BERTICELLI, 2004, p. 88, note 4, emphasis in original).

Further emphasizing the place of language, we bring the contribution of Palmer (1989, p. 20-21):

human existence, as we know it, always involves language, and so any theory about the human interpretation has to deal with the phenomenon of language. And among the most varied symbolic means of expression used by man, none surpasses the language in communicative flexibility and power, or in general importance it plays. Language shapes the vision of man and his thinking simultaneously – that’s the conception he has of himself and his world (these two aspects are not as disconnected as they seem). The very sight he has of reality is shaped by the language [...]. If we treat this topic in depth, it becomes apparent that the language is the "medium" in which we live, move and in which we have our being. 

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5 a tarefa primeira da crítica epistemológica é a tematização da linguagem como ‘medium’ de produção de significações. É ela (linguagem) o nosso meio de acesso, não o ser, mas o discurso sobre o ser
6 What, after Kant, should not mean limit in the negative sense, but the very condition of human knowledge. It is also worth noting that medium or means in this context does not mean instrument, but something closer to the notion we have of environment.
7 “a experiência do mundo se traduz como linguagem. Não há outra tradução possível da experiência do mundo que não seja a linguagem”
8 “a peculiar objetividade do mundo decorre da relação da linguagem com ele”
9 a existência humana tal como a conhecemos implica sempre a linguagem e assim, qualquer teoria sobre a interpretação humana tem que lidar com o fenômeno da linguagem. E entre os mais variados meios simbólicos de expressão usados pelo homem, nenhum ultrapassa a linguagem quer na flexibilidade e poder comunicativos,

The meaning given here to hermeneutics pressuposes the centrality of language, a phenomenon that produces what we call in philosophy linguistic turn or linguistic spin, which in short means the displacement of the question of reason and truth of the plan of the subject-object to the plan of language. Thus, the problem of interpretation is put in the center of philosophical concerns\textsuperscript{10}, which implies a break with the conception of knowledge as a representation of an individual consciousness. It is an inflection of contemporary philosophical thought, which will have in the intersubjectiveness of language its foundation for validation. Likewise, the scientific validation no longer occurs as evidence for an individual consciousness, but mainly because of its public recognition as a paradigm of a linguistic game (in the sense of Wittgenstein) (APEL \textit{apud} BERTICELLI, 2004, p. 95-96).

I hope, in the set of notes that follows, to show the implications of this position, which consolidates what has been called postmetaphysical thinking.

1. The abandonment of the effort to know the thing in itself, already assumed by Kant, removes from the ontology the pretension to exhaust the sense of being through the knowledge of what actually exist, and be contented with the sense of being while being, what happens linguistically. Thence, Gadamer’s statement: a being that can be understood is language. Language is custodian of the historicity of the being, which is inseparable from the time (proposition embodied in the title of Heidegger's work \textit{Being and Time}).

\textsuperscript{10} In the definition of Gadamer, “hermeneutics is: to know how much remains, always, of the unsaid when we say something” (“a hermenêutica é isto: saber o quanto fica, sempre, de não dito quando se diz algo”) (apud Hermann, 2002, p. 72).
2. Language is not a product (ergo), but activity (energy), in which all understanding is accomplished. Such understanding is not a faculty of man, but the very mode of being of the being (Dasein). It’s an opening that always occurs as an interpretation, giving rise to the different discursive forms that constitute the worlds (mythical, religious, scientific ...). It’s a productivity which is expressed also in the disciplinary knowledge capable of founding argumentative communities and intervening in different fields (natural, social, aesthetic).

3. The language remains open in its dynamics ("it can only be maintained while it transforms itself"\(^{11}\) - LARROSA, 2002), as a function of its bond with the historicity of the human condition, as well as with its inherently Babel character. This condition requires efforts on the part of the national states, linguists, philosophers, etc to reify, objectify and instrumentalize the language, which results in national languages, rules, concepts and so forth. This is an endless attempt to homogenize the language, which has as its telos, according to Larrosa (2002), the pretension that "the words say the same thing\(^ {12}\) and that "the speech can control the discourse\(^ {13}\). Since, however, concepts and discourses are composed of words, and these, "even though they remain the same, never say the same thing\(^ {14}\) (POZCHIA apud LARROSA, 2002), we never overcome the essential inaccuracy of the knowledge, because it depends on the language, since the "very 'reality' does not speak of itself, it needs a spokesperson\(^ {15}\) (VATTIMO, 2001, p. 43). And he/she, for this end, uses an "imperfect tool" (HENRY, 1992) or, in hermeneutic terms, he/she is used by it. Therefore, language is unattainable to us, finite beings. In an effort to

