

THE CORPORAL ABILITY TO SPEAK

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Abstract

Among all of the arts, Merleau-Ponty had the most refined sense for painting. It is common to state that literary works were beyond the scope of his investigations. However, he engages in considerations of language in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Prose of the World*, among other works.

The following paper deals with the relation between language and body, following the way paved by Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty describes language as a way of corporal expressivity. He understands both language and gesture as corporal expressions, considering them equal. According to Merleau-Ponty, Body is not only a medium (an articulating mouth or a writing hand) but also the subject of the speaking act or the main organizer of speech. Three aspects are pointed out in Merleau-Ponty's thinking which might influence the understanding of the act of speaking as well as the understanding of the literary work: 1) the language as kin-aesthesia, 2) the meanings of language, 3) the style of language.

Keywords: language, speech, body, corporal gestures, expressivity.

Following the phrase of Paul Valery «the painter takes his body with him» Merleau-Ponty states that a picture is painted not by a mental activity but by a corporal action. He proposes an alternative to the position represented for example by Michelangelo who taught drawing using one's head rather than one's hand, thinking about the wholeness of the painted object, measuring the proportions of its parts carefully. Merleau-Ponty describes the process of painting as a corporal and primarily visual experience. He reveals the Body as a sketching movement as well as a sketched line. Among all of the arts, Merleau-Ponty had the most refined sense for painting. It is common to state that literary works were beyond the scope of his investigations. However, he engages in considerations of language in the *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Prose of the World*, among other works.

Merleau-Ponty describes language as a way of corporal expressivity. He understands both language and gesture as corporal expressions, considering them equal. According to Merleau-Ponty, Body is not only a medium (an articulating mouth or a writing hand) but also the subject of the speaking act or the main

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organizer of speech. The following paper will deal with the relation between language and body, following the way paved by Merleau-Ponty.

A few initial notes which seek to specify the subject and to prevent the difficulties that we meet trying to grasp it. 1. The science of linguistics acknowledges that the body is able to influence the meaning of words as a paralinguistic factor. The posture of the speaker's body, the expression of her/his face, the modulation of her/his voice affects the meaning of speech. I do not have any doubts about this but this will not be my subject. I shall deal not with the paralinguistic body but with the body inside language. 2. Referring to the body that is able to express itself by language, the body is understood as a forming activity which is inseparable from the person and not just another object observed from a distance. Indeed, I am referring to the living body and the lived experience of language. 3. Common wisdom regards body and language as two subjects with different natures. This attitude stems from the dichotomous thinking that informs various human activities and also influences the common sense that we apply on a daily basis. Body and language function as a variant of the opposition between body and mind (or soul).

Merleau-Ponty unfolds painting by relying on the experiences of painters; he presents their utterances as arguments. Following the way of Merleau-Ponty, we can confidently suggest that a more intensive experience of language is prevalent among writers. For the writers it is evident that speaking is deeply connected with their bodies. The Czech writer Milan Kundera has one of his characters say the following: 1 «... my whole body is filled with the desire to express itself. To speak. To make itself heard»¹. Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas, a Lithuanian poet known for his phenomenological attitude, continues along the same line: «My skin sings and my fingers recite»². The Body not only wants to speak, and can do so, but it also can reside in language, being through the mode of language. The following remark of Nyka-Niliūnas demonstrates this: «poetry begins when the words disappear; the body begins from the word». The words can then transform into the body. A typical criticism of Nyka-Niliūnas is that in a weak verse there is always too little body and too much poetry.³ Thus, according to the poet, verses can be good, i. e. become body, or not good, i.e. remain only fiction. A successful poem is one from which the body emerges, fascinating us with odours and colours, and with natural and economic reality.

Although Merleau-Ponty focuses on language stemming from the body, he also acknowledges the possibility of the sovereignty of language and describes it as an algorithm multiplying within itself⁴. Merleau-Ponty uses examples from geometry, demonstrating the large number of propositions derived from one initial corporal premise. Digression from living language can also occur in the daily use of language when steady phrases are repeated without a real wish to say anything. Merleau-Ponty takes a writer and a child as model speakers because they are both inclined to live in their speech. Thus the philosopher's criterion for differentiating language is based on the coherence between language and body.

It is important to point out three aspects in Merleau-Ponty's thinking which might influence the understanding of the act of speaking as well as the understanding of the literary work: 1) the language as kinaesthesia, 2) the meanings of language, 3) the style of language.

The language as kinaesthesia

Concentrating on the experience of speech, Merleau-Ponty reveals language as a motion of body. He states that «the spoken word is a gesture»⁵. He presents language as a flow that takes a direction and wanes, flows or suddenly breaks off. When I start to speak, I do not know what my next phrase will be. I feel the future speech only as an abstract shape, as a general line, and the said word as sinking into the past. Merleau-Ponty emphasises the act of speech and presents it as a way of movement. The difference between the saying and the said is elaborated in structuralist theories, but even when discussing the saying, they consider the text as a whole unit. On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty stresses the pulsing-disappearing presence of speech.

