An "I" Locked in a Barrel "Would Not Know How to Speak": Field of Experience, Dialogue, and Encroachment in Merleau-Ponty

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Abstract — This article will illustrate the development of the theme of language within Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *The Prose of the World* (1973) in relation to Saussurean linguistics and Hendrik Pos's phenomenology of language. Focusing on the concept of encroachment (empiètement) and on the inter-penetration between one's own body and the other's body, it will illustrate the strategic role played by an open conception of the field of experience and of history's dynamic sedimentation.

Keywords — Merleau-Ponty (Maurice), Saussure (Ferdinand de), speaking, field, Pos (Hendrik)

Résumé — Cet article analyse le développement du thème du langage dans La prose du monde *(1969) de Maurice Merleau-Ponty en relation avec la linguistique saussurienne et la phéno-ménologie du langage d'Hendrik Pos. En se concentrant sur le concept d'empiétement et sur l'interpénétration entre le corps propre et le corps autrui, ce travail illustrera le rôle stratégique joué par une conception ouverte du champ d'expérience et de la sédimentation dynamique de l'histoire.*

Mots-clés — Merleau-Ponty (Maurice), Saussure (Ferdinand de), sujet parlant, champ, Pos (Hendrik)

Premise. A monistic perspective

Merleau-Ponty's speculations are driven by the problem of the relations between consciousness and nature, spirit and matter, mind and body, and by the search for a solution different from that of Cartesian dualism. A crucial aspect is that of corpo-reality, the fundamental starting point for any type of reflection on existence. And it is for this reason that Merleau-Ponty's monistic philosophy has been rediscovered in the experientialism of contemporary cognitive science because it assigns a central role to the body in the structuring of experience, in which it identifies the precon-ditions of intersubjectivity[1]. It is less known, however, that Saussurean linguistics

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1 Within the cognitive science of embodied mind, the enactive perspective inaugurated by Maturana and Varela is "a direct and deliberate continuation of Merleau Ponty" (Joseph 2020: 30; Bondì 2017 ; Nerlich & Clarke 2007).

were a source of inspiration for Merleau-Ponty[2], who gave a penetrating reading of Saussure's work and considered his *Course in general linguistics* (CGL) (1959 [1916]) to be a genuine contribution to the philosophy of language[3].

Merleau-Ponty maintains that it is necessary to overcome intellectualism, eidetic reduction, and empiricism, and to consider our own filters, be they bodily, experiential or intentional, through which we *live* language and *live within* language. By overcoming Cartesian dualism, Merleau-Ponty finds the interweaving point between consciousness and the world within the body: the subject is in fact an *embodied mind* which, through the body, lives the world in which it is immanent and in which it identifies its own *field of experience*. If the body acts as a vehicle between consciousness and the world, the production of meaning is linked to intentionality and to the linguistic gesture – themes that are addressed in *The Prose of the World* by assigning to intentionality the dual function of perception and elaboration of the world, and by attributing to speech the ability to act as a shaping force. In this framework, corporeality is linked to language through the concepts of behaviour, linguistic gesture, and intentionality, which Merleau-Ponty develops from the phenomenology of Husserl and Pos.

The study of language has been spoiled by both naturalistic and idealistic attitudes: "these two conceptions are at one in holding that the word *has* no significance" (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 205). As demonstrated by the cases of aphasia and other pathologies of language "what the patient has lost, and what the normal person possesses, is not a certain stock of words, but a certain way of using them" (*ibid.*: 203)[4]. The centrality of the question of meaning is linked, in Husserl's last writings, to a conception of speaking as not attributable to translating thoughts into words, but characterized by the intention to signify, to target an object with speech (Merleau-Ponty 1975 [1961]: 43). According to Merleau-Ponty, it is not possible to look at the problem of language in an abstract or objective way independently

2 Merleau-Ponty's interest in Saussurean linguistics testifies to a key stage in the reception of Saussure in French philosophy. Merleau-Ponty's actual reading of Saussure seems to date back to the late 1940s (cf. notes to Merleau-Ponty 2020: 39-40) According to Foultier (2013: 129): "The first explicit reference to Saussure by Merleau-Ponty occurs in *The Metaphysical in Man*, first published in 1947 […] it is particularly in the essays from 1951-52, as well as in the manuscripts from the same period, that Saussure views on language are discussed in more detail".

3 Saussure (for whom language is located in the brain of the speaking subject) and Merleau-Ponty would represent for Joseph (2020: 186-191) two reflections *avant la lettre* on the extended mind (on the centrality of the speaking subject theme in Saussure: De Palo 2016 and 2022).

4 In these reflections on the pathologies of language Merleau-Ponty is inspired by Gelb-Goldstein's concepts of "concrete" attitude and "categorical attitude" defined by Gurwitch as "concrete" functions and "categorical" or "abstract" functions (Aurora 2022: 29; cf. Goldstein 1948). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty writes (1945: 204-205): "the fact that the patient cannot identify the samples is a sign, not that he has lost the verbal image of the words red or blue, but that he has lost the general ability to subsume a sensory given under a category, that he has lapsed" (on Gurwitch and Merleau-Ponty see Aurora in this volume and Aurora 2022). Cf. Bimbenet 2004: 64-65 and 232-234.

of the speaking subjects, since we risk ending up discussing it as "a circuit of third person phenomena" in which "[t]here is no speaker, there is a flow of words set in motion independently of any intention to speak." (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 203) However, since reversing the perspective risks binding the speaking subject to psychologism and solipsism, Merleau-Ponty frames the question of the subject – as he had learned by studying *Gestaltpsychologie* – without disregarding the background within which it shows itself to perception, considering each individual as a *being in the world*.

