

**GRAŻYNA LUBOWICKA**

University of Wrocław

## **UNDERSTANDING DAILY REALITY IN CLIFFORD GEERTZ'S INTERPRETIVE ANTHROPOLOGY<sup>1</sup>**

How to understand daily reality? This question poses a problem and a challenge for contemporary humanities and social sciences (sociology, pedagogy, anthropology, philosophy). It comprises two aspects: on the one hand, it concerns the method, access, treatment, observation, and research of daily reality; on the other hand, it refers to the issues that each individual entangled and involved in his or her own daily reality can raise: how to understand oneself in the context of one's own daily reality? In this question, posed both from the methodological point of view and from the point of view of an individual involved in daily reality, the emphasis is placed on its understanding. The answer to the question of possible access to daily reality is based on the assumption that it requires understanding, which is a complex operation of the mind that the researcher performs and that each individual can perform. The understanding of everyday life will be presented from the perspective taken by Clifford Geertz, a contemporary representative of the anthropology of culture.

<sup>1</sup> Originally published: Grażyna Lubowicka, "Rozumieć codzienność – z punktu widzenia antropologii interpretatywnej Clifforda Geertza", [in:] *Codziennosc jako wyzwanie edukacyjne*, Vol. 1, ed. M. Humeniuk, I. Paszenda, Instytut Pedagogiki Uniwersytetu Wrocławskiego, Wrocław 2017, p. 30–43, <https://www.repozytorium.uni.wroc.pl/publication/84049> (available: 1.06.2020).

The solutions proposed by him may serve as a methodological basis for understanding of the examined individuals or social groups, as well as for reflection and self-consideration of a particular person. The anthropology of culture takes a very broad view on the meaning of the term *culture*, which can be described as follows: „culture is ontologically defined directly in relation to systems of meaning, which are encoded in symbolic forms and tied together in what he famously called, after Weber, »webs of significance«”<sup>2</sup>. Geertz’s anthropology approaches such a broadly understood culture through publicly articulated cultural symbols and at the same time through their manifestation in concrete behaviours, events, actions and statements of individuals, which brings the concept of *culture* closer to other concepts dominating in contemporary thought concentrating on the social world expressed through systems of signs and meanings (or more broadly, also symbols and images). These contemporary orientations assume that social life or culture is expressed only through systems of meanings whose sources in the dependencies of violence, domination, power, and interests can only be presumed, as well as their functioning in the mental life of individuals. Thus, daily reality itself is expressed exclusively through meanings that are common, cultural, and manifested in their use by particular individuals. Daily reality is directly experienced by each individual; it is determined by the course of human life, actions and matters in which the individual is involved, close surroundings, meetings, conversations, and learning. However, daily reality, this course of the individual’s life, is simultaneously realized within a wider context – the culture that determines it and influences it, affecting also the understanding of oneself in direct experience. Assuming the of textualisation of culture or the social world, it must be accepted that everyday life can also be understood as a text. The individual understands himself or herself in the face of this text, but the text also permeates the meaning of the culture in which he or she is involved. To understand one’s own daily reality means to understand oneself in relation to the meanings of culture that define it, to decipher these meanings, to embrace one’s own experience and to reflect critically on oneself.

<sup>2</sup> M. M. Kraidy, P. D. Murphy, “Shifting Geertz. Toward a Theory of Translocalism in Global Communication Studies”, *Communication Theory* 2008, No. 18, p. 335.