\(^{11}\) "só se conserva enquanto se transforma"
\(^{12}\) "as palavras digam a mesma coisa"
\(^{13}\) "o discurso possa controlar o discurso"
\(^{14}\) "embora permaneçam as mesmas, nunca dizem a mesma coisa"
\(^{15}\) "realidade 'mesma' não fala de si, tem necessidade de um porta-voz"
overcome the chaos of historical languages, Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 25) makes the following statement:

The algorithm, the design of a universal language, is the revolt against the given language. We do not want to depend of its confusions, we want to remake it according to the truth, redefine it according to the thought of God, start the history of speech from scratch, or rather, pluck the speech from history.  

4. The language, according to Humboldt, is human since its inception (apud GADAMER, 1999, p. 642). It originates with consciousness and society. Together, they are subject to the coming-to-be, the history, so, they were not given, they are not a natural fact (GIACOIA JR, 2001, p. 40). Therefore, there is not a human world before language or without language, since this world is constituted linguistically. It is a world that is common ground for those who talk to each other, a world which is not a barrier to knowledge, rather, it constitutes in the possibility that something might rise to our perception, because "it is always a human world, that is, linguistically structured , whatever its tradition is" (GADAMER, 1999, p. 648-649).

5. Since the language is beyond us, "as finite beings we have always come from long before and have arrived long after". In it "it becomes clear what is real, beyond the consciousness of each one" (GADAMER, 1999, p. 652). In the linguistic happening, the whole of our behavior is uncovered, be it the truths narrated by science, or the universe of appearances (even after Copernicus, the sun still sets). In this happening "there is a place not only for what holds, but

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16 O algoritmo, o projeto de uma língua universal, é a revolta contra a linguagem dada. Não se quer depender de suas confusões, quer-se refazê-la à medida da verdade, redefinir-se segundo o pensamento de Deus, recomeçar do zero a história da fala, ou melhor, arrancar a fala à história.
17 "o que se representa é sempre um mundo humano, isto é, estruturado linguisticamente, seja lá qual for a sua tradição"  
18 "como seres finitos sempre vimos de muito antes e chegamos até muito depois"  
19 "torna-se claro o que é real, mais além da consciência de cada um"
also and precisely for what changes”\(^{20}\) (GADAMER, 1999). We can exemplify this change in the decadence of words that can reveal changes in customs and values.

6. The fundamental relation of language and the world does not mean that the world becomes the object of language (GADAMER, 1999, p. 653). Having a language means to have a world, but it is not a world \textit{per se}, since it is not an object, for one fundamental reason: "there is no place outside the linguistic experience of the world from which it could convert itself into an object”\(^{21}\) (Gadamer, 1999, p. 657). Thus, the objectivity of language (Sachlichkeit) is not the same objectivity of science (Objektivität), which knows the laws, which "has something in its hands”\(^{22}\) (Gadamer, 1999, p. 658). To speak, according to Gadamer (1999, p. 658), "does not mean, in any way, to make things available, and calculable [...] this experience remains itself, intertwined with the vital behavior”\(^{23}\). Meanwhile, for the objective science, the world’s linguistic experience is full of prejudices, which the mathematical methods need to eliminate.

