

# Speaking of the Subject: Meaning and Presence in Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language

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At the root of all perception is language. Language defines objects and introduces us to others. Without language, social reality would not be possible. Yet language also objectifies our relationship to the world through its unified system that was constructed externally. Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language attempts to take up this problem and reconcile the disparity between the subjectivity of ideas and the objectivity of language. His connection to language is largely influenced by the structuralist turn in linguistics, which views language as an objective system consisting of basic units (signs) that inherit meaning based on their variance from other signs. Merleau-Ponty, while reproducing much of the structuralist model, argues against it on two points: (1) language can be an expression of subjectivity and not just an objective relation of terms and (2) signs are not inherently meaningless, but are always pregnant with meaning. This general project can be seen as the starting point for his re-introduction of subjectivity into language. In this paper I will examine Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, compare Derrida's critiques of language, raise concerns about both philosophies, and construct a new view of language that transcends the subject/object dichotomy. Merleau-Ponty's argument, as I will show, ultimately rests on fallacious assumptions about the transfer of meaning, subjectivity, and the institution of language.

Merleau-Ponty's discussion of language in *Phenomenology of Perception* and his movement to the theory expressed in *The Prose of the World* hold a fundamental link which one can consider a linear evolution. He sees the body as being the expression and clarification of consciousness. All experience is embodied experience. So habits and personal style, which seem to be internal, are only realized when they are embodied. Merleau-Ponty extends this notion of clarification-through-embodiment to language: thoughts are only well-formed when they are put into language.<sup>1</sup> Language (like the body) thus becomes the background or norm for a personal style to develop.<sup>2</sup> The difference between personal and impersonal expressions rests in gradations from completely personal to entirely impersonal. In the body, this difference would be judged through actions, but in language, Merleau-Ponty analyzes speech acts. To fix the personal/impersonal distinction to language, he claims that there are two ways of using language: sedimented language and speech (*le langage parlé et le langage parlant*). Sedimented language is seen as the totality of fixed meanings and expressions that a given language holds at any particular moment. Speaking through sedimented language is the most common type of communication. It is a clichéd and commonplace mode of being-in-the-world. For example, the phrase "the dryness of brown hair" tells a person nothing beyond what the words signify, but the phrase "the brown dryness of hair" seems to speak

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, ed. Claude Lefort, trans. John O'Neill (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 5, 48; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New York: Routledge Classics, 2010), 206. He also places the same expressive apparatus on the act of painting in his essay "Eye and Mind." It must be noted though that these tensions between expression and non-expression, thought and speech, etc. are fundamentally linked to the body and are not immanent or relative to their specific *mode* of expression (embodiment, language, or art).

<sup>2</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 61.

outside of the words themselves and adopts a new meaning.<sup>3</sup> The second phrase is what Merleau-Ponty would call speech and is inherently more meaningful.

Underlying Merleau-Ponty's conviction that personal expression (speech) is more meaningful than the impersonal (sedimented language) is a fundamental naturalism. Sedimented language is aligned with the conventional while gestural language is natural. This is due to the fact that language, as an institution, is a culturally constructed system. Its parts (articulation, morphology, grammar, etc.) are simply used to unify language itself and do not serve a greater (more meaningful) purpose.<sup>4</sup> Gestural language is more natural because it penetrates language-as-institution with the body-subject, once again relating the expression of thought through language to the expression of intention through embodiment. At this point it would seem right to connect gestural/personal/natural expression against sedimented/impersonal/conventional expression, but these terms are not entirely mutually exclusive. It is not necessarily the case that gestural language is always personal; these methods of expression serve different ends. Gestural language is the foundation of any use of language by the body-subject, but can be impersonal at times. Personal expression is always derivative of sedimented language and modifies it in some unique way, but this could be done without the use of gestural language. Of course these types of expression without the other would seem strange: Merleau-Ponty wants to highlight the importance of the unification of personal and gestural speech as it produces a genuinely expressive language or literary speech (in the case of writing).