I will attempt to illustrate the development of the theme of the speaking subject within *The Prose of the World* (1973 [1969])[5], attempting to show the lines of continuity with a reading of CLG devoid of canonical structuralist reception (cf. De Mauro 1967; Ricoeur 1969: 247; Stawarska 2015; De Palo 2016; Aurora & Flack 2016) where la langue is considered as a closed system, ontologically separered from parole and from history, focusing on the concept of *encroachment* (*empiète-ment*) and on the inter-penetration between *one's own body* and *the other's body*, wherein a strategic role is played by an open conception of the *field of experience* and of history's dynamic sedimentation.

1 From the transcendental subject to the speaking subject: Pos and the pre-theoretical linguistic knowledge

Merleau-Ponty's reflections arise from a continuous dialogue with the work of Husserl, beginning with a critical reading of *Logical Investigations* (2021) which shaped his line of reasoning already in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). The subjective perspective must be radically examined because it is from the subject that the revelation of the world departs, like a beam of light aimed at an object. The individual considered in his or her corporeality is placed at the centre of the reflection. In this anti-intellectualist perspective, Merleau-Ponty finds in *gesture* the corporeal origin of language because, when dealing with language, phenomenology places itself in the perspective of the speaking subject: speech is defined as a gesture, that is, a way of *being in the world* with *one's own body*. The subject, in his or her linguistic gesticulation and motility, is at the origin of the meaning of verbal orders (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 164). And it is only after gesticulation that language is constituted, understood as being the set of available meanings, *i.e.*, the reserve of expressions

5 The text dates, according to Lefort (1969), to the years between 1950-1952, and contains important reflections on language that are developed in one of the first courses Merleau-Ponty gave at the Collège de France on *Le problème de la parole* between 1953 and 1954 followed by courses on *L'institution el la passivité* (1954-1955).

invented in any circumstance by *speaking subjectivities* that belong to the inter-subjective community (Descombes 1979: 118).

Merleau-Ponty's critique of the Husserlian transcendental subject is inspired by Pos's phenomenology of language which identifies the primary task for the theory of language as the need to become aware of the speaking subject (Merleau-Ponty 1975 [1961]: 42) who is not to be understood as a transcendental subject detached from linguistic situations, but as a subject who uses the exercise of language to access a presumably universal truth (*ibid*.). Such a notion of the *speaking subject* returns full of implications also in *Phenomenology of Perception* and in *The Prose of the World*.

The epistemological reflections on language carried out by Hendrik Pos – a Dutch pupil of Husserl – have many points of contact with those of Saussure and Merleau-Ponty (cf. Flack 2013: 10; 2021; De Palo 2022). Pos (1939) reintroduces the notion of subject as fundamental in the creation of a phenomenology of language. He does this by developing the issues of intentionality and of the dualism between the point of view of the speaker and that of the grammarian, connecting the problem of the nature of consciousness to that of science (Pos 1939: 354)[6].

Pos highlights the pre-theoretical subjective datum as being independent of the objective form, reaching a phenomenological point of view that leads him to study the links between original (pre-scientific, *pre-theoretical*) linguistic consciousness – the starting point of all language sciences – and the *theoretical and reflexive* knowledge of language. In this sense, the phenomenological point of view does not annihilate scientific knowledge but relativizes it, opposing any theory of knowledge that claims to construct its object of analysis within the scientific framework. This link between science and the original phenomenon is present in all knowledge, but in the human sciences it reveals itself as condition of possibility. This is especially evident in the language sciences: "the linguist is a linguist because he is a speaking subject, and not in spite of this" (Pos 1939: 365).

In fact, Pos (2013: 49) explains that science is an attempt to overcome the limits of original linguistic consciousness. The linguist's point of reference will therefore be *original subjectivity*, a knowledge based on the intuitive data which make scientific objectification possible but which are not acquired through it. For the phenomenologist, all knowledge is determined by this original knowledge (Pos 1939: 363).

The original prelinguistic knowledge to which the speaker has access, what Zlatev & Blomberg (2019: 82-84) call *pre-theoretical*, differs from scientific observation (the linguist's *theoretical* linguistic knowledge) for several reasons (Willems 2012).

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6 For Flack (2013: 23), Pos's perspective can be seen as an attempt "*pour réconcilier, du moins pour juguler l'objectivité idéale de la connaissance et la subjectivité concréte de l'expérience vécue qui résonnent de la façon la plus intéressante avec les recherches conduites à la même époque par la psychologie de la Gestalt, Cassirer, Bühler ou le phénomonologue russe Gustav Špet. Ce sont elles aussi qui ont le plus attiré l'attention de figures telles que Merleau-Ponty, Eugenio Coseriu ou, plus récemment, Jean-Claude Coquet*".

A distinctive feature is the active attitude from which the former derives (Pos 1939: 357). The confident and instinctive behaviour of the speaking subject does not imply knowledge. Linguistic knowledge, on the other hand, arises with a change in the linguistic subject's attitude, wherein the active subject – whose behaviour is characterized by an instinctive certainty that is not knowledge – becomes an observer subject and observes language as an external object (*ibid.*: 358).

What is relevant to the speaking subject is the access that language gives to the world, while the awareness of the diversity of languages (*i.e.*, the question of arbitrariness), the awareness of the past (diachrony), and the taxonomic drive of linguistics which creates atomizations, discretizations, and categorizations, all belong to the (scientific) observer's point of view (Pos 1939: 361-365).

Pos, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964 [1960]: 104), asserted "the rediscovery of the subject in the act of speaking," as contrasted to both "a science of language which inevitably treats this as a thing," and to "the scientific or observational attitude" which "takes that language in the past and breaks it down into a sum of linguistic facts in which its unity disappears."

