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MERLEAU-PONTY FROM PERCEPTION TO LANGUAGE. NEW ELEMENTS OF INTERPRETATION

Maurice Merleau-Ponty is widely known for his work on perception, but his research in the field of language is extremely rich and wide-ranging: it extends from the acquisition of language by infants to the various pathologies connected to the decline of human verbal capacities, from writing to cases of artistic efforts to find a new language capable of expressing new experiences of the world. If wish to set out in search of a philosophy of language in Merleau-Ponty's work, we must bear in mind what he stated about hermeneutics, namely that a theory about language cannot be without facts¹.

In recent times important integrations to Merleau-Ponty's corpus have been made through the publication of the previously unreleased sources from the National Library in Paris. While hitherto Merleau-Ponty's lessons at the France College in the fifties were only known through the summaries published in the Annual Report of that institution, we can now read the notes for two of his courses dating back to 1952-53, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression* and *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage* (Merleau-Ponty 2011 and Merleau-Ponty 2013). These basically confirm the great attention which Merleau-Ponty devoted to language in those years, and which led him to develop his inquiries into the field of perception in a different direction. The picture will become complete with the publication of the notes of a third course, *Le problème de la parole*, which was held the following year, and for which we have still to rely on the *Résumés* (Merleau-Ponty 1968) – but this paper will also refer to an indirect source, Stefan Kri-

¹ See Merleau-Ponty 2011, 47: «*Une herméneutique de la facticité ne peut être sans faits*». Merleau-Ponty was here clearly referring to Heidegger's philosophy and its peculiar configuration.

stensen's reconstruction of these lessons in his *Parole et subjectivité* (Kristensen 2010).

In the past, Merleau-Ponty's research on language was widely known through a good range of sources. Claude Lefort edited and published *La prose du monde* (Merleau-Ponty 1969) after the philosopher's premature death. This is the provisional draft of a book on which the phenomenologist worked in the early fifties, without ever coming up with a definitive version that satisfied him². The third chapter of the book was partially rewritten and published in the journal *Les temps moderne* by the author himself in the form of an essay entitled *Le langage indirect et le voix du silence* (Merleau-Ponty 1960). In *Signes* we also find *Sur la phénoménologie du langage* (Merleau-Ponty 1960), the text of a talk held by Merleau-Ponty in 1951. Going back a couple years more, we must recall the course *La conscience et l'acquisition du langage*, held by the philosopher when he was teaching infant psychology and pedagogy at the Sorbonne in 1949 (Merleau-Ponty 2001).

The two recently published series of lecture notes effectively provide new elements for understanding how the issue of language played a crucial role in helping Merleau-Ponty to configure the new concepts of subject and consciousness, which sprung from *La phénoménologie de la perception* (Merleau-Ponty 1945) and deeply contributed to the author's reshaping of the third part of this book and his reformulation of the metaphysical side of his inquiries in the form of the so-called ontology of the flesh³.

However, the focus of this paper will be on the connections between perception and language, for which new important insights can be gained from the notes⁴.

In the Thursday course the concept of expression firstly finds an explicit and articulated formulation, crucially contributing to explain the continuity between perception and language. Although basically continuing to follow the main phenomenological stream by searching for the roots of linguistic meanings in perceptions (Kristensen 2010, 107), the attribution of an expressive character to perceptions themselves makes it clear that for Merleau-Ponty perceptive experience is not to be understood as the direct

² On some problems about the published version of *La prose du monde* that emerge when considering the philosopher's unpublished notes, see Noble 2014, 201.

³ On this transition, see Saint Aubert 2011.

⁴ My aim here is to update and further develop the inquiries I proposed in Dreon 2007, Chapters II and III.

intuition and givenness of something immediately present. A continuity exists between perception and linguistic acts of *parole*, and the two share a structure analogous to the one characterizing linguistic meanings. The self-moving body is conceived as the crucial aspect of the expressive attitude at the core of both perception and speech. But can movement – movement from within the world we belong to – be a sufficient condition for explaining this distinctively human characteristic?

In the Monday course the idea of the two languages finds support and is developed in a more radical direction through Merleau-Ponty's confrontation with the experience of the writer trying to find new words to convey his experience of the word. But is this emphasis on the *langage conquérant* at the expenses of ordinary shared linguistic practices unproblematic and can it really be endorsed?