It is the concern for writing that Merleau-Ponty spends much of his time with because it would be intuitive to assume that writing can never be personal, and certainly not gestural. Yet he wants to rescue us from this harsh assumption by a specific analysis of Stendhal's literary speech. He begins by saying that any perception of the reader as dominant with respect to the text is an illusion. "I create Stendhal; I am Stendhal while reading him."<sup>5</sup> The task of reading becomes to inhabit the book and to experience the narrative *as the author weaves it*. The moment of expression in reading is at the point where "the book takes possession of the reader."<sup>6</sup> Merleau-Ponty likens it to a kind of reading between the lines where the intentions, feelings, silences, and movements of the characters become explicit even when they are only implicit in the text.<sup>7</sup> This is much more than simply "reading" though: it is an experience and an expression on the reader's part. The job of the author is to develop new truths and to express them through the always already sedimented language. The reader, on approaching the text, brings this sedimented language with him. Upon reading the text, if done correctly, the reader engages with the author in a type of co-creation that transforms sedimented language and expression exists on both sides. This expression can exist in the reader because reading and speaking, according to Merleau-Ponty, are

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<sup>3</sup> Ernesto Laclau, "Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor" in *A Time for the Humanities: Futurity and the Limits of Autonomy*, ed. James S. Bono, Tim Dean and Ewa Olonowska-Ziarek (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 61. This specific example uses metaphorical meaning, which we will return to later.

<sup>4</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 28.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 12. He goes on: "The reader's sovereignty is only imaginary, since he draws all his force from the infernal machine called the book, the apparatus for making significations."

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

comparable to an echo.<sup>8</sup> The reader and speaker are always echoing the expressions of the Other and identifying them on their own, much like Sartre's belief that we learn our body through experiencing other bodies. Another case besides reading where one can see expressive language is in the use of metaphor. Plutarch's famous expression, that a student is not a container to be filled, but a fire to be kindled, tells us something beyond the common significations of the words. Plutarch succeeds (insofar as the reader has not encountered this idea/utterance before) in expressing a profound truth about teaching and inspiration through sedimented language. Metaphors are used often in everyday life and are a strong argument in favor of Merleau-Ponty's theory.

While Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language represents a middle ground between types of expressive acts (wholly subjective vs. wholly objective), his view becomes an extreme itself when considered next to Jacques Derrida's critique of language. Merleau-Ponty's belief that meaning is proliferated throughout language (and the world) sharply contrasts to Derrida's conception of language as impenetrable from meaning. Derrida begins with the same assumptions, insights, and observations as Merleau-Ponty does. First, they agree that one is born into language.<sup>9</sup> Language represents a whole or, at the very least, a unified structure that a speaker endeavors to enter, learn, appropriate, and exploit. Merleau-Ponty's *sedimented language* is Derrida's *language of the other* in this sense. Second, they agree that by entering into the system of language, a speaker can only establish an incomplete appropriation of that language at any given time.<sup>10</sup> Language is seen as a historical construction where each word speaks more about its history than about its referent. This bothers Derrida especially because prior to a speaker's use of language, he or she is already engaged in a struggle to communicate meaning through barriers of historicity, ideology, governmentality, and grammar. Merleau-Ponty remains more optimistic about the subject's dominance over language. Third, they both assert that grammar cannot facilitate meaning.<sup>11</sup> However, they decide to take this claim in very different directions. Merleau-Ponty attaches it to his naturalistic claim about gestural language and the free exchange of meaning through speech; although he merely expresses doubt about a universal grammar and not an outright rejection of such an idea. Derrida, on the other hand, declares that grammar is complicit in claims of a mastery of language. The master is always seen as a violent authoritarian aligned with colonizers, racists, and fascists who create "politico-phantasmatic constructions" to dominate culture.<sup>12</sup> This notion is all-too-common in American culture where separate idioms and dialects are considered deviations from the "correct" way of speaking.<sup>13</sup> Fourth, they agree that the "logic of language" can never be clarified in the language itself.<sup>14</sup> It is

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<sup>8</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 215.

<sup>9</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 6. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other: or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, trans. Patrick Mensah (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 23.

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 32; Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" in *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 165; Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 24.

<sup>11</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 28. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 23.

<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 23.

<sup>13</sup> The most obvious example of this is the case of Ebonics. The non-Ebonics speaker argues: "Ebonics is an affront to the English language. It is wrong, ignorant, and results from a lack of education about proper grammar." Derrida reads an implicitly racist message into this normative claim. Not only does it assume a mastery of language, but it represents the *jealousy* of language, the desire to say, "Your language is not mine, so it is wrong."

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 37. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, 22.

impossible for one to stand outside of a language and comment on it. As soon as one leaves one signifying apparatus, one is always already trapped in another. Lastly, they roughly agree there is at least some alterity in the use of language where it “yields nothing more than we ourselves find in it.”<sup>15</sup> This point seems much weaker than the previous four because it is the juncture where Merleau-Ponty and Derrida split apart. They acknowledge that the meaning of language is produced by the speaker and inflected on the words, but whether this meaning can be shared is where they become disconnected. One could easily stop here and make a deconstructive move as Derrida does in “The Rhetoric of Drugs” by claiming that beyond the assumptions, there are only normative claims.<sup>16</sup> Whether one says that meaning can overcome sedimented language or that it cannot is arbitrary based on the facts laid out so far; each view holds no more weight than the other and can inextricably be reduced to the other. However, much more can be said beyond this aporia. Merleau-Ponty and Derrida both offer further proof of their views, but I will now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s position while keeping Derrida in the background as a reference to an-other possibility.