The phenomenologist, as Merleau-Ponty remarks (1975 [1961]: 41), tries to explain what the speaking subject is, but the speaking subject does not have the same attitude towards language as the observer who looks at language as something external. The observer's point of view is independent of the psycho-physical conditions and of the conditions of use in which it is produced. While for the speaking subject who appropriates and practices language, the reality of language indisputably exists, insofar as there are certain environments and contexts in which he or she can communicate effectively and other environments and contexts in which he or she cannot (*ibid*.: 42).

Distinguishing between external observation of language and the speaker's sentiment configures a dualism which is reconciled by hypothesizing a progressive extension of consciousness. The study of these interrelations is epistemology's most important challenge, and Merleau-Ponty complains about the lack of such a study[7].

Radical objectivism (behaviourism and physicalism in particular) pushes the gap between objective and subjective points of view to extreme consequences by claiming that all knowledge of language derives from external observation (*ibid*.: 362). Pos judges this gap – as had already been done by Saussure (who outlined a

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7 Very interesting in this regard are the passages in the *Notes préparatoires to the Cours au Collège de France* (1953-1954) on *Le problème de la parole* dedicated to *Conscience linguistique naïve*: "*le sujet adhérant à sa langue ou complice de sa langue, la parole ce n'est pas le simple usage de la langue, naïf, sans aucune objectivation*" (Merleau-Ponty 2020: 40-42).

continuum between different levels of consciousness)[8] – to be an abstraction, since the linguist is also a speaking subject, and if he is also a philosopher, he will reflect on what unites and what separates original linguistic consciousness and knowledge.

This perspective is taken up by Merleau-Ponty, when he argues that the phenomenologist who tries to explain the speaking subject does not have an observer attitude towards language at all:

> The observer is faced with language as something external to him [...]. The observer links the present to the past. But the speaking subject ignores the past [...]. The speaking subject turns towards the future. For him, language is above all a means of expression, a means of communicating to others his intentions towards the future. Finally, the observer always has the tendency to decompose language into a series of processes which he considers to be relatively independent of each other. (Merleau-Ponty 1975 [1961]: 41)

In this sense, the phenomenology of language advocated by Pos (cf. De Palo 2013b) detaches itself from the purely eidetic framework (which considers the abstract plane of every possible language) and makes a return to the speaking subject and his contact with the language he speaks (see Coquet 2007: 22), returning to the intentional nature of sounds and of the senses aimed at and adjusted to the problem of inter-comprehension.

If the subject is, in the first place, situated in language, phenomenology not only has the negative task of clearly indicating the conditions without which there would be no language, but it must also explain, according to Merleau-Ponty (1964 [1960]: 104-105), the paradox of a subject who speaks and understands. Here we see the importance of Husserl's claim that research should not aim at "merely possible expression[s]," but at our linguistic *field of presence* (*ibid.*). As a result, "the philosopher may no longer speak of mind in general, […] [i]nstead he must see himself within the dialogue of minds, situated as they all are" (*ibid.*: 106).

Developing these ideas from Pos leads to a philosophy of *parole* that Merleau-Ponty develops in two directions: 1) the dialogical nature of the speaking subject (§ 2); 2) an open notion of *field of experience*, called *environnement* by Pos, which takes on a strategic role in overcoming dualism (§ 3).

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8 The activity of the speaking subject presents different degrees of consciousness that come into play in the foundation of linguistic values and identities: "*Ce qui est réel c'est ce dont les sujets parlants ont conscience à un degré quelconque*" (CLG/E 2779 N7). Langue for Saussure is determined only from the perspective of the speaking subject who assumes the role of epistemic guarantor. In fact, for Saussure, the distinction between "*l'analyse subjective des sujets parlants eux-mêmes (qui seule importe!) et l'analyse objective des grammairiens*" (CLG/E, 2760 IR 2-65) is capital (on these issues De Palo 2016: 50-68; De Palo 2022).

2 Dialogue and encroachment:
The Dismantling of Monadic Consciousness

Whilst writing *The Prose of the World*, probably between 1950 and 1952, Merleau-Ponty was at the height of his reflection on language. Published posthumously in 1964, the work marks that intermediate phase in the author's thought, which lies between *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945) and *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964) and is very rich in insights on language.

With the discovery of the body as active body or symbolic power, Merleau-Ponty establishes "a concrete theory of the mind which will show the mind in a relationship of reciprocal exchange with the instruments which it uses" (Lefort in Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: xii).

The speaking subject is an embodied subject (*sujet incarné*) inseparably linked to his or her own body through which any type of experience is had, and which for this reason places itself as a vehicle between consciousness and the world. When the subject-object division is overcome and perception and the body are placed at the centre of the investigation, the individual is no longer an *ego* which can detach itself from things and think of them from the outside in a transcendental way commanded by a *res cogitans*. On the contrary, since the *ego* is embodied, and, to the extent that it inextricably "adheres" to the world and is tied to it as if by "an umbilical cord," one must speak – according to Merleau-Ponty – of a relationship of *immanence* (or inherence) also between body, mind, and world. The subject acquires the form of an "inherence in the world" (Kirchmayr 2008; Kristensen 2010: 193). In our encounter with the world as perceived, the world is the paradoxical field of our experience, and we are but a perspective in it. It therefore no longer makes sense to distinguish between an *interiority* (*cogito*) and an *exteriority* (*world*), since interior and exterior are but one, and represent two faces of the same surface. This surface which is the world is the same surface as the body.

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty argues, if the key to access things lies in the body, any type of relationship one has with the world and with others, every dialogue, and every expressive act, passes through the flesh. Nothing of what we say, think, or do, prescinds from immanence.