Geertz's approach, in which he emphasizes understanding as a way of accessing daily reality, is based on a hermeneutical or interpretive paradigm. Geertz himself calls it an *interpretive anthropology* or a semiotic approach to culture. For Geertz, culture is a domain of meanings and symbols. All participants of culture and daily reality, their expressions, behaviours and actions are of such character if they are to be understood by others, if they are to be significant acts. Therefore, the problem of understanding as access to daily reality combines two approaches: semiotics and hermeneutics. Geertz, however, does not derive from any of these approaches; what connects him to semiotics is the assumption of ambiguity of meanings (conventionality of signs) and the trichotomic theory of sign, the basis of which he finds in the works of pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce, who emphasizes that the meaning of sign lies in its being interpreted and understood in its particular use. What connects him with hermeneutics is that the process of cognition is reduced to understanding, i.e. interpretation of signs, or – more precisely – interpretation of meanings of signs. Contemporary hermeneutics, to which Geertz refers, is the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur, from whom the author of *Local Knowledge* takes over the model of the text as an intermediary of any interpretation, conceptualizing culture as a text. Geertz mentions the genealogy of his interpretive anthropology in the interview from 2008:

It starts with [Friedrich Ernst Daniel] Schleiermacher and so on, and then it continues on with [Hans-Georg] Gadamer and people of this sort, which rests on biblical criticism but is secularized. And I, at least, have learned a great deal from that tradition, but it's not mine. I mean I do not come out of that tradition. I mean I come out of a different kind of tradition that is Anglo, which is the study of meaning by [Charles S.] Pierce [...] <sup>3</sup>.

Geertz's interpretive anthropology was a kind of critical response to positivism and structuralism in the ethnography of the 1960s and 1970s, but since its solutions originated in the late 1960s and 1970s, they are

<sup>3</sup> N. Panourgiá, P. Kawouras, "Interview with Clifford Geertz", [in:] *Ethnographica Moralia. Experiments in Interpretative Anthropology*, ed. N. Panourgiá, G. Marcus, New York 2008, p. 18.

one of the earliest concepts of semiotic and interpretive culture – a concept parallel to the ideas introduced by Jacques Derrida, such as *multiplicity of meaning, signifying, difference and textualization*<sup>4</sup>.

The aim of the text is to present daily reality as a manifestation of culture or a symbolic sphere and a method of access to daily reality by means of understanding and interpreting signs. The hermeneutical approach to understanding proposed by Geertz will be presented against the background of profound changes in the linguistics of the 20th century made by several successive “linguistic turns”, which resulted in a redefinition of the concepts of *sign* and *symbol*.

## LINGUISTIC TURNS – TOWARDS THE MULTIPLICITY OF MEANINGS

The term *language turn* or *linguistic turn* in the humanities and social sciences was coined by Richard Rorty, who in 1967 at the “Rhetoric of Human Sciences” symposium in Iowa City, USA, stated that the linguistic and constructivist breakthrough since the 1960s puts language as a discourse and a sign and its meaning at the centre of cultural and social reflection. The sign loses at the same time the adequate relationship between the self and its thought or image, and between the thing and its representation; the meaning becomes ambiguous and therefore, requires interpretation or becomes merely an interpretation. In this linguistic breakthrough, according to Rorty, there are three consecutive turns: linguistic, interpretive and rhetorical. As a consequence of these turns, language/discourse, i.e. systems of

<sup>4</sup> “At Chicago, where I had by then begun to teach and agitate, a more general movement, stumbling and far from unified [...]. Some, both there and elsewhere, called this development, at once theoretical and methodological, »symbolic anthropology«. But I, regarding the whole thing as an essentially hermeneutic enterprise [...] In any case, »symbolic« or »interpretive« (some even preferred »semiotic«), a budget of terms [...] around which a revised conception of what I, at least, still called »culture« could be built: »thick descriptio«, »model-of/ model-for«, »sign system«, »epistemé«, »ethos«, »paradigm«, »criteria,“ »horizon«, »frame«, »world«, »language games«, »interpretant«, »sinnzusammenhang«, »trope«, »sjuzet«, »experience-near«, »illocutionary«, »discursive formation« [...]” C. Geertz, “Passage and Accident. A Life of Learning”, [in:] C. Geertz, *Available Light. Anthropological Reflections on Philosophical Topics*, Princeton, New Jersey 2000, p. 17.

signs, meanings and symbols, is accepted by humanities and social sciences as a fundamental way of understanding social and cultural reality. Therefore, daily reality, as a reality in which we are immersed, is a result of the use of language and a linguistic product which we ourselves use, copying, transforming, and exploiting it.