In relating language to movement, Merleau-Ponty emphasises the cases of synonymic usage of language and bodily gestures. In communication, we constantly switch from language into gestures and vice versa without noticing. I can say «come here» or beckon with my hand. The similarity of language and kinaesthetic gesture is found when attention is concentrated on the intention. The language as well as the gestures move towards somebody or respond to something. The act of speaking always anticipates the relationship with another person or with the world.

A person seeks to speak her/his world and, involuntarily, wishes her/his words to be unnoticeable, although he wants the meaning expressed by them to be felt. In general, when listening to the speech of the other, or reading it, we find the same relation between language and body:

«Words cease to be accessible to our senses and lose their weight, their noise, their lines, their space».⁶

When I persuade the other to help me, my speech is revealed as an extension of my bodily capacities. Body as 'I can' is, at that moment, revealed in the modality of the language. Speaking appears both as a prosthesis of bodily activity and as a way of sensation.

«The process of expression, when it is successful, does not merely leave for the reader and the writer himself a kind of reminder, it brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience».⁷

The language that appears as an incarnation of a person does not represent what is already known, but finds a new way of sensing. Speech

enables the experience, or even the discovery, of what was never experienced before. Kinaesthesia, as well as in its linguistic form, according to Husserl, does not mean sensation of movement, but a sensing that moves itself.⁸

The meaning of language

According to Husserl, the main criterion for distinguishing gestures from language is meaning – bodily expressions lack the intention to express something, while language is soaked with signification. Husserl adopts a concept of language as a system of signs in which language is not conceived as reality itself but only as a possible envelope for reality.

Merleau-Ponty, on the contrary, asserts that the meaning of both word and gesture is situational; a constant meaning contains only a small part of the meaning. The meaning is formed between word and situation (for instance, the word ‘donkey’ carries a different meaning depending on the situation – if I utter it while looking at an animal descending the slope of mountain as opposed to using it as a form of personal address). Moreover, in seeking the most intensive expression, words modify the meaning of each other. Thus, the meaning is modulated or even formed within the act of saying.

In the same way, the meaning of a gesture is not self-enclosed. It emerges as the things around it share their meaning with the gesture.⁹ I stretch my hand towards a pen and the gesture acquires the meaning from the pen when I finally pick it up.

Merleau-Ponty notices that the less you think the better you grasp the meaning of the words.¹⁰ Thinking is understood as a removal from the situation, like an observation from the side. The transparency of the meaning, he says, increases with the involvement in the situation but not from the knowledge of separate words.

The style of language

The concept of style reveals the most intensive coherence between language and body (as between expression and perception).¹¹ Merleau-Ponty states that we express in the same way as we perceive. The individual painting lies in the distinctive, non-standardized perception, a primary characteristic among children and artists.¹² Any new artistic trend arises from a new way of experience:

«Only the blind and involuntary logic of things perceived, totally suspended in our body’s activity, could lead us to ... a new mode of expression».¹³

In saying that the body streams into language, Merleau-Ponty describes the act of speaking as indivisible into body and language. The flow does not create any possibility of a rift between corporality and speech. The style itself is a stream in which shapeless sensitivity flows into arising forms. Of course in the process of formation, the style of

perception continues to develop. Thus, each expression starts earlier than it appears; it finds its origin in the act of perception. This is why we can state that «poetry exists before it comes into being»¹⁴.

Style shows a thing as perceived by somebody and, at the same time, style is the perceiving person itself. Merleau-Ponty names the speaking subject as «a certain style of being» and «‘the world’ at which he directs his aim»¹⁵. It is worth noticing that writers such as Gustave Flaubert and the aforementioned Alfonsas Nyka-Niliūnas identify themselves with their writing style but not with their characters.

Generally, the first rights to research the style of language belong to stylistics – as a branch of linguistics. The style is analyzed by stylistics, separating it from the speaking person (there are exceptions such as Leo Spitzer who seeks to reveal the spirit of the writer by describing the minutiae of his or her language). Merleau-Ponty provides the guidelines for a phenomenological stylistics that is able to flourish in the wider field of anthropological research. Concrete poetic figures such as metaphor or rhythm can be revealed as rooted in perception. They are not ornaments but the movement of perception. Rhythm as a manner of the movement of perception was noticed by Edmund Husserl and further developed by Marc Richir¹⁶. Metaphor is based on association in the sense in which Husserl used this word in *Passive Synthesis*¹⁷. The concrete poetic forms confirm the unity of the style of the work and of the style of perception, concretising Merleau-Ponty’s thesis in the case of a poetic text.

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