The groundwork that Merleau-Ponty lays down for his theory of language is powerful and says many things about phenomenal experience. His philosophy of the lived body shouts at the reader in many volumes—all of them true. While his observations in the *Phenomenology* seem correct, his transition to the question of language is not as flawless. Merleau-Ponty assumes that bodily expression is the very same thing as linguistic expression.<sup>17</sup> These two cases, however, are fundamentally different. Bodily expression is understandably subjective because it is done through our very own body that no one else can control. Linguistic expression, on the other hand, is not mediated by something we have privileged access to, but by the structure of language that is pre-determined before our birth. This stifles Merleau-Ponty’s argument that subjectivity can be expressed through language; clearly it is not that simple. Another case where alterity contaminates expression is in understanding (the reader/listener side). Derrida furthers his claims about the incomplete appropriation of language by arguing that our grammars and vocabularies are so different that each person virtually speaks a grammar of his or her own and this disrupts understanding. Merleau-Ponty is aware of the same issues when discussing the interpretation of art as taking place entirely in the viewer.<sup>18</sup> The transfer of meaning across expression, in this case, depends on the artist creating an object and leaving it for the viewer to interpret. The truth of the expression is wholly dependent upon *how* the viewer engages with the work and this seems to suggest an unbridgeable mediation. The final dubious argument offered in favor of Merleau-Ponty is also his strongest: the case of metaphor. He argues that signs do not resemble the things they signify and the relation between the two is arbitrary.<sup>19</sup> From this he wants to say that there is nothing mediating the perception or expression of signs,

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<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 109–110.

<sup>16</sup> Arguments on both sides of the legalization (of drugs) debate assume that the current discourse on drugs (e.g. they are bad) was socially constructed. This leads to the rupture that separates the two views, but legitimizes neither. Pro-legalization claims that since the discourse of drugs was constructed it is bad, unnatural, and should be ignored; anti-legalization claims that, for the same reason, the discourse was developed to protect society from the evils of drugs and should be promoted. Derrida’s hope for a *politics of drugs* is optimistic, but offers no real escape from aporia.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>18</sup> Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 167.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 170–1.

words, paintings and so on: “There is nothing more going on between the things and the eyes, and the eyes and vision, than between the things and the blind man’s hands, and between his hands and his thoughts.”<sup>20</sup> Yet there must be some cohesion between the signifier and the signified that tie them together to promote understanding; this cohesion is due to the cultural context. The reason we can move from understanding what filling a container would be like to kindling a fire is because we have already assimilated these practices into our culture. Ernesto Laclau expands on this notion in his study of Proust. He argues that metaphor is always grounded in metonymy because it represents a specific break from the signifying chain of resemblances. The space of metaphor is designated as what is outside the space of metonymy. Since metaphor grows out of metonymy, it is limited by the particular associations involved in metonymy which are always already culturally constructed (e.g. “Washington” to signify the U.S. government). Neither is there any other recourse in language or the novel than metonymy/metaphor because, as Laclau shows, these are eternally tied to combination and substitution (respectively), which are the two fundamental functions of how signs relate to each other.<sup>21</sup> At this point it seems that different forms of alterity are always pushing in on language and attempting to define words according to external systems. However, one still has the feeling that one owns words and that one is most at home in one’s own language. There must be a middle path between Merleau-Ponty’s language that is everyone’s and Derrida’s language that is not mine.

Two things are clear: I speak at least one language and my language is haunted by alterity. The first claim can be divided into relevant sub-parts: I / speak / at least one / language. The “I” declares the overbearing presence of the subject, author, and speaker. It is impossible to speak without always already speaking from the I-position. To speak is to contaminate, penetrate, and disrupt language. Words and silences are orchestrated by the subject and the institution of language is as subjective as it is objective. “At least one” designates the impossibility of counting or of speaking outside of one’s given (con)text, yet the certainty that *at least one* mode of speaking must exist, and this mode belongs to the subject. “Language”—the final word only manifests as the already subjugated object. Perhaps we cannot write about a subject in language, but a subject in speaking is inescapable. The haunting of language by alterity is precisely this other side of speech: language as institution. It is the immovable, destructive force that disfigures particular ideas (Berkeley) into minted coins (Nietzsche) which have no dissimilarities.<sup>22</sup> This specter cuts through communication and leaves no meaning intact. One may think that we have only reproduced the Merleau-Pontian distinction between sedimented language and speech, but this was an *expressive* distinction whereas ours is *communicative*. The subject speaks through language, but only to herself. Meaning never transfers across the no-man’s-land of language. The echo is the fundamental