Linguistic turn marks its beginning with the book published in 1967 and edited by Rorty *The Linguistic Turn*<sup>5</sup>. This turn emphasizes the fundamental role of language, discourse, text of communication (and their meanings) as an active factor of creation and understanding of reality, especially the social world. The second of the turns described by Rorty is an interpretive phrase which is realized mainly by contemporary representatives of hermeneutics (the already mentioned Gadamer and Ricoeur as well as Stanley Fish, Charles Taylor and Geertz himself)<sup>6</sup>. It introduces a central role of understanding as an interpretation mediated by text. Another linguistic turn has been described by Rorty as rhetorical (rhetorical constructivism). Its authors draw attention not only to the fact that all knowledge is a construct of language, because access to the world or our experience is possible only thanks to discursive forms of knowledge and representation, but also emphasize the functioning of rhetorical mechanisms in discourses, i.e. the role of tropes, rhetorical figures and argumentative techniques. This rhetorical turn is combined with the thought of Derrida, who in his work *Margins of Philosophy* introduces the problem of metaphorical nature of philosophical concepts<sup>7</sup>. A characteristic figure of this turn is also Paul de Man<sup>8</sup>, whereas on the historical ground it will be Hayden White<sup>9</sup> and Frank Ankersmit, in anthropology this turn is identified with a literary turn, whose co-author was, next to Geertz,

<sup>5</sup> See *The Linguistic Turn. Essay in Philosophical Method*, ed. R. Rorty, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1967. In this book Rorty presents the reflections of the founders of language philosophy, mainly from the circle of analytical philosophy (Rudolf Carnap), but also its critics (Willard Van Orman Quine) and philosophers going beyond this analytical paradigm (Max Black, Jerrold Katz).

<sup>6</sup> This turn was also described by Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan in the book *Interpretive Social Science. A Reader* (ed. P. Rabinow, W. M. Sullivan, Berkeley 1979).

<sup>7</sup> See J. Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, Chicago 1982.

<sup>8</sup> See P. de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology*, ed. A. Warminski, Minneapolis 1996.

<sup>9</sup> See H. White, *Poetyka pisarstwa historycznego*, ed. A. Domańska, M. Wilczyński, Kraków 2000.

James Clifford<sup>10</sup>. The rhetorical phrase is a development of a methodological perspective oriented towards the interpretation of society and culture, in which mechanisms and tools of rhetoric play a significant role. The process of understanding is therefore mainly of a topological nature, and the interpretation captures and takes into account the conventions of rhetoric. The symbolic space itself is structured not only as a text or sign system, but also in a rhetorical way. Thus, discourses in the symbolic space contain rhetorical tricks, techniques of argumentation and persuasion, as well as its figurative dimension, it also emphasizes the importance of symbols, metaphors and other rhetorical tropes<sup>11</sup>.

Among the linguistic turns determining the way of thinking of contemporary humanities and social sciences, attention will continue to be focused on the interpretive turn, in which the meaning of a sign depends on its interpretation, complementing each other in understanding. Contemporary hermeneutics is constituted on the basis of this solution, and Geertz's thought defining itself as interpretive anthropology is also based on it. It refers to the hermeneutical paradigm modified and adapted to the methodological assumptions of cultural anthropology. The meaning resulting from the interpretation and being completed in the understanding can be considered as the basis for understanding the daily reality.