In what regards language, the epistemological activity does not have access to the being of things (the very being), but to the discourse on being. I accept, however, Heidegger’s proposition that language is the house where the being dwells. We realize that these speeches are not representations of the world, but they are worlds, they do not tell of the world, but they say the worlds. Palmer (1989, p. 244-245) explains it in the following passage:

> The language, in fact, is not an instrument, but how the being appears. When we want to transmit the being of a situation, we do not imagine a language that suits it, rather, we

\(^{20}\) “tem lugar não somente o que se mantém, mas também e justamente a mudança das coisas”

\(^{21}\) “não existe nenhum lugar fora da experiência linguística do mundo a partir do qual este pudesse converter-se a si mesmo em objeto”

\(^{22}\) “tem algo em suas mãos”

\(^{23}\) “não significa, de maneira alguma, tornar coisas disponíveis, e calculáveis [...] essa experiência permanece ela mesma, entrelaçada no comportamento vital”

find a language appropriate to the situation. Thus, what finds expression in our language is not our "Reflexivity", but the situation itself: the words do not function primarily to refer to this subjectivity; on the contrary, they refer to the situation. The foundation of objectivity does not lie in the subjectivity of the speaker, but in the reality which expresses itself in and by language. It is in this objectivity that the hermeneutics experience shall find its foundation.24

Therefore, the epistemological task, hermeneutically oriented, is not done by appealing to external references (theological or natural), but from the interior of finite pattern of truth. Therefore, as noted by Hermann (2002), understanding does not happen out of a context, or of a culture, which precludes treating the comprehension phenomenon exclusively as logical structures, as proposed by Piaget's genetic epistemology. The author states that,

Understanding human thought as a mental operation or a logical analysis entails to silence man’s historicity dimension, which happens on the horizon of language itself. It also implies submitting the complexity of comprehension and the search for meaning to the tutelage of the formal logic sciences (Hermann, 2002, p. 64).25

24 A linguagem de facto não é um instrumento mas sim o modo como o ser aparece. Quando queremos transmitir o ser de uma situação, não imaginamos uma linguagem que se lhe adapte mas antes encontramos a linguagem adequada à situação. Assim o que encontra expressão na linguagem não é a nossa “reflexividade” mas a própria situação: as palavras não funcionam essencialmente para se referirem a esta subjectividade; pelo contrário, referem-se à situação. O fundamento da objectividade não está na subjectividade daquele que fala mas sim na realidade que se exprime na e pela linguagem. É nesta objectividade que a experiência hermenêutica deverá encontrar o seu fundamento.

25 Compreender o pensamento humano como uma operação mental ou como uma análise lógica implica silenciar a dimensão de historicidade do homem, que se realiza no horizonte da própria linguagem. Implica, ainda, submeter a complexidade do processo de compreensão e de busca de sentido à tutela das ciências lógico formais.
We move about a language game that constitutes itself within a tradition, which provides the assumptions of our understanding. This insight enables us to keep open the debate on the conditions of possibility of the methods that operate the sciences, asking ourselves about the possibility of knowing, the place of the interpreter, the conditions of possibility of the interpretive act etc. In short, this is an activity within a scientific community, which ensures that the happening of the truth is argumentative. This is Gadamer’s position: "The model of knowledge is the dialogue, not the meeting between an autonomous subject and a dominated object, which is the postulate of modern science and also, in a sense, the death of metaphysics" (apud BERTICELLI, 2004, p. 69-70).

This happening, understood in its radicality, renders any effort unnecessary, or renders problematic concerns / statements such as Oliveira’s (1983, p. 105): "What we seek is the true nature of Physical Education. The essence. What it really is". Likewise is Medina’s position (1983, p. 58), which, when disqualifying the claims of the subjects of his research, makes reference to a "real education". In a most recent text, he seems to "relapse into essentialism", like Crisorio (2003, p. 48-49), when referring to a possible "defect of identity" and to "Physical Education as is" going beyond a certain nostalgia of the "original paidotribes".

Keeping a metaphysical, essentialist perspective, gives us a measure of criticism, and we can denounce everything that is not Physical Education. If, however, we agree with

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26 "O modelo do conhecer é o diálogo e não o encontro entre um sujeito autônomo e um objeto dominado, que é o postulado da ciência moderna e também, em certo sentido, a morte da metafísica"
27 "o que procuramos é a verdadeira natureza da Educação Física. A sua essência. Aquilo que realmente ela é"
28 "verdadeira educação"
29 "recáidas essencialistas"
30 "defeito de identidade"
31 "educação física como tal"
32 "paidotribia original"
33 We can not ignore that, in some cases, these concepts conflict with the work or thinking of the authors.
Larrosa (2004, p. 348) "that the question what is it? is not a good question, at least it is a naive question about one thing, the identity and the identification of a thing." It befits, according to the author, to disemboby, to denaturalize, to recognize the invention character of human institutions, which allows us to ask: how are they constituted and how do these inventions work?

