

Speech and Affective Expression: Language and Embodied Subjectivity in Early Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract: The Western philosophical tradition has always conceived language as the articulation of the meaning of the world in the interiority of the subject before it is expressed in speech or writing. The intentional subject has been the essential basis of philosophical theories of language. Truth is a correct statement about the world when the mind of the subject is in touch with reality as such. Against such a background, Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes a theory of language that suggests the unique idea that language is gestural. It shows speech as a gesture, which is the primary form of our shared and embodied meanings. This understanding of meaning is essentially phenomenological, as it cannot be separated from the notions of embodied subjectivity and lived experience in relation to the world. The present paper seeks to address the embodied and affective dimension of language and meaning in Merleau-Ponty based on his early notion of the embodied subject, speech, and gesture in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Keywords: Expression, Body-subject, Speech, Gesture, Affectivity

Introduction

Primarily, the discussion of this paper is based on Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*, specifically the chapter on body as expression and speech.⁹⁹ According to Merleau-Ponty expression is not an externalization of the inner essence of the Cartesian subject nor mere representation of the sensory experience of the external objective world. Rather expression is fundamentally a manifestation of our embodied

⁹⁹ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (Routledge, 2012), 179-205.

being in and towards the world. In this sense, language, like music, painting, and literature, is one of the manifestations of the body, or as he calls it, an expression of a ‘speaking subject.’ This idea demarcates Merleau-Ponty’s concept of language and speech from rationalism and empiricism. The speaking subject, in Merleau-Ponty, is a speaking body; not a thinking subject. This idea brings two aspects of speech into discussion: speech as linguistic expression and speech as bodily expression or gesture. Such a discussion provokes the commonsensical understanding of language as pure convention and gesture as pure biological. This controversial idea of speech exposes the paradoxical characteristic of expression in general. It can be argued that both language and body are neither completely natural nor cultural. Furthermore, we can argue that language and meaning are fundamentally rooted in affective and embodied expression.

As Merleau-Ponty states, “by now seeking to describe the phenomenon of speech and the deliberate act of signification, we will have the opportunity to leave behind, once and for all, the classical subject-object dichotomy.”¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of speech cannot be explained within the framework of Cartesian subject-object dualism. Speech is an expression of the speaking subject. The speaking subject is an expressive body in the world. The body as expression is neither an object in the world nor an entirely biological or cultural being. Rather, the body is the locus of intentionality and a space of lived experience. As Russell Keat observes, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, one of the aims of Merleau-Ponty is to critically address the scientific realism and Cartesian dualism by using phenomenological account of the body. He states that “the body...is not the scientific object of Cartesian dualism, and its subjectivity is not that of a consciousness ‘inhabiting’ such an object. Further, the world as it is for the human subject is ‘for’ an

¹⁰⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 179.

embodied subject, not for a disembodied consciousness.”¹⁰¹ Thus, subjectivity is always already embodied and situated in the world. A distinction between bodily expression and the body itself is not possible. The body both acts within the world and is also being shaped by it. Through this interaction, it creates meaning and becomes a space where meaning is lived and experienced. Thus, speech as expressions is inseparable from the manifestation of bodily experience. Therefore, in Merleau-Ponty, phenomenological analysis of expression is neither a study of language as a mere sign system nor an understanding of speech as a complete reproduction of socio-cultural meanings. Rather, for Merleau-Ponty, expression is a concrete act of the body. This also means that the phenomenon of speech is a manifestation of the naturo-cultural body. This view opposes traditional philosophical theories, which are based on dualistic theses such as mind-body, inner-outer, subject-object and nature-culture. That is to say, for Merleau-Ponty, speech as expression is non-dualistic and fundamentally anti-Cartesian in nature.