## FROM SIGN TO UNDERSTANDING

A sign, in the most general way, is a visible representation, a representation of an absent thing, i.e. a thought, an intention or a thing, replacing it. In its most visible dimension, a sign most often has a linguistic character, but in its contemporary approaches it can also include

<sup>10</sup> Rhetorical turn in anthropology and then in social sciences was presented in the book whose co-editor was James Clifford (see *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. J. Clifford, G. E. Marcus, Berkeley, Los Angeles 1986). This turn is more broadly described in the work by Wojciech Kruszelnicki *Zwrot refleksyjny w antropologii kulturowej* (Wrocław 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Linguistic turn which occurred during three consecutive language turns was described by Michał Mokrzan in his work "Clifford Geertz i retoryka" (in: *Geertz. Dziedzictwo, interpretacje, dylematy*, ed. A. A. Szafranski, Lublin 2012, pp. 101–119).

a symbol, an image, any figurative expression, as well as a gesture, behaviour, action (a verbal or visual sign and a gesture). In a narrower, linguistic sense, a sign takes the form of a concept. The relations between the representation and the thing represented by the sign are defined differently depending on the type of semiology adopted. Most often it is the relation between the form and the meaning or between the signifying and the signified.

Ferdinand de Saussure's semiology introduces a dichotomic concept of a sign, the relation between the signifying (material image or material side of a sign) and the signified, which is a concept or idea associated with a sign<sup>12</sup>. In de Saussure's approach, the relationship between the signifying and the signified is arbitrary; this thesis is then used and developed by structuralism, poststructuralism, as well as Derrida's philosophy and its followers. Peirce's semiology, on the other hand, develops a trichotomic concept of sign, closer to the contemporary trends of hermeneutics and to Geertz himself. According to Peirce's pragmatic approach to the sign, interpretability, i.e. its interpretation, becomes a condition of the signality, i.e. the significance of the sign (the sign applies to a specific referee). Peirce's semiotics breaks down the sign into three elements: the representation (the sign appears in our perception), the interpretant and the object. In this terminology, a sign always refers to an object related to it. Peirce, however, insists on the interpretive mediation necessary to link the sign to the object to which it refers. In other words, the interpretability of a sign, its interpretation, its being interpreted, its being interpreted, is linked to a specific use of the sign<sup>13</sup>. The meaning of the sign is complemented by a process of specific interpretation, which requires the involvement of the subject and reference to the functioning symbolic space. This idea is taken up by Geertz, who argues that meaning is articulated by public, accessible cultural symbols and manifested in particular events. This process of specific and contextual interpretation leads to understanding the meaning of a sign.

<sup>12</sup> See F. de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Ch. Bally, A. Sechehaye, A. Riedlinger, New York 1959.

<sup>13</sup> Peirce's understanding of sign was explained by Hanna Buczyńska-Garewicz in the work "Pragmatyzm Peirce'a, Rorty'ego i Putnama" (in: *Filozofia amerykańska dziś*, ed. T. Komendziński, A. Szahaj, Toruń 1999).

Hermeneutics takes the mental operation of understanding that results from interpretation as its basic method. After many transformations of this broad discipline of knowledge, Wilhelm Dilthey emphasized understanding (*Verstehen*) as a cognitive method of the humanities and the process of assimilation of meaning proper for every human being. The hermeneutical paradigm emphasizes the active involvement in the interpretation of signs (for example, cultural signs) of a particular subject with its presuppositions and its own cultural context. Understanding, therefore, is not entirely arbitrary on the part of the subject, since he understands himself and the meanings, already in the experience of what surpasses and embraces him and what remains opaque; the subject experiences himself as already immersed in the social world of signs and culture, and therefore, his understanding is as much a perception of meaning as its production. Martin Heidegger described this ontological situation of a subject immersed in the “world” as an experience of “being-in-the-world”<sup>14</sup>. From the perspective of Heidegger’s hermeneutics, as well as that of Ricoeur or Gadamer, one must anticipate the semantic richness of meaning in the process of interpretation, i.e. one must enter the “hermeneutical circle” in which one must already know something about the sought-after sense of a given representation (and about oneself) in order to be able to start discovering it. It is therefore necessary, in the understanding of the minimum of previous knowledge, to make preliminary assumptions, without which there would be no hidden sense for the subject, waiting for the interpretation in the sign.