The ambiguity inherent in the very concept of corporeality configures an embodied subject, from which any reflection also starts. Such a subject is simultaneously a living body (*chair*) and a lived body, on the basis of the distinction introduced by Husserl in *Cartesian Meditations* between (one's own) lived body, *Leib*, and the other body (as thing), *Körper*. For this reason, by perceiving and receiving external impulses, the body is lived, and at the same time, by internalizing and reworking them – giving them meaning – it shows itself to be alive.

The fundamental novelty of this vision of the body is the linguistic perspective that shows "a two-way action; one which is induced by our own presence and another which we bring about in the *socius* by regarding him [the other person] as being outside ourselves." In fact, "[t]he speaking 'I' abides in its body. Rather than imprisoning it, language is like a magic machine for transporting the 'I' into the other person's perspective" (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: 19). There would be no "others or other minds for me, if I did not have a body and if they had no body through which they slip into my field" (*ibid*.:138).

The need to thoroughly rethink the relationship between consciousness and the world (between the perceiving body and the perceived object) is progressively manifested in Merleau-Ponty's reflections. The goal is to dismantle the so-called "monadic consciousness," an expression also used by Karl Bühler (2011[1934]: 12)[9]. The philosopher is never a universal thinker from all points of view but is always situated, identified, and for this reason, in need of dialogue. The most effective way to overcome these limitations is to get in touch with other situations (Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1960]: 106)[10] because the ultimate, final, radical subjectivity – what philosophers call *transcendental subjectivity* – is an intersubjectivity:

> When I speak or understand, I experience that presence of others in myself or of myself in others which is the stumbling-block of the theory of intersubjectivity, I experience that presence of what is represented which is the stumbling-block of the theory of time. (Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1960]: 97)

In *The Structure of Behaviour* (1942), structure and behaviour mark the two poles that recall the object and the subject, or nature and consciousness. All behaviour implies meaning, and is, therefore, simultaneously structure and meaning. I can experience a certain thing because my consciousness has targeted it in ways that can also be very different from each other (for example perception, imagination, expectation, memory, etc., ways that Husserl calls, in technical language, *noesis*). Merleau-Ponty speaks in this regard of "existence," which is grasped when we conceive behaviour as belonging neither to the order of physical things nor to that of psychic processes. Existence is therefore an opening to the world as a movement that is not yet conscious. Through the study of behaviour, therefore, Merleau-Ponty brings to light a form of pre-reflexive consciousness which is in the world, is related to the world, and exists. The other is always inserted at the meeting point between

9 "When Merleau-Ponty speaks about a 'phenomenology of speech' he does not have a solitary subject in mind constituting linguistic meaning solely from the profundity of his transcendental subjectivity" (Foultier 2013:130).

10 Cf. in this regard in the *Notes préparatoires* to the *Cours au Collège de France* (1953-1954) on *Le problème de la parole* and more specifically the passages devoted à l'*égocentrisme*: "ma situation linguistique, parce que vécue sans réduction ni réflexion est prise pour absolu. Egocentrisme /[7] (3)/ linguistique" (Merleau-Ponty 2020: 41; Andén 2020: 10, 15).

the self and the world, we find the other as we find our world. It is not an accident "but our first insertion into the world and into truth." (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: 139). Thus, languages too should not be considered in a search for an essence, or a universal grammar, but should be conceived in the dimension of existence (*ibid*.: 45; see following §).

The themes of dialogue and of the interlocutor are addressed starting from a critique of the conception of the ideal interlocutor prefigured by the eidetic of language which conceives of language as algorithm (*ibid*.: 131). The notion of *the other's body* (*corps autrui*) therefore develops in relation to that of dialogue: "[m]yself and the other are like two *nearly* concentric circles which can be distinguished only by a slight and mysterious slippage." In any case, "the other is not I and on that account differences must arise." (*ibid*.: 134); "How could there be an outside view upon this totality which I am? [...] I grow; I give birth, this other is made from my flesh and blood and yet is no longer me" (*ibid*.).

It is not a matter of affirming that the self inhabits another body, conceived as a sort of second *ego*, a second domicile of the self: "there is a myself which is other, which dwells elsewhere and deprives me of my central location" (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: 135). It is instead a matter of understanding how I split myself, how I decentralize myself, since "[t]he mystery of the other is nothing but the mystery of myself." (*ibid*.)

Communicating is thus depicted as a sort of encroachment, as something that abolishes the boundary between what I am and what the other is; *speaking* is letting oneself be carried away by the movement of speech, woven by the said and the unsaid, by language and silence.

The topic of "Dialogue and the Perception of the Other" is precisely dialogue, and, in it, the encroachment of meaning that leads from the speaking subject to the other, to another subject in which it mirrors itself:

> with respect to the particular gesture of speech, the solution lies in recognizing that, in the experience of the dialogue, the other's speech manages to reach in us our significations, and that our words, as the replies attest, reach in him his significations. For we encroach upon one another inasmuch as we belong to the same cultural world, and above all to the same language, and my acts of expression and the other's derive from the same institution. (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: 139)

The fact is that "speech and understanding are moments in the unified system of self-other. The substratum of this system is not a pure 'I'," but "an 'I' endowed with a body which reveals its thoughts sometimes to attribute them to itself and at other times to impute them to someone else" (*ibid*.:18).

Merleau-Ponty presents the programmatic plan of his investigation of the linguistic phenomenon:

> I would have to admit that I do not live just my own thought but that, in the exercise of speech, I *become* the one to whom I am listening. Finally, I would need to understand how speech can be pregnant with a meaning. Let us try, then, not to explain this but to establish more precisely the power of speaking, to get close to that signification which is nothing else than the unique movement of which signs are the visible trace (*ibid*.: 118).