Embodied Expression and the Critique of Dualism

Merleau-Ponty critically engages with the empiricist and rationalist accounts of language and speech. He argues that both perspectives lack the concept of the speaking subject.¹⁰² Empiricist philosophers understand expression merely as part of the objective causal mechanism where speech is explained as the result of the complex stimulus-response mechanism. In speech, the listener receives a sound as a stimulus, which excites an idea in their mind, then produces a response corresponding to it. A word is only a sign of ideas in the mind that originates from the sensory experience. Thus, the objective world is the source of all meanings and it is through sensory experience we come to know the

¹⁰¹ Russell Keat, “Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of the Body,” *Unpublished Manuscript, University of Edinburgh*. Retrieved February 10 (1982): 2015, 3, <https://russellkeat.net/admin/papers/51>.

¹⁰² Merleau-Ponty develops empiricist and rationalist perspectives of language in the context of the theory of aphasia and amnesia.

world. Also, the meaning of words is merely a matter of naming, which is part of the stimulus-response mechanism. From the point of view of Merleau-Ponty, within empiricism, speech cannot properly be regarded as an action since it does not manifest the inner possibilities of the person who speaks. That is to say, meaning is not dependent on the intentionality of the speaker; rather, it comes through the relation of immediate sensory experience and its corresponding representations in the mind.

According to the traditional dualistic theories in general, thought is something interior, separated from the body and the world. For rationalists, such as Descartes, words are carriers of thought, therefore, language is an external manifestation of inner thoughts. Speech is a mechanical act of the body, and meaning is an internal act of the mind. Speech itself as a bodily act is meaningless; rather, it becomes meaningful only as a vehicle of internal thoughts. In other words, our embodied and situated experiences are not crucial aspects of meaningfulness of speech since the meaning of a word is constituted internally. In rationalism, the word is differentiated from its meaning. The word is grasped as an empty vessel that merely carries thought. Speech as an act and its meaning as concepts originates in and caused by the mind. That is, a word has no meaning of its own, as it is only an exterior sign of something internal. However, for Merleau-Ponty, “speech is not the ‘sign’ of thought...sense is caught in speech, and speech is the external existence of sense. We can no more admit...that it is the envelope or the clothing of thought.”¹⁰³ Unlike empiricism, rationalism considers the presence of an intentional subject, but it is a thinking subject, not a speaking subject. Therefore, it is clear that, in rationalist explanations of language, the phenomenological aspect of the body as a speaking subject is absent. Merleau-Ponty rejects the empiricist view of language because it refuses the role of the subject as a speaker. Similarly, he rejects the rationalist view due to its conception of language

¹⁰³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 187.

as a vehicle of already worked-out thought and its refusal to accept the role of the speaker as an embodied subject. Both the empiricist and rationalist theories of language are antithetical to each other, but “in both cases the conception of language is the same in that there is no ‘speaking subject’...There is no one who speaks, there is but a flow of words that occurs without any intention to speak governing it.”¹⁰⁴ Everything is internal and subjective in rationalism, but the subject here refers to the thinking substance. In empiricism, everything is objective and mechanical. And speech is explained as the result of the stimulus-response mechanism where the body is not the subject but is a mechanical phenomenon. In rationalism, the subject creates meaning that is imposed on the world. In empiricism, on the contrary, the subject passively derives meaning from the world through the sense experience. As Merleau-Ponty argues, the active role of the speaking subject in speech and expression is missing in both these views.

According to Merleau-Ponty, meaning neither results from the physical phenomenon nor from psychical traces but comes from the lived experience of speaking. Here, the speaker is an embodied being in the world—a “body-subject.”¹⁰⁵ The body-subject is not an envelope of the Cartesian ego, which receives and transmits meaning. Instead, our thoughts and speech are conditioned by our embodied experience of the world. The body is already there in the world of matter and meaning. That is, neither the subject nor the world solely constitutes meaning, but it is evoked by our embodied being in the world. In other words, for Merleau-Ponty, the body is the subject; he argues, “I am my body, at least to the extent that I have an acquisition, and reciprocally my body is something like a natural subject, or provisional sketch of my total

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 179-80.