Further attention will be paid to Geertz’s development of the paradigm of hermeneutical understanding (together with the trichotomic concept of Peirce’s sign) and its application in Geertz’s interpretive anthropology.

<sup>14</sup> According to Heidegger: “Man is never first and foremost man on the hither side of the world, as a ‘subject’, whether this is taken as ‘I’ or ‘We’. Nor is he ever simply a mere subject which always simultaneously is related to objects, so that his essence lies in the subject-object relation. Rather, before all this, man in his essence is ek-sistent into the openness of Being, into the open region that lights the »between« within which a ‘relation’ of subject to object can ‘be’” (M. Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism”, *Global Religious Vision 2000*, Vol. 1/I, p. 101).

## UNDERSTANDING IN THE PERSPECTIVE OF GEERTZ' INTERPRETIVE ANTHROPOLOGY

In Geertz's approach, understanding and the process of interpretation is a mediation between the experience of individuals creating their own context of understanding and the meanings functioning in the culture to which they belong. The concept of *culture* has a broad meaning, so the cultural circles to which individuals may belong are very different and overlapping: from the social sphere to local communities, social groups, professional groups, subcultures, places related to leisure time, entertainment, interests, family and the loved ones.

In Geertz's anthropology, culture is perceived as a language. Each culture is a language with different meanings, i.e. a different integrated symbolic system or a signifying system. *Culture* is defined directly in relation to systems of meanings that are encoded in symbolic forms and linked together in a "network of meanings". Cultural meanings are intersubjective and therefore social, public and hence shared, common ways of thinking, feeling and understanding. In this sense, culture and public meanings are a broad context of understanding for all participants. Culture and its systems of symbols thus provide a meaningful framework for people to find their way around the world, to understand other people and to understand themselves. All cultural behaviours are "produced, perceived, and interpreted" in relation to meaningful structures<sup>15</sup>. This fabric of meanings enables individuals to act, from articulation, gesture, to conversation and values, because they are shared by all. Meanings also become a component of social activities and practices and are defined by their rules. Social behaviour is symbolic because the participants have to act in a way that is understandable to others. Our way of thinking and ideals are also entangled in culture. According to Geertz's famous metaphor, man is immersed in culture like a spider suspended in a net:

The concept of culture I espouse [...] is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance

<sup>15</sup> C. Geertz, "Thick Description. Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", [in:] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures. Selected Essays*, New York 1973, p. 7.

he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretive one in search of meaning. It is explication I am after, construing social expressions [...]”<sup>16</sup>.

However, the mere understanding and realization of this network of meanings takes place only in individual contexts of consciousness. According to Geertz, the meaning of a sign is articulated by publicly available cultural symbols, but manifests itself in specific events, actions and statements. Human activities and human understanding are therefore negotiated between systems of symbols and individual life experiences. An anthropologist, whose task is to describe culture, captures it on the basis of how people themselves understand meanings and comment on experience. Reaching cultural meanings starts with researching how individuals understand themselves (although this is done in the world of public interaction), how they interpret their lives, how they see and understand their world, how they navigate it. It is the comprehension of their understanding. The role of an anthropologist is to search in an individual understanding for units of general meaning constituting a cultural system. However, in order to study daily reality, it is necessary to focus attention on the understanding of individuals, but to take into account broader and different cultural contexts.

