

The Body and the Understanding of Others: The Phenomenology of Language in the Work of Merleau-Ponty

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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, as Merleau-Ponty claims, language carries the ‘existential meaning’ associated with our existence, then this meaning must be embedded in our ways of living. If that is the case, how can we transcend differences in cultural background? To respond this question, we need to describe carefully how we can get the meaning of words or how the meaning emerges from words, speeches, or interactions. Merleau-Ponty tries to witness and describe the moment of meaning’s emerging, which is a dialectic process or a circulative movement between the definition of the meaning of words and their creation, which is always accomplished by perception through the body and interaction with others, that is, in our lifeworld.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper reconsiders 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 significant and essential problem in the context of reflection on thought itself. One of the ground-breaking theories of this shift in philosophy was the linguistics of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913), which clarified the role of language as not just a sign of meaning but also constitutive of our intellectual framework. One of the subsequent bodies of work that accepted and developed the linguistics of Saussure was the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty. 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.

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’. The most important point that Merleau-Ponty establishes in his theory of language as presented in *Phénoménologie de la Perception* (1945) is the discovery of the ‘existential meaning’ of language beneath the ‘conceptual meaning’. Merleau-Ponty insists that it cannot be true that language is recognised only as a signature of a concept or a representation of things. He explains that the process of understanding language cannot be only intellectual or conceptual, but it must also be existential; that is, it must be based on ‘an attitude’ toward 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 carries the ‘existential meaning’ associated with our existence, then this meaning must be embedded in our ways of living. If that is the case, how can we transcend differences in cultural background? How can it be possible for philosophers to achieve universality or attain a common ground? This is the main question of the present paper. To answer it and to reconsider a link between the body and language, I will first investigate how Merleau-Ponty understands the difference between ‘conceptual meaning’ and ‘existential meaning’, describing his theory of language. And second, I will clarify how philosophers can attain common ground across several different cultures or languages.

LANGUAGE AS ‘GESTURE’

The purpose of Merleau-Ponty’s theory of language is to challenge the assumption that language could be regarded as a sign of one’s thought or as an expression of inner thought. Merleau-Ponty refutes the words of Augustine, cited by Husserl at the end of *Cartesian Meditations*, who argued that ‘it is in the inner man that truth dwells’ (Husserl, 1963, p. 183).¹ Instead, Merleau-Ponty argues, ‘... 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, positions that regard language as the expression of inner thought, claim that the essential purpose of the expression of language is to accurately convey pure thought. 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—a 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”²²’ and proposes that language is ‘gesture’, not a tool of the subject (p. 92). He insists that no inner man or pure thought exists behind expression; rather, thought is formed by the act of expressing. The meaning of the words and the intention of the speaker do not always exist before expression; rather, sometimes they arise in their expression or in speech. A person who speaks his words should be understood as a subject immersed in the world, not an isolated inner man. In short, the expression of language is not an ‘intention’ belonging to the transparent subject, but rather a ‘gesture’ similar to 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 performed not only by recognising representations of meaning but also by a coupled attitude toward the speaking subject. It may be true that we use words as signs or representations in institutions or customs, but in the words of a child, a writer, or a 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 his or her 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 is in a link between the body and language, it is not with ‘body language’ or ‘sign language’, terms that sociologists commonly use in discussions about interactions using bodies or social actions. In my view, ‘gesture as language’ and ‘language as gesture’ are close in meaning, but not the same. According to sociologists, ‘gesture as language’ refers to communication by the intentional use of the body and to a representation of a message from a subject; therefore, it seems to be the same as understanding language to be the expression of the ‘inner man’. In this case, although words *deliver* meanings, they do not *have* them. In contrast, in taking the position of ‘language as gesture’, the crucial focus is not on presentations, but on the tone or style of words; words *have* meanings, and do not *deliver* them. By recognising the view of ‘language as gesture’, we can get a perspective on how we comprehend the meanings 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 [meaning] 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’ exists in some place such as in ‘his mind’; rather, his gesture itself *is* anger. Also in understanding the words, we simply comprehend the meaning of the words as ‘gesture’, that is, we comprehend the meaning the words *have*: ‘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 that 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 helps lead to the phenomenology of language.

THE BODY AND UNDERSTANDING OTHERS

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. 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 understanding others' words is not only an intellectual process but also a process of modulation akin to bodily training, as in the process of children acquiring a language. This 'existential' acquisition 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).

Because 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 may never be translatable. But if this is so, how can we understand others? Is living in a similar culture even enough to understand another language? As a response to this point, Merleau-Ponty talks about 'universal thought'.

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 a perspective that finitude is our starting point when

connecting with or recognising the world, for universal thought is achieved by taking up the effort to live one language in depth. It may 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, 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 establishes a new significance; Merleau-Ponty uses the French term ‘sens’ which means meaning, sensation, and direction. Through comprehending the ‘sens’ of words, we are opened to a new experience or new understanding of others.