When I am listening, "the conversation pronounces itself within me. It summons me and grips me; it envelops and inhabits me" (*ibid*.: 19). Therefore, the conversation "resembles a struggle between two athletes in a tug-of-war" (*ibid*.). The paradox of this conception lies in the miracle of perceiving of the other, which can only manifest itself by accessing *my field*, by entering my world. What convinces me that the other feels and sees like I do, that "there are two of us perceiving the world" is that "his body belongs among my objects, that it is one of them, that it appears in my world" (*ibid*.:136):

> The experience that I make out of my hold on the world is what makes me capable of perceiving another myself, provided that in the interior of my world there opens up a gesture resembling my own. (*ibid*.: 137)

In fact, "There is a universality of feeling – and it is upon this that our identification rests, the generalization of my body, the perception of the other (*ibid*.). Therefore:

> the other is not to be found in the things, he is not in his body, and he is not I. We cannot put him anywhere and effectively we put him nowhere, neither in the in-itself nor in the for-itself, which is me. There is no place for him except in *my field*, but that place at least was ready for him ever since I began to perceive. From the first time I relied on my body to explore the world, I knew that this corporeal relation to the world could be generalized. (*ibid*.:136)

The perception of the other is part of an open, exposed conception of the self that is very far from the "I think" conceived as "a certain locus called 'I' where action and awareness of action are not different," and "where no intrusion from outside is even conceivable" (*ibid*.: 17). This 'I' locked up in a barrel, as Bühler would say, "would not know how to speak." On the contrary "[h]e who speaks enters into a system of relations which presuppose his presence and at the same time make him open and vulnerable" (*ibid*.). Openness to the world can be found in the notion of *field*:

> One field does not exclude another the way an act of absolute consciousness, a decision, for example, excludes another. Rather, a field tends of itself to multiply, because it is the opening through which, as a body, I am "exposed" to the world (*ibid*., pp. 137-138).

In fact, for me there would be no others, no other minds, "if I did not have a body and if they had no body through which they slip into my field, multiplying it from within, and seeming to me prey to the same world, oriented to the same world as I" (*ibid.*:138).

3 The opening of the field: "I am a field! I am an experience"

The notion of *field* can be traced back to *Gestaltpsychologie* (De Palo 2019a, 2019b, 2019c; Barbaras 2021) and is naturally very recurrent in *Phenomenology of Perception* especially in relation to a particular type of field, the visual one. In *Gestalttheorie* a figure on a background is the simplest sensible datum we can obtain, without which a phenomenon cannot be called perception. The perceptual "something" is always in the midst of other things and always part of a "field" (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 6)[11].

In his course notes from the Collège de France, Merleau-Ponty (2021: 65) also admits another source of inspiration: "*De même, Brunschvicg insiste sur la notion de champ*" (cf. Dastur 2016: 9). It is interesting to emphasize this reference that Merleau-Ponty makes to his teacher Brunschvicg[12] in the use of the concept of field as an alternative to the subject-object dualism:

> *Cette notion est-elle pensable dans la cadre d'un idéalisme qui ne connaît que le construit ? Le champ est-il un constructeur ? N'a-t-il pas une propriété particulière ? La relation qu'il entretient avec l'homme n'est pas la pure relation sujet-objet puisque celui qui pense le champ en fait partie.* (Merleau-Ponty 2021: 65)

In the section of *Phenomenology of Perception* titled *The synthesis of one's own body*, Merleau-Ponty (2005 [1945]: 173) in fact poses roughly the same question posed by Brunschvicg: "Are we then to say that we perceive our body in virtue of its law of construction, as we know in advance all the possible facets of a cube in virtue of its geometrical structure?" But Merleau-Ponty's answer owes much to the phenomenological notion of *one's own body*, inspired by *Cartesian Meditations*, which, by redesigning the relationship between subject and object, allowed – together with the notion of field – to arrive at a different conception of perception (cf. Bonomi 1967: 32-39).

The importance of the background-figure structure of perception goes far beyond the sphere of visual perception – the main interest of *Gestalt* psychology – and refers also to the "auditory field" (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 383) pointing to the presence

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11 The holistic perspective of Gestalttheorie is related to the idea of the totality of the organism studied in its epistemological implications by Kurt Goldstein (1934) who strongly influenced Merleau-Ponty's thought.

12 Pos also came into contact with Brunschvig (Flack 2013: 14).

of a *subject* of perception (*e.g.*, one capable of explaining the orientation of a face in space).

But how do considerations on perception, on the role of one's own body, on the notion of field, merge with the question of language? As Merleau-Ponty (2005 [1945]: 202) writes:

> We have seen in the body a unity distinct from that of the scientific object. We have just discovered, even in its "sexual function", intentionality and sense-giving powers. In trying to describe the phenomenon of speech and the specific act of meaning, we shall have the opportunity to leave behind us, once and for all, the traditional subject-object dichotomy.

Language and speech seem to be able to respond to and overcome the dualism of subject and object and open up "a space between self and world, between the inner and the outer" (Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1993: 3). Speech emerges as a decisive and strategic place for a radical questioning of the dualisms of mind and body, of mental and physical, or spiritual and material.

The continuous comparison between the linguistic gesture and any other bodily gesture allows us to understand that the speaking subject is located in a world, is surrounded by objects, and is immersed in a context – in a field – it shares with other subjects who are also speakers, as evidenced by the fact that Merleau-Ponty carefully considers the figure of the listener. The embodied subject can be defined as such insofar as it is located in a field, so much so that in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty writes: "I am a field, an experience" (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 473).

Thus, we can understand "the accomplishment language represents for us, how language prolongs and transforms the silent relation with the other" (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: 139). It is a matter of understanding that our sensitivity to the world, our synchronized relationship between the body and the world makes "a transferable signification of our 'corporeality,' [creates] a 'common situation,' and finally [yields] the perception of another like ourselves" (*ibid*.). Therefore, when we consider "the particular gesture of speech, the solution lies in recognizing that, in the experience of the dialogue, the other's speech manages to reach in us our significations, and that our words, as the replies attest, reach in him his significations" (*ibid*.)[13].