For Geertz, the method of accessing culture by understanding themselves the individuals participating in it is a “thick description” that is both an interpretation and a process of translation. Culture, Geertz writes, is: „interworked systems of construable signs [...], culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context, something within which they can be intelligibly – that is, thickly – described”<sup>17</sup>. The transition to a dense description means for an

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem, p. 5. A similar definition is proposed by Paul Rabinow: “Anthropology is an interpretive science. Its object of study, humanity encountered as Other, is on the same epistemological level as it is. Both the anthropologist and his informants live in a culturally mediated world, caught up in »webs of signification« they themselves have spun. This is the ground of anthropology; there is no privileged position, no absolute perspective [...]” (P. Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Marocco*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London 1977, p. 151).

<sup>17</sup> C. Geertz, “Thick Description. Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, op. cit., p. 29.

anthropologist belonging to a different culture by way of generalization and at the same time by way of translation and dialogue.

A raw description (“thin description”) concerns the behaviour and statements of people; it is a record of their understanding, which they present themselves. The raw description, however, already conceals a description of how people understand each other in the context of culture (and what circles of culture), which then needs to be developed. An anthropologist also needs basic information about culture (e.g. about the meaning of ritual, exchange, values). He creates a description of culture only on the basis of the constructions that the participants in culture (unconsciously) impose on what they experience, the formulas that they use to define what happens to them. Thus, an anthropologist describes the understanding of individuals, also in their everyday life, striving to extract cultural meanings from them. His task is to describe culture on the basis of its understanding by people, so his method is a thick description, a way of generalizing by linking their understanding with the context of culture. In the text “»From the Native’s point of View«. On the nature of Anthropological understanding” Geertz explains his approach to understanding the studied subjects, who are not comprehensible to us as strangers, in the following way:

where are we when we can no longer claim some unique form of psychological closeness, a sort of transcultural identification, with our subject? [...] The trick is not to get yourself into some inner correspondence of spirit with your informants. Preferring, like rest of us, to call their souls their own, they are not going to be altogether keen about such an effort anyhow. The trick is to figure out what the devil they think they are up to. In one sense, of course, no one knows this better than they do themselves [...]. People use experience-near concepts spontaneously, un-self-consciously, as it were colloquially; they do not, except fleetingly and on occasion, recognize that there are any “concepts” involved at all. That is what experience-near means – that ideas and the realities they inform are naturally and indissolubly bound up together. [...] I have been concerned, among other things, with attempting to determine how the people who live there define themselves as person, what goes into the idea they have [...] of what a self [...]. And in each case, I have tried to get at this most intimate of notions [...] by searching out and analyzing the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions,

behaviors – in terms which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another<sup>18</sup>.

An anthropologist encounters a multitude of conceptual structures which seem strange, irregular, incomprehensible, but which must nevertheless be ordered, connected and generalised. Anthropological research concerns other, foreign cultures, but do we not now assume that every cultural circle, even those encountered in the context of common culture, is a foreign one for every researcher? The researcher does not try to understand the other from his or her point of view, but to put him or her in their own categories. Therefore, Geertz's method of thick description explains the behaviour of individuals through a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures, rules of understanding that function in the society. Generalising the understanding of individuals, and thus their understanding in the context of their culture, consists in the accumulation of structures of meanings. An anthropologist selects a small event (situation, symbol, ritual, cultural phenomenon) and tries to describe it in the context of all other symbols, social findings, feelings and concepts in relation to which it is relevant. The thick description makes it possible to characterise culture on the basis of key symbols, deeper layers of structures, principles of symbolic systems. An anthropologist has to face a multitude of conceptual structures that overlap and intertwine. In this task, he becomes a code-maker who aims to impose the framework of interpretation on the statements and behaviour of individuals, on their understanding of themselves. Geertz compares the work of an anthropologist, who studies different cultures, to dealing with a foreign manuscript: "Doing ethnography is like trying to read [...] a manuscript-foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries [...]"<sup>19</sup>. Interpretation is an attempt to read such an unknown text as Ann Swidler explains: "The culture of a people is an ensemble of texts, themselves ensembles, which the anthropologist strains to read over the shoulders of

<sup>18</sup> C. Geertz, "»From the Native's point of View«. On the nature of Anthropological understanding", [in:] C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge. Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology*, New York 1983, pp. 56, 58.