One question that seems to have been brought out in this debate is: why not apply this antimetaphysical reasoning that we apply to the notion of identity, and even - or primarily - to the notion of truth, to science? Why not apply here what we said previously, based on Larrosa (2002), that even though the words remain the same, they never say the same thing? Or even, as Merleau-Ponty points out (2002, p. 23): "no thought remains in words, no words remain in the pure thought of something."

It seems that, on the one hand, we reserve to science the role of a sparring partner, and on the other, we seek recognition from the scientific community, for example, by joining the SBPC. When we execrate science, we refer to it as substantiality: the Science. At other times, we boast of using scientific concepts as cultural capital (double meaning).

To take hermeneutics seriously, as previously outlined, means appropriating the notion of science without, on the one hand, ignoring the tradition surrounding this concept, but, on the other, we desacralize it, which is a condition for its resignification. I have exemplified this position with my experience in the Master’s course Education in Science (Educação nas Ciências), UNIJUI (Ijuí-RS), which contains no clause that excludes an area of knowledge because it is not a science, but "perceives" scholarly production as scientific. This perception stems from the understanding of scientificity,
which is linked to the notion that something reaches this condition by publicly supporting an argument, that is, among peers in the academic community, who, in turn, have social legitimacy (prerogative that is inherited from tradition, but that must be constantly exercised in order to be renewed). As Berticelli (2004, p. 96-97) points out,

This position takes into account the displacement of knowledge criticism as an analysis of consciousness to a knowledge criticism as a language analysis. The truth value can no longer maintain its identity with the problem of evidence or certainty (certitudo), as Apel says, in line with a solitary Cartesian consciousness, nor on the basis of an objective validity for a Kantian consciousness in general, but rather on the basis of an intersubjective formation of the minimum consensus.

This knowledge, according to Fensterseifer (2002), does not allow us to treat epistemology as a legitimating instance of what in modernity aspires to the condition of truth, drawing to itself the responsibility to recognize the status of scientificity of an area of knowledge, and overseeing inescapable methodological processes to ensure the objectivity of the knowledge produced. We know that this place was secured by the assumption of equivalence Truth = Ratio = Science, which has been seriously challenged by the critical tradition, to which I add the tradition of hermeneutics. Elements such as knowledge-guiding interests, historicity, finitude, pragmatic-linguistic turn, among other elements, lead us, on the one hand, to question the pertinence of epistemology to claim this privileged place in relation to the truth, and on the other hand,
to question if this should mean abandonment of any norms for judging the claims to truth.

Tackling these issues is obviously a task not exclusively ours, but we cannot wait for it to be resolved in another context to apply to Physical Education. Rather, it configures itself in the very way in which we operate to produce knowledge. So, if we can agree with Vaz (2003, p. 119) when he says that it is "somewhat absurd to write a reflection on 'research methodology in Physical Education', and if it seems pointless to refer to an 'epistemology of Physical Education', I do not think it is absurd or pointless to break with the metaphysical notion of Reason / Truth / Science. We should sustain methodological reflections suitable for our purposes, and keep alive the epistemological activity regarding the knowledge produced within the scope of Physical Education.

Taking stock of epistemological perspectives within the scope of Physical Education after the crisis of the 1980s, we can visualize, among some alternatives, the naturalist inheritance, which seeks to consolidate the scientificity of Physical Education in scientificist objectivism, which, in its turn, believes it can translate what it considers relevant in the human movement into formal logical terms. This school of thought seeks its legitimacy in the shadow of the status enjoyed by certain hard sciences, as well as in the undeniable contributions it gives to the field of performance sport, to the field of health and motor development. It’s a legitimacy that is built, as befits this scientific tradition, observing ethical-political concerns and, in part, the pedagogical demands of Physical Education.