My field is therefore "an inexhaustible source of being – not only of being for me but also of being for the other (*ibid*.: 140). Just as our common belonging to the same world presupposes that my experience is originally experience of being, so our belonging to a common language presupposes a primordial relationship between me

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13 In this regard, see the notion of "*Autrui*" in theories of language and "*champ perceptif* énonciatif" (in Lebas 2022: 15-40; Bondì 2022).

and speech: "The common language which we speak is something like the anony-
mous corporeality which we share with other organisms" while "the expressive op-
eration, and speech in particular considered in its nascent state, establish a common
situation which is no longer only a community of *being* but a community of *doing*"
(*ibid*.).

4 Diacrisis and expressive signification:
difference and conjunction

Even in the courses that Merleau-Ponty held at the Sorbonne between 1949 and
1952, we can see a recognition of language's centrality in philosophy and a dis-
tancing from the tradition that goes from Descartes to Kant which refuses to give
any philosophical meaning to language (Merleau-Ponty 1988: 9). In the Cartesian
tradition there is no possible encounter between consciousness and language and
therefore no bridge between the self and the other:

> *car la conscience est essentiellement conscience de soi pour pouvoir être conscience
> de quelque chose. La conscience dans cette conception est une activité de synthèse
> universelle. Dans cette perspective, autrui n'est que projection de ce que l'on sait
> de soi-même : dans le principe de cette philosophie, on ne rencontre pas autrui* […]
> *le langage relève de l'ordre des choses. Et non de l'ordre du sujet*. (Merleau-Ponty
> 1988: 9)

Therefore, in this perspective, language is emptied, placed in the background, and
considered as a covering for thought and consciousness (Merleau-Ponty 1988: 10).
The critique of the model of language as an algorithm, carried out in *The Prose of
the World* also serves as a starting point to support the thesis about the need for a
linguistic investigation beyond the logical-scientific approach that objectifies and
abstracts the word. Because speech, instead, lives thanks to its mystery; its vital
principle lies in the elusive overabundance of the signified on the signifier, put into
action by "a fabulous apparatus which enables us to express an indefinite number of
thoughts or objects through a finite number of signs," an apparatus which, like God's
understanding, "contains the germs of every conceivable signification" (Merleau-
Ponty 1973 [1969]: 4).

If we are to believe in "the spectre of a pure language," in a golden age of lan-
guage, and in the fact that "men unearth a prehistoric language spoken in things,"
then "linguistic gesticulation may arouse nothing in the mind of an observer," (*ibid*.:
6-7) because "[i]n this way we are putting language before language" (*ibid*.: 14).
The myth of a "language of things" is the same as that of a "universal language,"
for which the word is "a pure sign standing for a pure signification" (*ibid*.: 7) and
the speaker limits himself to codifying his thought. In this way, if one reflects on

language rather than living it, one can only arrive at a paradox that Merleau-Ponty expresses almost in the same terms as Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*: we understand what is said to us because we know in advance the meaning of the words spoken to us. We also find this idea of a paradoxical language in *Signs*:

> if communication really did go from the whole of the speaker's language to the whole of the hearer's language, one would have to know the language in order to learn it. But the objection is of the same kind as Zeno's paradoxes; and as they are overcome by the act of movement, it is overcome by the use of speech. And this sort of circle, according to which language, in the presence of those who are learning it, precedes itself, teaches itself, and suggests its own deciphering, is perhaps the marvel which defines language. (Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1960]: 39)

This conception of language develops around the concept of expression that Merleau-Ponty applies to the analysis of gestures, to the mimic use of the body, to all forms of language, up to the more sublimated examples of mathematical language. In fact, under the grammatical system which attributes a certain sign to a certain meaning, "one can see another expressive system emerge which is the vehicle of the signification but proceeds differently" (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: 28).

Having abandoned the specter of pure language, it is necessary to recognize that there are two languages: *sedimented language* (*le langage parlé*), "or language as an institution, which effaces itself in order to yield the meaning which it conveys," and *speech* (*le langage parlant*), "which creates itself in its expressive acts, which sweeps me on from the signs toward meaning" (*ibid.*:10). Merleau-Ponty in fact makes use of the notion of signs and of the symbolic dimension of languages, often neglected in current cognitivism[14]. However, the symbolic or representative function is not an ultimate term of analysis because, as we have seen, it is not autonomous and "separate from the materials in which it is made real" (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 179).

Merleau-Ponty (2005 [1945]: 229) develops a philosophy of *langage parlant* in which linguistic structures are subordinated to the work of expression: as for Pos, it is a question of passing from object-language to *speech.* In fact, speech not only realizes possibilities inscribed in the *langue*, but – as Saussure had already claimed – it modifies and sustains *langue* (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 35). For the speaking subject, the act of speech represents the moment in which the – still silent – intention to signify is *embodied* into intersubjective cultural practices, realizing itself in situations

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14 An interesting semiotic perspective is that of Bondì (2022: 9) who, drawing inspiration from Merleau-Ponty, rethinks signification as "semiogenesis," referring to linguistic semiosis, that is, to "an activity of construction and constitution of concomitant sense-forms and values" that contribute to the "tireless 'search for expression' by subjects".

of *discours*, constantly transforming the meaning of the tools through which these practices are carried out.

