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Body and the Understanding of Others: Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Language

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*This presentation aims to reconsider a link between the body and language in our understanding of others based upon the phenomenological framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). In *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty distinguishes the "existential meaning" of language from the "conceptual meaning", and claims that the former meaning is based not on "pure thought" but on "an attitude" towards the world.*

If Merleau-Ponty's view is true, and if the existential meaning of language is formed by the work of the body, then our language must be embedded in our ways of living. It is also through bodily interactions or intercorporeity ("intercorporéité") that people with different cultural backgrounds can comprehend each other. In this context, what is the role of body and language in our understanding of others in different cultures?

I would like to clarify how we can understand others through our body without falling into private or subjective speech. This is an attempt to take language back to our bodily understanding of others.

INTRODUCTION

This paper aims to reconsider a link between the body and language in our understanding of others based upon the phenomenological framework of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-1961). In phenomenology, as in analytic philosophy in the 20th century following the 'linguistic turn', language is regarded as a quite significant and essential problem in reflection on thought itself. One of the path-breaking theories of this move in philosophy was the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), which clarifies the role of language not just as a sign of meaning but as constitutive of our intellectual framework, and one of the foregoing works which accepted and developed the linguistics of Saussure was the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty, especially in his early works, regards an act of language as a part of bodily actions, which provides a perspective for discussion in phenomenology, describing the way to 'live a language'.

Merleau-Ponty explicated and augmented the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), referring to the psychological or neuroscientific works of the same period, and establishing the phenomenology of body, without lapsing into either idealism or materialism. The most important point that Merleau-Ponty sets up in the theory of language in *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (1945) is a discovery of the 'existential meaning' of language beneath the 'conceptual meaning'. Merleau-Ponty insists that it cannot be true that language is recognized only as a signature of concept or a representation of things; he explains that the process of understanding language

cannot only be intellectual or conceptual, but also existential, that is, being based on 'an attitude' towards the world. Through his phenomenology of language, we are able to take a position on language in its uses in our daily lives, without committing ourselves to an abstract understanding of it.

If as Merleau-Ponty claims, language has the 'existential meaning' associated with our existents, then this meaning must be embedded in our ways of living. If that is the case, how can we transcend a different cultural background? How can it be possible for philosophers to achieve the universality or attain a common ground? This is the main question of this paper. In order to answer it and to reconsider a link between the body and language, firstly I would like to investigate how Merleau-Ponty understands the difference between 'conceptual meaning' and 'existential meaning', describing his theory of language. And secondly, I would like to clarify how philosophers can attain their common ground among several different cultures or languages.

LANGUAGE AS 'GESTURE'

The purpose of Merleau-Ponty's theory of language is to redefine the assumption that language is regarded as a sign of one's thought or as expression of inner thought. Merleau-Ponty refutes the words of Augustine, cited by Husserl at the end of *Cartesian Meditations*, that 'it is in the inner man that truth dwells' (Husserl, 1963, p. 183).¹ Instead, he argues—'or more accurately, there is no inner man, man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. xi). Philosophers taking traditional positions on the subject of consciousness, which regard language as the expression of inner thought, claim that the essential purpose of the expression of language is to detect pure thought accurately. In this case tones or styles are no more than tools for expression. If language is just a tool used by a consciousness, then 'language could not play any other role in respect to thought than that of an accompaniment, substitute, memorandum, or secondary means of communication' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 84). This definition of language relies on dualistic assumptions—bifurcation between mind and body, subject and object, self and world— which Merleau-Ponty attempts to overcome throughout his life.

Against such a position, Merleau-Ponty sets up 'the return to the "Lebenswelt"'² and makes a proposition that the language is 'gesture', not a tool of the subject (p. 92). He insists that there is no inner man or pure thought behind us, rather thought is formed by the act of expressing. The meaning of the words or intention of the speaker does not always exist before expression, rather sometimes they arise in their expression or in speech. A person who speaks his words should be a subject immersed to the world, not an isolated inner man. In short, the expression of language is not an 'intention' belonging to the transparent subject, but a 'gesture' like bodily action. This proposition lets us return to the basic experience of language, which is a habitually structured interaction between body and world.

What I communicate with primarily is not 'representations' or thought, but a speaking subject, with a certain style of being and with the 'world' at which he directs his aim (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 183).

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes 'a certain style' from 'representations', and claims that our communications are not performed only by recognizing representations of meaning, but also by a coupled attitude toward the speaking subject. It may be true that we use words as sign or representation in institutions or customs, but in the words of a child, writer, or philosopher, we can find some 'existential meaning' beneath the 'conceptual meaning' of words. The former is more akin to making the other person change or move in their action. In this context, a gesture which Husserl and preceding philosophers regarded as an adjunct to language comes to hold an important place in Merleau-Ponty's theory of language.

I should like to add a caveat here that, although my interest here is in a link between the body and language, it is not with 'body language' or 'sign language', which sociologists usually use in discussions about interactions through bodies or social actions. In my view, 'gesture as language' and 'language as gesture' are close but not the same. According to sociologists, 'gesture as language' is communication by the intentional use of the body and a representation of a message from a subject, and therefore it seems to be the same as the understanding of language as the expression of the 'inner man'. In this case, though words *deliver* meanings, they do not *have* them. On the contrary, in taking the position of 'language as gesture', the crucial point is not on presentations but on tone or style of words; words *have* meanings, and do not *deliver* them. By recognizing the view of 'language as gesture', we can get a perspective on how we comprehend the meaning of words, without pure thought or ideas.

Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted, as our body suddenly lends itself to some new gesture in the formation of habit. The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its ... I do not see anger or a threatening attitude as a psychic fact hidden behind the gesture, I read anger in it. The gesture *does not make me think* of anger, it is anger (pp. 183-184).

If language, especially speech, can be regarded as 'a genuine gesture' as Merleau-Ponty says, we can see that understanding language is similar to understanding gesture. Led by presumptions of mind-body dualism, we often speak as if there were 'anger' *behind* this gesture of anger and that this gesture is the expression of it. Similarly, in the case of words, we would think that verbal abuse represented some mental process of 'anger' behind the words. However, according to Merleau-Ponty, such a view of gestures or words is not right. In looking at a gesture, it is not right that something like 'anger' does exist in some place such as in 'his mind', but his gesture itself *is* anger. Also in understanding the words, we simply comprehend the meaning of the words as 'gesture', that is, we comprehend meanings the words *has*; 'I seize it [the meanings of words] in an undivided act which is as short as a cry' (p. 186). In this sense, 'The word and speech must ... become not its clothing but its token or its body' (p. 182).

Merleau-Ponty expresses disagreement with a view of language which reduces the meaning of words to a personal consciousness. The experience of body is the pre-reflective realm out of which a reflective form of personal consciousness emerges. Such a view about body leads to the phenomenology of language.

THE BODY AND UNDERSTANDING OTHER

I would like to return to my first question of how we can understand others living in another culture, or speaking another language. In Merleau-Ponty's view of language, others are assumed to be living in the same culture as ours. In order to truly comprehend others, what is needed for us?

As, in a foreign country, I begin to understand the meaning of words through their place in a context of action, and by taking part in a communal life—in the same way an as yet imperfectly understood piece of philosophical writing discloses to me at least a certain 'style'—either a Spinozist, criticist or phenomenological one—which is the first draft of its meaning. I begin to understand a philosophy by feeling my way into its existential manner, by reproducing the tone and accent of the philosopher (*ibid.*).

Merleau-Ponty claims that the understanding of others' words is not only an intellectual process, but also a process of modulation like bodily training, as in the process of children acquiring a language. This 'existential' acquiring of the 'style' through our bodies, enables us to understand others or even a 'piece of philosophical writing'. In what follows he discusses understanding another culture.

Hence the *full* meaning of a language is never translatable into another. We may speak several languages, but one of them always remains the one in which we live ... one never does belong to two worlds at once (p. 187).

Since we live in one body, Merleau-Ponty says, we are not able to live in several worlds at the same time. In this sense, our languages might be never translatable. But if this is so, how can we understand others, or, even if we live in a similar culture, is it enough to understand the language? For a response to this point, Merleau-Ponty talks about 'universal thought'.

CONCLUSION: FINITE BODY AS UNIVERSAL THOUGHT

If there is such a thing as universal thought, it is achieved by taking up the effort towards expression and communication in *one* single language, and accepting all its ambiguities, all the suggestions and overtones of meaning of which a linguistic tradition is made up, and which are the exact measure of its power of expression (pp. 187-188).

From this passage, we are able to draw forth a perspective that the finiteness is our starting point when connecting to or recognizing the world. For universal thought is achieved by taking up the effort to live one language in depth. It might be true that our bodies or languages are embedded in our ways of living, but this does not mean that

we live in closed cultures, nor does it mean that once one has acquired a custom, then he can never transcend this way of living. Rather, a gesture of language has 'indefinite power of giving significance by which man transcends himself towards a new thought, through his body and his speech' (p. 194). It 'brings about, both for the speaking subject and for his hearers, a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence' (p. 193). In communication or dialog, by being brought about, this 'co-ordination' or 'modulation' of speech among persons always puts up a new signification; Merleau-ponty uses the French term 'sens' which means, meaning, sensation, and direction. Through comprehending a 'sens' of words, we are opened to a new experience or a new understanding of others.

Body or language is always between a conventional meaning (habit or institution) and a creative 'sens' (new meanings or new behavior). Here we can see the finite body or language as the starting point toward universal thought. There is no absolute *position*, no *perspective* to look down upon the world from above, from which we could understand languages or others. Rather, our understandings of others arising in and after our experiences with others bring us 'co-ordination' or 'modulation'. Realization of universal thought is a continuous movement, which is like acquiring a new modulation of habit in our everyday life, or creating a new meaning for words through expression. This is an unfinished work but it is strongly driven by the motive or the will to 'seize the meaning of the world', and is 'as painstaking as the works of Balzac, Proust, Valéry, or Cezanne—by reason of the same kind of attentiveness and wonder, the same demand for awareness, the same will to seize the meaning of the world or of history as that meaning comes into being' (p. xxi).

NOTES

- 1 'In te redi; interiore homine habitat veritas' (Husserl, 1963, p. 183).
- 2 'Lebenswelt' means 'lifeworld', which is the technical term of phenomenology. It means the world as immediately or directly experienced in the subjectivity of everyday life, as sharply distinguished from the objective 'worlds' of the sciences. In analyzing and describing the lifeworld, phenomenology attempts to show how the world of theory and science originates from the lifeworld, how the experience of the lifeworld is possible by analyzing time, space, body, the presentation of experience.

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