This approach is opposed by the current epistemological lines of thought, which recognize the historicity of the human condition and, therefore, its dimensions, such as human motion, body, ludic practices, etc.. This recognition does not

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37 The use of the phrase "after the crisis of the 1980s" does not necessarily mean the breaking with elements of our epistemological tradition, but rather the affirmation of certain positions before this crisis.

necessarily mean the abandonment of scientific objectivism, but now it is linked to the effort of the so called Humanities (and Social Sciences) to search an ontological foundation. If Physical Education faced this endeavor, it would be closing doors to the objectification of a historical process that would lead to the emancipation of humanity. That is a process grounded in a scientific objectivity, inherent to social relations in which humans are involved.

A third epistemological perspective comes from phenomenology, and seeks to complexify the possibilities of objectification of subjects dear to our area, such as body and movement, recognizing the difficulties of apprehending them within the limits of scientific language, be the limits of Natural Sciences or Humanities. This perspective seeks greater fidelity to the nature of its object, which, on the one hand, enriches our perception of the phenomena that make up our experiences in the universe of physical culture, but, on the other, it can lead us to the illusion of diving in a kind of sensitive immanence, free of mediations, among which figures the language.

Given this scenario, drawn in quick strokes, we can ask: how can the framework outlined at the beginning of this text help us treat the pedagogical responsibility of Physical Education?

Hermeneutics does not discard the pretense of objectivity of the sciences (natural or humanities), but it has no illusions that they exhaust the meaning of the subjects/objects about which it announces its conclusions. It recognizes that the scientific method has an extremely ingenious and functional explanatory potential, but it is aware of the fact that its possibilities are partial, which is not unworthy. This limit (and here we do not mean it in a pejorative sense) prevents us from deriving an ethical-political normativity from this knowledge, and this evidences its insufficiency to set up a pedagogical project within a plural society. From its episteme we cannot derive possible exits for the educational field and, in particular, for Physical Education, which goes without the
subjects involved in this space, which means the abandonment of projects guided by an enlightened vanguard, who knows before hand, and better than the people, what is good for the people.

We may also, based on hermeneutics, suspect the alleged primacy of the senses as capable of constituting a human world without the mediation of language. If this effort is already questionable in the very exercise of bodily experiences, since even before we are born we belong to a symbolic world constituted within a culture, it would be still more problematic to believe that from this original experience we could derive a pedagogical project for Physical Education as a curricular component responsible for systematizing a particular knowledge on culture of bodily movement.

Finally, having in mind the contributions of hermeneutics, we should question about the conditions of possibility of epistemological activity at a time when new directions are emerging for thinking the objectivity of knowledge and the very notion of truth. In a hermeneutic perspective, the terms of the theme of objectivity are based not on "the subjectivity of the speaker, but on the reality that expresses itself in and by language. It is in this objectivity that the hermeneutic experience must find its foundation" 38 (Palmer, 1989, p. 244-245). It is a task that, given its non-dogmatic character, summons all to dialogue, which only makes sense if the reified truths are abolished and if relativism is not our choice. What remains is the fragile certainty of a postmetaphysical thinking, which has its legitimacy in the intersubjectivity of subjects involved in different contexts, for which the foundation is the argument.

38 "na subjetividade daquele que fala, mas sim na realidade que se exprime na e pela linguagem. É nesta objetividade que a experiência hermenêutica deverá encontrar o seu fundamento"
Language, hermeneutics and epistemologic activity in

Linguagem, hermenêutica e atividade epistemológica na Educação Física

Resumo: O presente texto busca trazer para a comunidade científica da Educação Física um conjunto de notas referentes à temática da linguagem tal como entendida pela Hermenêutica Filosófica. A consideração deste referencial nos possibilita redimensionar a questão do conhecimento, visto que implica uma inflexão no entendimento da racionalidade hegemônica na filosofia ocidental com suas devidas implicações para os diferentes campos do saber, entre eles, um redimensionamento da atividade epistemológica.


Hermenéutica e actividad epistemológica en La Educación Física

Resumen: El presente texto busca traer para la comunidad científica de la Educación Física un conjunto de notas referentes a la temática del lenguaje tal como entendido por la hermenéutica filosófica. La consideración de este referencial nos posibilita redimensionar las cuestiones del conocimiento en el momento que implica una inflexión en el entendimiento de racionalidad hegemónico en la filosofía occidental con sus debidas implicaciones para los diferentes campos del saber, entre eles, un redimensionamiento de la actividad epistemológica.


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