Words are neither the armour nor the fortresses of thought, because "beneath the conceptual meaning of the words, [we find] an existential meaning which is not only rendered by them, but which inhabits them, and is inseparable from them" (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 212). Returning words to the gesture means returning them to the source of meaning, to expression, to the *speech* that coherently deforms the *sedimented* and *institutional language* (Puech 1985: 31; Zlatev 2010: 8). In the final analysis, the act of speech is not only a patchwork of individual realities, but the place in which these realities sediment and constitute the instituted forms of the *langue* on a collective, inter-individual, i.e., intersubjective level (see next §).

Interest in Saussure and in the systemic conception of *langue* led Merleau-Ponty (1973 [1969]: 31) to rediscover the link between totality and negativity (differentiality) and to attribute to signs a diacritical sense, a systemic and differential value which depends on the coexistence with other signs: it is necessary to clarify, "this side of all established nomenclature, the 'linguistic value' immanent in the acts of *speech*."

Speech is not a sum of signs, but a methodical means of distinguishing one sign from another and thus constructing a linguistic universe. "Speaking is possessing language as a principle of distinction" according to which each language has different differential values, for example, there are languages "in which one cannot say 'to sit in the sun'" (*ibid*.: 32; same example made by Saussure CGL: 116)[15]. Language "invents a series of gestures, which between them present differences" which purvey "to us the palpable flow and contours of a universe of meaning" (*ibid*.). Phonemes, which by themselves mean nothing one can specify, are a tool which has an inexhaustible power to distinguish one linguistic gesture from another based on distinctive units. Therefore, the expressive power of a sign is linked to the fact that it is part of a system.

However, it must be remembered that in language – unlike in algorithms – signification springs not only from differentiality, but also from the *conjunction* of signs, an undervalued important issue that introduces a positive principle alongside the negative principle of difference, sometimes linked to the carnal disposition mysteriously blossoming within them; it explodes beyond signs and yet it is only their vibration, just as a scream transmits the sigh and the pain of the screamer. On the other hand, in the purity of the algorithm, signification frees itself from any compromise with the flow of signs that it dominates and legitimizes, while, at the same

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15 Visetti & Piotrowski (2015: 6) refer to "*une extension radicale du concept de* diacriticité*, qui désormais opère à tous les niveaux, sur tous les régimes du sentir et se mouvoir en tant que des significations s'y trament*".

time, signs correspond to it in such a perfect way that expression leaves nothing to be desired and appears to contain meaning. The confused relationships of transcendence give way to relationships belonging to a system of signs with no inner life and to a system of meanings that do not belong to animal existence. Therefore, the *finished expression*, "what we call successful communication," is chimerical. "But successful communication occurs only if the listener, instead of following the verbal chain link by link, on his own account resumes the other's linguistic gesticulation and carries it further" (*ibid*.: 28-29).

The core of these reflections lies in the relationship between language and thought often addressed in relation to the phenomenon of *ellipsis*. In *Signes* (Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1960]: 43), for example, we see a rejection of the hypothesis that thought is a sort of *original text* that language must translate, and the idea that there is a *complete* expression is deemed nonsensical. In this sense, it is in fact necessary to get rid of the notions of implication and of *ellipsis*, insofar as *integral* communication does not exist (*ibid*.)[16]. It is intention (*visée*), that animates words: all words embody intention and carry it, embodied in them, as meaning.

In language as algorithm, the correspondence between signs and meanings is so perfect that expression leaves nothing unsaid and denies any mysterious character. While in mathematics the perfect adherence between the "two faces of the sign" does not leave any kind of expressive freedom, the internal diacriticality of the linguistic sign leaves meaning opaque and hidden, exposed to those that Saussure (CGL/E: 2602 IR), calls *flottements* and Merleau-Ponty (1973 [1969]: 22) *glissements*. In fact, meaning insinuates itself as "lateral or oblique," in the "commerce between the words themselves."[17]

Language is not a reality made up of univocal meanings that can fully express themselves under the gaze of a constituent consciousness, but rather it is a set of linguistic gestures which never exhaust expression and which make sense only obliquely in relation to other incomplete expressions, eventually signifying through a style which is a personal signature imprinted on the use of language by the embodied subject (Bonan 2001: 250).

16 Merleau-Ponty (1973 [1969]: 27) shows himself to be a very erudite reader of Saussure from whom he takes the same examples used with regard to syntax and the notion of implication: the phrase *l'homme que j'aime* is no more complete or expressive than *The man I love*, despite containing an additional relative pronoun. On the question of ellipsis in Saussure and Merleau-Ponty see De Palo (2013, 2016).

17 The allusion to obliquity in the quoted text is also found in Saussure's *Writings on General Linguistics* (2006: 84).

5 *Parole conquérante* and *parole* as an institution

Saussure's exceptional acumen which inspires many of Merleau-Ponty's reflections cannot be ignored. Saussure has shown what the key to intersubjectivity is. It is not in the etymology of words which is totally ignored by the speaking subjects to whom what is important is the *usage actuel*, so much so that Saussure inaugurates alongside the linguistics of language, *langue*, a linguistics of speech, *parole* (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: 23). As an alternative to the anti-historical reading given to the notion of langue in structuralism, Merleau Ponty (1953: 64) writes: "*Saussure pourrait bien avoir esquissé une philosophie de l'histoire*".

The key to understanding language is in fact not objectivism, since "[t]he radical awareness of subjectivity enables me to rediscover other subjectivities and thereby the truth of the linguistic past" (*ibid*.: 25).The solution to the doubts and paradoxes that affect language is not found in the recourse to some universal language that dominates history, but in what Husserl calls the "living present," in *speech*, a "variant of all the languages that were spoken before me" (*ibid*.). Merleau-Ponty (1973 [1969]: 23) recognizes the immense merit of Saussure having freed history from historicism and inaugurated a new conception of reason. In fact, there is a historical need for the institution of language, and it is not of a logical nature and proves that the foundation of truth is not outside of time (*ibid*.: 144).