¹⁰⁵ The term ‘body-subject’ is used by Remy Kwant. According to him, Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is fundamentally a philosophy of Body-subject. See Remy Kwant, *The Phenomenological Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty* (Duquesne University Press, 1963), 3.

being.”¹⁰⁶ That is to say, in Merleau-Ponty, “the human body is itself a ‘subject’, and the human subject is necessarily, not just contingently, embodied.”¹⁰⁷

That is, for Merleau-Ponty, expression is fundamentally a bodily manner of existence in the world of meaning. Our existence as an embodied being is not merely biological nor the world is full objects but is a lived body in the lived world. Since the body is always already intentional or directed towards the world, expression is a meaningful act of the body-subject. The body is always expressive and is encountered with purpose and meanings in the worldly situation. Moreover, our perception of the world is implicitly associated by an non-thetic *intentional arc* which “projects around us our past, our future, our human milieu, our physical situation, our ideological situation, and our moral situation, or rather, that ensures that we are situated within all of these relationships.”¹⁰⁸ This *intentional arc* operates at the pre-reflective or pre-conceptual bodily engagement in the world, through which the body, world, consciousness comes together in our experience with emotional, cognitive, motor, perceptual aspects of it. The body is situated within the socio-cultural meanings. At the same time, the body is not something entirely defined or determined by existing meanings. The act of expression is inseparable from what is expressed. Thus, the body is fundamentally expressive and its existential meaning comes to exist through its own expressive nature. Merleau-Ponty states that “the body expresses total existence...not that it is an external accompaniment of it, but because existence accomplishes itself in the body.”¹⁰⁹ So, it is necessary to address the primordial operation of signification where the act of expression is inseparable from what is expressed. That is to say, something that can generate a sense of its own but is not a sign of something else. The body is the locus of all

¹⁰⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 205.

¹⁰⁷ Keat, “Merleau-Ponty and the Phenomenology of the Body,” 2.

¹⁰⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 137.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 169.

possible human expressions. And all expression inherently has an embodied sense, prior to linguistic meanings and “this embodied sense is the central phenomenon of which body and mind, or sign and signification are abstract moments.”¹¹⁰ Therefore, language is fundamentally an embodied expression in the world. Prior to linguistic expression, the body has an original expression toward the world and others, called gesture. It also implies that there is a primordial sense of meaning in our embodied manner of being in the world prior to conventional or established meanings.

Speech as Linguistic Gesture

Generally, speech is understood as a way of communicating our emotions or information to others. To do so, we need a common language. That is to say, there should be a language with shared meaning to make speech sensible to others. In general, the assumption is that we need a language to express something. However, this is not the case in which Merleau-Ponty explains language in relation to speech and gesture. For him, a gesture is not a sign of inner intention or hidden emotion. Rather, in gestures one’s intentions are directly expressed to others. For example, there is no hidden anger to perceive behind our gesture/expression of anger. Emotions are not hidden inner states that are later expressed by the body. Instead, emotions are lived and manifested through bodily expression. Emotions are bodily expressions through which an embodied being relates to and makes sense of worldly situations. Therefore, the sense of gesture lies in its very expression and it is necessarily shared between the subject. It is achieved through the gestural reciprocity between my body and the other. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Everything happens as if the other person’s intention inhabited my body, or as if my intentions inhabited his body. The gesture I witness sketches

¹¹⁰ Ibid.

out the first signs of an intentional object. This object becomes present and is fully understood when the powers of my body adjust to it and fit over it. The gesture is in front of me like a question, it indicates to me specific sensible points in the world and invites me to join it there.¹¹¹

One of the important points is that understanding the meaning of gestures is not an inner cognitive activity. Rather, my intentions are explicit in the form of gestures and the other can capture the meaning of this expression because my gesture and the possible gesture of the other are connected through our embodied presence in the world. For Merleau-Ponty, the gesture is the first sign of an intentional object. It is because “the sense of the gestures is not given but rather understood, which is to say taken up by an act of the spectator.”¹¹² Here, communication becomes possible when I confirm the gesture or the behavior of the other and the other confirms mine. This gestural understanding is not intellectual interpretation. Instead, As Merleau-Ponty argues, the gesture or “the movement by which I lend myself to the spectacle must be recognized as irreducible. I join with it in a sort of blind recognition that precedes the definition or intellectual elaboration of the sense.”¹¹³ I understand the other (gestures) as I perceive things (as it appears) through my body since my world is a space of my bodily coexistence with them. It is a relation between a particular way of inhabiting or structuring the world by an embodied subject and how the other embodied subject recaptures the meaning of that structuring.