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ernesto Laclau, “Articulation and the Limits of Metaphor” in *A Time for the Humanities: Futurity and the Limits of Autonomy*, ed. James S. Bono, Tim Dean and Ewa Olonowska-Ziarek (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 65–66. “Metaphor and metonymy, in that sense, are not just some figures among many, but the two fundamental matrices around which all other figures and tropes should be ordered.”

<sup>22</sup> Language has undergone sufficient critiques in its inability to transfer genuine, subjective meanings. One should also note Hume’s case: “The very same idea may be annex to several different words, and may be emply’d in different reasonings, without any danger of mistake. Thus the idea of an equilateral triangle of an inch perpendicular may serve us in talking of a *figure*, of a *rectilinear figure*, of a *regular figure*, of a *triangle*, and of an *equilateral triangle*” (1.1.7.9).

experience of speaking/reading because dialogue always involves the third term of language as mediator-without-agency.

This middle path is not complete without the possibility of transcendence. So far we have only combined aspects of Merleau-Ponty and Derrida into a Frankenstein theory of language. What if we could speak *across* language? What if we could exploit language to say exactly what we mean, but without actually saying it *through* language? If such a case existed, one would see successful acts of communication alongside linguistic mediation. One example that could be pointed to is the *nouveau roman* of Alain Robbe-Grillet. Its structure mimics the mediation of language in how purely objective language attempts to share subjectivities, yet appears to succeed. This success is not in the form of a fusion of subject and object in the word, or the dominance of either term, but of a strategic situatedness that organizes the roles of the author and reader to facilitate communication. This is done by sensitivity to cultural meaning and the restructuring of language to speak through implicit, rather than explicit, significations. Robbe-Grillet's *Jealousy* is an adequate example of this method. The novel plays on the cultural experience of jealousy through materiality: arrangements of chairs, movement through rooms, trips, messages, voices, stories, and so on. These intersubjective relationships are placed on the background of the plantation and its role as colonial institution. The background of colonization multiplies the feelings of jealousy and isolation further by introducing other manifestations of them (e.g. class struggle). Soon the reader finds herself immersed in a cultural context engineered by the author/speaker. Through the inversion of values and concepts that mediate subjectivity, one is able to communicate meaning. This meaning, however, is fundamentally different from the typical referential proposition in that it is not the words that speak the meaning, but the context as a whole, or the *presence* of the text.<sup>23</sup> Robbe-Grillet's conception of the role of the novelist is even similar to Merleau-Ponty's in that the novelist is "more than a creator in the strict sense, [and] is thus a simple mediator between ordinary mortals and an obscure power."<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Stendhal (his novelist par excellence), however, differs greatly from Robbe-Grillet's. They agree that he is a novelist that fits their definition, but Robbe-Grillet argues that his truth is only relevant to his time. So, the meaning of *The Red and the Black* only makes sense in 1830's France. Hence, one is able to see more clearly the limitations of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language and the relevance of speaking *across*, rather than *through*, language.

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language has made a good first stride in understanding communication, but ultimately misconstrued the transfer of meaning, subjectivity, and the institution of language. Mediating apparatuses should be confronted and not neglected; Merleau-Ponty's theory demanded reluctance from the reader/speaker and this was its downfall. Language is often conceived as neutral, but it is always exploiting its subject. Each speaker has a choice to be exploited by language (e.g. echo), or to exploit language itself and establish a communicative act (e.g. *nouveau roman*). The Situationist notion of subversion (*détournement*) has been shown to be applicable to language. This subversion is not a mere contamination or deconstruction, but a reversal of the mediating logic of language through a direct assault on grammar, culture, etc. This text itself is situated in an array of

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<sup>23</sup> Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1965), 21.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

cultural assumptions in which the dialogue has been hijacked. It is no longer I who speak to you, but Merleau-Ponty, Derrida, Robbe-Grillet, Stendhal, and many others along with us. The bad faith of dialogue is dispelled as soon as the author realizes, like Rimbaud, that he is someone else. There is no longer anything to *say*, everything must be *shown*.

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