<sup>19</sup> C. Geertz, "Thick Description. Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture", op. cit., p. 10.

those to whom they properly belong”<sup>20</sup>. A thick description does not lead to establishing abstract cultural regularities, but outlines those regularities within specific cases.

Cultures are languages that must be translated into a language that can be understood by members of other cultures (more precisely, anthropologist’s culture). Similarly, someone’s experience of daily reality should be translated into the language of the person who wants to understand it. For an anthropologist, every culture, every person is treated as foreign, incomprehensible. Therefore, in the case of a meeting with another person, the generalisation should be at the same time a translation of another culture into one’s own language. Translation is a meeting, a dialogue between two cultures or two strangers. An anthropologist does not deal with naked facts, but with interpretations which he then has to interpret from his own position as a culturally situated subject. Therefore, a researcher, when conducting more general interpretations and analyses, must approach this task with extensive knowledge (also in the area of his or her own culture, for example in the area of meanings of power, faith, work, domination, passion, authority, beauty, violence, love and prestige). Cultural translation juxtaposes someone’s understanding with our understanding on the basis of our own cultural context; translation is an exchange between different cultural forms. “Translation, observes Geertz, is not some simple transformation of other ways of treating things in the terms we treat them (this is actually how we lose things), but the showing the logic of the ways things are treated in our stylistics”<sup>21</sup>. Translation is also a kind of interpretation, but this interpretation “consists in catching »foreign« views by »our« dictionaries”<sup>22</sup>. The method of thick description is based on engaging in a dialogue with culture and its representatives, in which the meanings are negotiated by both sides; an anthropologist, on the other hand, tries to reconcile the otherness he encounters with his own cultural experience without any claim to a holistic understanding.

<sup>20</sup> C. Geertz, “Deep Play. Notes on the Balinese Cockfight”, [in] C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, op. cit., p. 452. “[...] societies, like lives, contain their own interpretations. One has only to learn how to gain access to them” (Ibidem, p. 453).

<sup>21</sup> C. Geertz, “Thick Description. Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture”, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

We are not, or at least I am not, seeking either to become natives [...], or to mimic them. [...] We are seeking, in the widened sense of the term in which it encompasses very much more than talk, to converse with them [...]"<sup>23</sup>.

The aim of the semiotic approach to culture is to gain access to the key to the conceptual world in which the people who are the subjects of our research live, so that we can have a dialogue with them. Therefore, an anthropologist in this dialogue remains both outside the studied culture and inside his own culture. The model of cognition is not the subject – object relationship, but the relation between a subject and another subject, where the subjectivity of the anthropologist is indelible and it is the vehicle of his culture. The thick description leads to generalisation based on a cultural context, common meanings and, at the same time, it must be a dialogue, because the researcher's point of view is never objective and is never deprived of his own cultural heritage.

However, due to the necessary dialogue, the description and construction conducted by an anthropologist is also only his interpretation:

In short, anthropological writings are themselves interpretations; and second and third order ones to boot. (By definition, only a "native" makes first order ones: it's his culture.) They are, thus, fictions; fictions, in the sense that they are "something made", "something fashioned" [...]"<sup>24</sup>.

All the more so because the interpretation is made in one's own language and, in the case of anthropology, it gains a written form and becomes a written work, literature;

the line between mode of representation and substantive content is as undrawable in cultural analysis. [...] The ethnographer »inscribes« social discourse [...]. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted<sup>25</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem, p. 13.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 16, 19.

But this writing, this *veni, vidi, vici* of an anthropologist, these three stages of the search for knowledge are no longer possible to be separated, from the very beginning guessing meanings, guesses, their evaluation and conclusions intertwine, together making up an interpretation. Thus, anthropological knowledge cannot be objective and neutral, neither are its research procedures in the conditions of contextual interpretation of cultural texts. Anthropology itself is a cultural practice.