As Monika Langer points out, the structuring of the world into an inter-subjective space of meaning is possible only through the mutual act of the embodied subjects.¹¹⁴ It does not occur at the reflective level but in the pre-reflective act of the body. She observes, Neither his intention nor mine is thematized; in both cases it ‘inhabits’ our body. Our interaction

¹¹¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 191.

¹¹² Ibid., 190.

¹¹³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 191.

¹¹⁴ Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, 56-66.

involves neither a mechanical process nor an intellectual operation, but a pre-reflective act of structuring the world on the part of one body-subject and a corresponding pre-reflective act of recapturing the meaning of that structuration on the part of the other incarnate subject.¹¹⁵

There is a relation between the gestures of a body-subject and the possible gestures of the other and it is through gestures that a shared world of meaning is made possible between subjects. The gesture itself is a meaningful expression of the body. Merleau-Ponty goes further and states that speech is gestural since it is meaningful by itself like a gesture. This is because speech is an expression of established language and it contains words with already sedimented meanings. Speech of our daily life is a repetition of words with familiar meanings or ‘spoken words’, and their meanings are explicit as it is in the gesture. Therefore Merleau-Ponty argues, “speech is a genuine gesture and, just like all gestures, speech too contains its own sense.”¹¹⁶ The meaning of the gestures and the words does not pre-exist in the mind or hidden behind their expression. Gesture contains meaning by itself; it is fully expressed in it. Similarly, speech has meaning by itself and it is explicit through the very act of speaking. Thus, we can argue that speech is gestural if we assume that language already exists before the act of speech.

However, Merleau-Ponty’s central concern is about what makes language possible in the first place. For the answer, as he writes, “we must, then, seek the first hints of language in the emotional gesticulation by which man superimposes upon the given world the world according to man.”¹¹⁷ There is no language before our embodied expression. Language originated as a result of a primordial act of body in the world and speech is a gesture that expresses its own meaning. As Douglas Low observes, in Merleau-Ponty, the meaning of words originates in bodily gestures, which means a ‘lived-through’ interaction of the body with the

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 61.

¹¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 189.

¹¹⁷ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 194.

world that is always already shared with the other. The body is naturally capable of adapting with worldly situations and adopting the gestures of the other (at least partially), at first as emotion and then as symbolic meanings. Likewise, the body appropriates the verbal gestures of the other (voice) and acquires meanings. In other words, the bodily gesture reveals our primordial relation with the world and the linguistic gesture shows its cultural aspects.¹¹⁸

The gesture is explicit and open to perception which allows the other subjects to grasp the sense of it. Perception is the primordial mode of our being-in-the-world and is the natural capacity of human beings. However, the case is different in linguistic gesture. The sense of verbal gesture is not explicit or directly available to others since it refers to the mental landscape. It is only through speech that the sense of the verbal gesture becomes explicit and available to everyone. This means that the sole function of the verbal gesture is to communicate its sense to others, a sense that is not directly available to perception. As Merleau-Ponty writes “culture here offers what nature does not provide.”²¹¹¹⁹ Nevertheless, what culture can offer is already available signification in the form of an inter-subjective world of shared meanings. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty argues, The sense of the gesture is not contained in the gesture as a physical or physiological phenomenon. The sense of the word is not contained in the word as a sound. Rather, it is the definition of the human body to appropriate, in an indefinite series of discontinuous acts, meaningful cores that transcend and transfigure its natural powers.”¹²⁰

If we bracket off all the vocabularies related to laws of phonetics, foreign languages, and grammar, we can see that language is not entirely

¹¹⁸ See Douglas Low, *Merleau-Ponty in Contemporary Context: Philosophy and Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (Routledge, 2017), 235-36, 250.