Body or language is always situated between a conventional meaning (habit or institution) and a creative ‘sens’ (new meaning or new behaviour). Here we can see the finite body or language as the starting point towards universal thought. There is no absolute *position*, no *perspective* from which we could look down upon the world and understand languages or others. Rather, our understanding of others, arising in and after our experiences with others, brings us ‘co-ordination’ or ‘modulation’. The realisation of universal thought is a continuous movement, which is similar to acquiring a new modulation of habit in our everyday life or creating a new meaning for words through expression. This is an unfinished work and 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).

POSTSCRIPT: EXPRESSION AND TRUTH

At the end of this paper, I would like to again consider ‘inner man’ in the context of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology. Although he emphasises that no inner man exists, we tend to think that we have language in our mind and that it can never be heard by others. When we listen to someone scream, ‘There is a bull!’, we can take it as his message, for example, that he wants to warn of the dangerous animal or that he is simply moved to see the beautiful sight in the countryside. As in this case, we can often easily suppose that an ‘inner man’ exists in a person’s mind. Against this ordinary assumption, how does Merleau-Ponty respond?

First, Merleau-Ponty does not deny that an inner man who is understood only by himself can exist. It may be considered to be true that a person has his own feelings and history and that there should be some private context behind his speech (e.g., ‘There is a bull!’), which may be concealed from others. However, Merleau-Ponty emphasises that it is only through expression that the screaming man reveals his ‘inner’ condition of panic or admiration. Thus, the ‘inner’ intention behind words does not exist apart from their expression, and there is no ‘inner man’ who exists by himself, separated from the expression. As I wrote in ‘Introduction’, Merleau-Ponty is opposed to the Cartesian view of ideal expression with disembodied minds or

transcendental egos. For him, expression is not ‘the intentional activity of disembodied minds or consciousnesses’ (Adams 2008, p. 153). According to Merleau-Ponty, although we can easily assume the existence of ‘inner man’ in our minds, this man does not live in the ‘Lifeworld’ (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 92), where we live as embodied existence and communicate with things, creatures, and other persons. Therefore, it is hard to think that an ‘inner man’ or internal condition exists beneath a body. If it exists, it seems to emerge from many kinds of expression—speech, a scream, a sigh, a blush, a palpitation, and so on.

Second, the reason we assume an ‘inner man’ behind someone’s speech is, according to Merleau-Ponty, because we are familiar with ‘secondary’ use of languages. We often use language as if a word indicated a representation that can be identified by the word. However, as I claim in the section, ‘Language as Gesture’, language is not simply the sign or representation of things; it is sometimes like a gesture that evokes or causes co-ordination or modulation of others. This is the ‘primary’ use of language. In this context, we can regard the screaming man as an embodied person, not as an ‘inner man’. If the man who screams ‘bull!’ is our friend, we might hear his inner voice; however, before we hear it, he may appear as a speaking man in front of us. In this case, his expression through screaming, gesturing, and speaking would be more important for us than his internal intention or transcendental ego. If we change our action, then it is due to his action itself. His inner intention is merely a conceptual production by our intellectual thought after the communication has been established among those present.

In summary, according to Merleau-Ponty, truth does not exist simply by itself, but arises from expression; furthermore, it is not eternal and absolute, but is disclosed by expressions.³ To clarify the close relationship between expression and truth, Merleau-Ponty finds our use of language to be crucial. He distinguishes the ‘spoken word’ from the ‘word in the speaking’. The former is a secondary use of language and comprises the conventional use of words to deliver and identify the meaning of the words. In contrast, the latter is the words in which unformulated significance is genuinely created in the context of interaction (p. 197). Merleau-Ponty regards the ‘word in the speaking’ as the primary use of language, viz., expression by which we can find ‘Being’ or the world. He explains that speech is not the ‘sign’ of thought and claims ‘the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it’ (p. 183). The expression is not the translation of pure thought, but is instead the creation of truth.

Through these investigations, Merleau-Ponty attempts to reconsider and renovate the concept of truth, which has been interpreted in modern philosophy as an eternal idea over time and space. Instead, he tries to witness and describe the moment of truth’s emerging, which is a dialectic process of the ‘spoken word’ and the ‘word in the speaking’ and is a circulative movement between the definition of the meaning of words and their creation, which is always accomplished by perception through the body and interaction with others, that is, in our lifeworld.

NOTE

1. 'In te redi; interiore homine habitat veritas' (Husserl, 1963, p. 183).
2. 'Lebenswelt' means 'lifeworld', which is a technical term in 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 analysing and describing the lifeworld, phenomenology attempts to show how the world of theory and science originates from the lifeworld and how the experience of the lifeworld is possible by analysing time, space, body, and the presentation of experience.
3. From this point, it seems that Merleau-Ponty is in a relativistic position. But indeed, his position is not so simple. For bodies, which are his main interest, include relativity and universality. The position is relative because the way bodies work differs among individuals or cultures, but it is universal because our existence is formed by the works of our body, which has rationality at a certain level. The purpose of his phenomenology is to revise and overcome the position of behaviourism and intellectualism, which are both regarded as forms of mind-body dualism. The ambiguity of his position comes from the ambiguity of body, which is simultaneously subject linked to object and object linked to subject. In this sense, he keeps the position between relativity and universality ambiguous.

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