In relation to the distinction between sedimented language and speech[18], the influence of Husserl (in *Crisis of the European Sciences*) and Saussure (linguistic synchrony and diachrony) shines through in the notion of *sedimentation*.

Merleau-Ponty uses this geological image as a metaphor for knowledge, the result of a succession of languages and cultural activities, which over time is deposited in a succession of layers, offering a "direction of meaning." Retracing these layers, we would be able to reach that original meaning that phenomenology chases after. Here is the kernel of a non-static conception of language, therefore closely tied to the progression of life and experience. Merleau-Ponty clearly states the importance of the experience of language whenever there are attempts to reconstruct meaning, since spoken language (*le langage parlé*) is nothing more than the intertwining of languages evolved through history and other human sciences. He thus welcomes this Husserlian idea of *sedimentation*, in its most dynamic sense. At the same time, he

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18 The distinction between a *speaking word* and a *spoken word* (*parole parlante et parole parlée*)*,* between creative use of words and its established use, is introduced in *Phenomenology of Perception* (Merleau-Ponty 2005 [1945]: 229). Merleau-Ponty' account of speaking and spoken speech would have for contentious issues in contemporary philosophy of language, such as the relation between speaker and expression meaning, the relation between semantics and pragmatics, the role of context in establishing meaning, and the ontology of language more generally (Kee 2018).

knows that words, as soon as they are used, are also actively speaking (*parlantes*) and exploding in all their power, opening up to new meanings.

Sedimentation preserves the sense of history through those who experience the present language. Taking up from Hegel the idea of a dialectic of history, which proceeds between the various states and traces the evolution of spirit over time, history becomes the guarantor of truth as much as the present action. Thus, Hegel is considered as a living example of historicity, as the fruit of this sedimentation and stratification of history, which preserves the past within itself without fossilizing it, but gives it a new form. It is synthesis that preserves the past in its present depth:

> Sedimentation is not the end of history. There is no history if there remains nothing of what passes and if each present in its very singularity does not inscribe itself once and for all in the tableau of what has been and continues to be. (Merleau-Ponty 1973 [1969]: 109)

For Merleau-Ponty, in *sedimented* language, meaning settles over time and is stratified in a past that must be understood in a dynamic way. It is in fact relived at the very moment in which something new is expressed through *speech*, which bears within itself the echo of the history it represents, but which does not let itself be paralyzed by it.

If for Merleau-Ponty spoken language is one whose meaning is sedimented and accumulated over time, speech conceals new meanings, which begin to live in the moment when words are pronounced. For this reason, language is conceived as always incomplete and alive, yet capable of actually returning the ambiguity of existence.

As we have said, the general use of language among people who share the same cultural world, the same *langue*, the same institution (which Saussure traces back to a speaking mass) implies another more fundamental "primordial relation between me and my speech, which gives it the value of a dimension of being." In fact, it is the first meaning, *la parole conquérante*, which enables the "institutionalized language," *la langue* (*ibid*.: 141).

Conclusions. From the field of experience
to the common situation

In this contribution, I have tried to illustrate how the intersection of phenomenology with the influence of Saussure's work and Gestalt psychology leads Merleau-Ponty to assign a strategic role to an open conception of the notion of *field of experience* (cf. Varela, Thompson, Rosch 1993: 174). This notion allows a dynamic rethinking of both the inter-penetration of embodied subjects and their singularity, in the form of *praxis*, and of *speech* (cf. Bonan 2001: 253). The self-other system is a hand-to-hand fight between two beings endowed with body and language, each of which attracts

the other through invisible threads (Merleau-Ponty 1964 [1960]: 42) which create a "common situation" in which the dynamic sedimentation of history is engaged (cf. Dastur 2016: 22).

In the courses held at the Collège de France (particularly in the course on *L'institution dans l'histoire personnelle et publique*, 1952-1953) Merleau-Ponty (1968: 38) "*cherche* […] *dans la notion d'institution un remède aux difficultés de la philosophie de la conscience*" and a motivation in culture as an intersubjective reactivation of the intention to signify. In this course, Merleau-Ponty refers to a *sujet instituant* to recognize the role of the historical element in the transmission of cultural values and an intersubjective and collective dimension of sedimented *speech* which guarantees belonging to a shared world and time (cf. Vallier 2005).

These considerations on sedimentation overlap with those made recently by Esposito (2021: 54) on the notion of *institution*, a word dear to Saussure, which underlines its links with life[19]. In this link, a crucial role is played by the faculty of language – which can be considered a "second birth" – from which political and social life originated without ever severing the ties with its own biological roots (*ibid.*: 9). The intersection of body and institution is represented precisely by language. In fact, the Saussurian linguistic turn – as Merleau-Ponty well understood by detaching himself from the structuralist doctrine – does not establish a split between language (*langue*) and its relationship with the (psychological, biological, neurological) subject. The faculty of constituting and learning a language is, for Saussure, an innate, natural, and biological faculty that can never be separated from the living body, from the organism, and from the brain of the individual speaker. Esposito (2021: 54) observes, in this regard, that Merleau-Ponty departs from Husserl's phenomenological conception by pushing phenomenological semantics in a more intensely historical and political direction, away from Husserl's over-focus on the subject's consciousness. Merleau-Ponty's original contribution lies in the shift from a philosophy of consciousness to one of living corporeality that frees its historical-political meaning. In this framework, Merleau-Ponty's originality is to be found in a notion of *instituting praxis*; a process that grafts newness onto an already established dimension.

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19 The term *institution* recalls the Husserlian *Stiftung* and accounts for the crucial moment in which the threads of history, culture, and the social sphere – understood as a field of intersubjective actions – intertwine.

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