¹¹⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 192.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

arbitrary; its meanings are rooted in a deeper system of embodied, and perceptual relations to the world.¹²¹ It will be more evident in the case of poetry. If we consider conceptual aspects or forms of a word, it may seem language is arbitrary or conventional. But poetry shows the underlying emotional sense of the words.¹²² This contradicts the general assumption that emotional and affective expressions are natural characteristics of the body. That is, if we go back to the bare words or sounds of language, rather than technical or abstract words, then we see at the ground level, words are inseparably related to emotions and gestures. This affective or emotional sense is an indispensable dimension of poetry. According to Merleau-Ponty, “words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world.”¹²³ That is, words are of the world and are not entirely conventional. Further he states “conventions are a recent mode of relation between men, they presuppose an earlier means of communication.”¹²⁴ If language is verbal gesture and speech is about spoken words, the algorithm of language is not merely conventional either. Therefore, we can say that conventional structures established between embodied subjects through their repeated expression of sound and emotions towards the world are called verbal gestures. Language in

¹²¹ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 193.

¹²² Poetry (words with emotional essence) is where language and gesture come together to a single point. However, Barbaras, in *The Being of the Phenomenon*, observes that it does not solve the dualism between the natural and cultural or gestural and conventional meaning since Merleau-Ponty claims it is not an argument for naturalism. Hence, it is not an attempt to reduce artificial signs (culture) to natural ones (nature). According to Barbaras, the question concerning how bodily gesture becomes conventional meaning remains problematic in early Merleau-Ponty. It is because the rejection of intellectualism forces Merleau-Ponty to seek the ‘genesis of ideas’ that reach into the analysis of speech as bodily expression. In other words, Merleau-Ponty attributes the power of signifying to the natural body. Merleau-Ponty’s account of ideality becomes problematic since the explanation of linguistic expression depends solely on the natural aspects of the body. In other words, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty tries to connect perception to linguistic expression through a naturalistic account of the body: speech as gestural. However, it implies a dualism of nature and convention at the fundamental level. In later Merleau-Ponty, the perceived or sensible world is not distinct from the world of ideality since perception itself is an expression. According to Barbaras, Merleau-Ponty later overcame the problem of dualism by finding reversibility in the role of expression. See Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, 44-48.

¹²³ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 193.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

this sense is gestural and an affective expression of the body in the world. As Hugh J. Silverman argues “in speaking, in gesticulating, in articulating, in signaling, the body is the locus of meaning production. Thus, the body of the word, which is incorporated into speech, is the material instrument of verbal expression”¹²⁵

Language, Gesture, and Affectivity

We, as embodied subjects, are not only linguistic or rational beings but also fundamentally affective beings. The gestural and affective sense of human experience cannot be replaced by language; bodily expression continues to be an essential source of meaning. We believe that, in everyday life, gestural and affective expressions are less frequent than speech, in which we use words and concepts in thought. Speech appears to us as concerned solely with words and as free of gestures (except the bodily organs that facilitate speech, such as lip movements, vocal cords, and so on). However, it is well known that the hand movements and facial expressions are associated with speech. For instance, if we try to restrict our hand movements while we speak, we find that it disrupts the fluency of speech and makes it difficult to remember or access words.¹²⁶ It is evident especially when we talk about directions like left, right, up, down by pointing our hands or moving our heads without noticing it. The most important point is that usage of such words implicitly places the body as the central point reference. As we fail to see gestural aspects of speech due to the primacy of spoken words, we overlook emotional expression due to the dominance of thought. As embodied beings our relation with the world is not entirely rational. Instead, we experience worldly situations through emotions, feelings, and embodied

¹²⁵ Silverman, “Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language,” 124.