## UNDERSTANDING DAILY REALITY

The model of anthropological understanding presented by Geertz is inscribed in the assumptions of this discipline of knowledge whose aim is to study other cultures and treat each culture as a foreign one. However, the researcher also adopts a postmodern attitude towards the object of his observation. Geertz's very concept, created in the 1960s and 1970s, was even an avant-garde of postmodern thought: it assumes relativism, contextuality of human knowledge, language and meaning as the only available dimensions of social life.

Can this model be applied to the everyday life of another person, a social group or oneself? Assuming that every human being is immersed in daily reality in every experience of his or her life and that daily reality is conditioned by the whole culture with all its signs and relations of domination, we can assume that the method and thought of Geertz's interpretive anthropology is applied in its understanding.

To understand the daily reality of another person means to apply the method of interpretive anthropology, thick description, translation, and dialogue to understand his experience of daily reality, whose cultural context and own life history never fully coincides with ours, and thus to be an anthropologist towards the other. To understand one's own experience of daily reality is to accept critical reflection, to apply the process of interpretation to one's own experiences entangled in the web of one's own culture. Experiencing daily reality is particularly characterised by the fact that, as Geertz stresses, the concepts and reality behind them are inextricably linked, and so it is expressed in everyday language. Knowledge about it has the character of common sense, whose properties Geertz mentions in his essay

“Common Sense as a Cultural System” – they include naturality and obviousness, practicality and usefulness, non-methodical character, direct accessibility and “lack of transparency”. According to Geertz:

The world is what the wide-awake, uncomplicated person takes it to be. [...] the really important facts of life lie scattered openly along its surface, not cunningly secreted in its depths<sup>26</sup>.

He presents experiencing daily reality as “world as a familiar world”<sup>27</sup>. If we try to understand the experiencing of daily reality as proposed by Geertz i.e. as a cultural system, an integrated order, we try to discover it empirically and formulate it conceptually, then

one cannot do so by cataloguing its content [...]. One cannot do so, either, by sketching out some logical structure it always takes, for there is none. And one cannot do so by summing up the substantive conclusions it always draws, for there are, too, none of those. One has to proceed instead by the peculiar detour of evoking its generally recognized tone and temper, the untraveled side road that leads through constructing metaphorical predicates – near-notions like “thinness” – to remind people of what they already know<sup>28</sup>.

This circuitous way of understanding one’s own or foreign daily reality can be a hermeneutical method of interpretive anthropology, a way of understanding selected aspects of daily reality through their interpretation in the context of meanings of one’s own or another’s culture in dialogue with one’s own culture. In both cases, it requires the understanding of the systems of meanings that are hidden in the experience of daily reality and structure it.

<sup>26</sup> C. Geertz, “Common Sense as a Cultural System”, [in:] C. Geertz, *Local Knowledge*, op. cit., p. 89.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, p. 92.

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**Abstract:**

The paper investigates the problem of understanding daily reality, which presents a challenge for the humanities, arts and social sciences today. The problem can be considered from two perspectives: first, as a problem relating to the method, interpretation, observation, study of daily reality; and second, as a problem or a question that every individual entangled in and belonging to daily reality can put to themselves, i.e. how to understand oneself in the context of one's own daily reality? The answer to the question about possible access to daily reality is based on the assumption that that access requires understanding which is a complex mental operation performed by a researcher and susceptible of being performed by every individual. The paper discusses understanding of daily reality with reference to the ideas of contemporary cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz. The cultural anthropology solutions Geertz proposed can both provide a methodological basis for conceptualising understanding of individuals or social groups under study, and prove useful in the individual's reflection and deliberation on themselves.

**Keywords:**

daily reality, culture, symbolic system, understanding, interpretive anthropology, Clifford Geertz