¹²⁶ An experimental study on the relation between speech, gesture and lexical access shows that gesture affects the fluency of speech with spatial contents and provides access to the memory of lexicon in speech. See Frances H. Rauscher, Robert M. Krauss, and Yihsiu Chen, “Gesture, Speech, and Lexical Access: The Role of Lexical Movements in Speech Production,” *Psychological science* 7, no. 4 (1996): 226-231, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1996.tb00364.x>. Robert M. Krauss, “Why Do We Gesture When We speak?” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 7, no. 2 (1998): 54-60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.ep13175642>.

movements. It does not imply that we express emotions such as joy or anger in certain situations. Mostly, we notice emotions only when they are too explicit. Nevertheless, gesture, emotion, and affectivity as ways of bodily response to the world, continue to be expressed along with the linguistic expression. Largely, these emotions are not recognized since they are concealed by thoughts or linguistic concepts which result from our embodied expression in the world. In ordinary situations like when we wait for a signal in the traffic, walking on a sunny day, meeting someone, or speaking on a phone, we are unaware of how the body makes sense of the situation and responds to it. The body expresses the world affectively just as much as linguistically. This affective expression of the body is fundamental to our worldly engagement and constitution of meanings.

According to Merleau-Ponty, it is an attempt to reduce language to emotional expression.¹²⁷ Rather, he tries to emphasize the point that since the body is a locus of all kinds of expression, language and speech cannot be devoid of affective and emotional dimension. Thus, as Merleau-Ponty argues, both are different modes of our being in the world. Emotion, as one way of being in the world, is already contingent according to our bodily features. However, it exercises the same power to articulate the stimuli and situations as that are at the pinnacle of linguistic expression.

Nature, Culture, and the Paradox of Expression

Does the above discussion suggest that gestures are natural and language is cultural? Conventionally, gestures are considered as natural and language as cultural. According to this view, gestures are, in some sense, biological. Emotions are directly observable from gestures. Thus, bodily gestures are taken as the natural sign of emotions. However, the language we speak is considered conventional since the relationship between a

¹²⁷ Here, Merleau-Ponty is not propounding a version of behaviourism by explaining the language and meaning in the restricted sense of explicit bodily gesture or limited to its biological aspect. Rather he points out that speech as a gesture implies the affective expression of the body towards the world.

word and what it signifies is considered arbitrary. Merleau-Ponty does not accept this distinction. As an example against these distinctions, he observes that in poetry, the function of words is not to represent things. Instead, words abstract and express their emotional or gestural essence. Commonly, emotions are understood as a natural feature of the body—a natural sign which stands for an inner feeling. Merleau-Ponty argues that there is no ‘natural sign’ for human beings. Gesture is not a sign nor is it purely natural as well because there is no one to one correspondence between a particular gesture and a particular state of mind. Thus, he writes: “we could only speak of ‘natural signs’ if the anatomical organization of our body made definite gestures correspond to specific ‘states of consciousness’... Having the same organs and the same nervous system is not sufficient for the same emotions to take on the same signs in two different conscious subjects.”¹²⁸

That is to say, gestures are not natural even though human beings share similar anatomical structure. According to Merleau-Ponty, gestural meaning is not perceived like the color of a carpet. It is not the case that we cognitively understand a gesture. Often, we do not understand the meaning of animal gestures or gestures of a person from a different cultural background because those are not merely natural. For instance, The gesticulations of anger or love are not the same for a Japanese person and a Western person. More precisely, the difference between gesticulations covers over a difference between the emotions themselves. It is not merely the gesture that is contingent with regard to bodily organization, it is the very manner of meeting the situation and of living it.¹²⁹

Similarly, language is not purely conventional or completely transparent to itself but the words, vowels, syntax of a language evolve according to how the body acts and reacts towards the worldly situation. A language

¹²⁸ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 194-5.

¹²⁹ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 194-5.

expresses our bodily manner of being in the world. In this regard a language is not merely a collection of words with formal rules but it signifies as an embodied subject how we live in it. As Merleau-Ponty argues, “the predominance of vowels in one language, of consonants in another, or systems of construction and syntax would not represent so many arbitrary conventions for expressing the same thought, but rather several ways for the human body to celebrate the world and to finally live it.”¹³⁰ Therefore, different languages express different ways of our existence in the world. Language and its meaning are not purely arbitrary. It does not mean that language is a system of natural signs. For Merleau-Ponty, “it is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table a table.”¹³¹ Furthermore, he argues that there is nothing such as pure thought which can translate meaning transparently from one language to another like an ideal expression. Similarly, there is no pure emotion which can be revealed by ideal gestures. Thus, the difference in linguistic and gestural meanings among subjects is conditioned by how they perceive the world or how the particular context determines their bodily experience. According to Merleau-Ponty,

It is impossible to superimpose upon man both a primary layer of behaviors that could be called “natural” and a constructed cultural or spiritual world. For man, everything is constructed and everything is natural, in the sense that there is no single word or behavior that does not owe something to mere biological being – and, at the same time, there is no word or behavior that does not break free from animal life.¹³²

In other words, it is impossible to clearly distinguish what is created and what is natural in human expression, since the body that is thrown into the world is inherently enigmatic. Speech as a linguistic expression is

¹³⁰ Ibid., 193.

¹³¹ Ibid., 220.

¹³² Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 195.

one of the manifestations of the enigmatic body. In Monika Langer's interpretation, one of the central concerns of Merleau-Ponty is the naturo-cultural aspect of language and gestures, which explains the indeterminacy of meaning in communication. Everything is simultaneously natural and cultural in human life, which makes our life different from animal life.¹³³ That means, gestures and language are neither natural nor cultural or spiritual. Gestures and language are not entirely independent of our body as biological beings. At the same time, they are not limited to what is naturally given but transcend themselves. Merleau-Ponty writes:

Behaviors create significations that are transcendent in relation to the anatomical structure and yet immanent to the behavior as such, since behavior can be taught and can be understood. We cannot do without this irrational power that creates and communicates significations, and of which speech is merely a particular case.¹³⁴

For Merleau-Ponty, there is no world external to embodied expression and its affective signification. In other words, the world is disclosed only through embodied and situated expression. Thus, speech is an expression of the body through which the world is revealed to us. Words are meaningful when they are part of embodied expression. The word inhabits the thing as the body inhabits the world. In the living experience of the speaker, there is no distinction between word, body and the world. We are embodied subjects and it is only through our corporeal engagement that we have language, and the meaningful world. Thus, we can argue that language and meaning are fundamentally rooted in subjective, affective and gestural expression of the body.

Through words, the world becomes meaningful in an inter-subjective space. For Merleau-Ponty it is through the body that we recognize others. Similarly, it is through the body that we recognize things. The meanings

¹³³ Langer, *Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception*, 62.

¹³⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, 195.

of words are the product of our specific way of interacting with worldly situations. That is, existing and new meanings are acquired only through affective and situated experience of the embodied subject.

Conclusion

From the discussions it is clear that for Merleau-Ponty, the body is neither an object nor mere biological being; but is the subject in the world. Here, we can see that for Merleau-Ponty, language and its meanings are acquired through our bodily expression in and towards the world. Language is not a manifestation of pre-existing thoughts or abstract ideas but of concrete acts of embodied subject. Language as expression of shared meaning, which is primarily gestural, is grounded in the unformulated meaning or a sense that the body acquires through its interaction with the world. Therefore, language is an expression of a speaking-subject or to say any expression is a manifestation of a body-subject in the world. Only in and through the process of gesturing or the expressivity of the body is there a shared meaning as such, neither before nor without it. However, Merleau-Ponty's idea of linguistic gesture provokes the problem of nature-culture binary. He somehow does not want to reduce language to one of these two extremes of the binary. Instead, he argues that language is neither entirely cultural nor natural. Such an argument reveals the paradoxical nature of human expressions. Therefore, I argue that, in Merleau-Ponty, language is neither an expression of innate thoughts nor a mere naming of objects, but is fundamentally rooted in affective and embodied expression.

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