The present paper will try to reconstruct these elements emerging from the new resources at our disposal, while considering both the positive contributions and the problematic implications they can provide with regard to the relations between perception and language.

1. Expressive perceptions

It can be acknowledged that, when it comes to the topic we are considering here Merleau-Ponty's basic philosophical move remains the same throughout his work, from *La structure du comportement* to *Le visible et l'invisible*. It consists in an attempt to trace linguistic meanings and logical categories back to their alleged roots in the pre-reflexive layer of perceptive experience. From this point of view, the French philosopher extends and further develops the phenomenological tradition originating with Husserl, and particularly works such as *Erfahrung und Urteil* (Husserl 1999) and *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (Husserl 1959).

However, while the primacy of perception remains the milestone of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, in the fifties his attention is no longer focused on the alleged derivation of language from perception, but on the structures they share and on the peculiarities of linguistic expression in comparison to the larger field of perceptive expression – leading him to support the idea of a «dialectic of expression». So while linguistic meanings in Merleau-Ponty's view are essentially based on – and develop – our percep-

tive experience, language produces and implies an essential restructuring of our experience of the world (Kristensen 2010, 73)⁵. Linguistic sense emerges from perceptive sense, but the former is not reducible to the latter. In my previous work on this subject I made the point that Merleau-Ponty never completes this move by explicitly admitting a retro-action of language on human perceptive experience – so that if we consider our distinctively human forms of life, the whole notion of a purely perceptive level of experience is bound to appear as an abstraction (Dreon 2007, 163).

Nonetheless, it must be acknowledged that the concept of expression presented in the lessons on the sensible world held in 1953 provides a crucial element for articulating the idea of a basic structural continuity between perception and language.

Hence, let us begin by quoting the passage from the first lesson where Merleau-Ponty outlines his notion of expression:

On entendra ici par expression ou expressivité la propriété qu'a un phénomène, par son agencement interne, d'en faire connaître un autre qui n'est pas ou même qui n'a jamais été donné. L'outil, l'ouvrage, exprime l'homme en ce sens. L'ouvrage de l'esprit ou le tableau aussi, mais plus complexe: ils expriment l'homme en parlant des choses ou du monde aussi bien, de sorte qu'ici il y a non seulement l'homme qui s'exprime dans le produit mais par ailleurs le produit qui exprime le monde, l'homme s'attestant par l'apparition de ce rapport (Merleau-Ponty 2011, 48).

In order to understand what the philosopher means when he speaks about expression and presents perception itself as something expressive, we should move away both from the common-sense idea of expression and from a certain philosophical assumption that perception is the way things are not only originally given to us, but also clearly and immediately given to us.

From Merleau-Ponty's perspective, expression is not the outside transmission of a pre-existing meaning – for example the communication to other people of an allegedly private state of mind, which ought to be already completely determined before it is conveyed. Expression is rather that peculiar property characterizing objects, human artefacts, utensils and works of art (and it would be helpful if Merleau-Ponty had also spoken about practices or behaviors as expressive) as implying something other than themselves as given in presence, that is something that is not giv-

⁵ This point was already noted in the past by Yves Thierry (Thierry 1987, 7).

en in presence or which remains opaque, implicit and not visible, by contrast to the object which is given. Something is expressive because it belongs to a human world – that is, it can be expressive only from an anthropological point of view – and moreover it is expressive in the sense that it makes us glimpse, half-see or imagine something else which is not given in its full presence and determinacy. This 'further' thing is nothing mysterious or esoteric: it may be the background of a figure standing on the foreground, the *écart* in comparison to a more primitive level, a certain practice from which a specific thing derives its own significance, or a whole form of life in reference to which something finds its proper function or meaning.

On the other hand, perception is always understood by Merleau-Ponty as the primary source of sense, but this does not imply that perceptive experience supplies an immediately clear and distinct picture of what exists. When we perceive something as determined, we always perceive a more nuanced something else alongside it that is not given in presence, but which constitutes the necessary background or the ground level in reference to which we can perceive a certain object, that is our focus – a figure in the background or a difference in comparison to a specific level representing the norm for us in a particular context.

It may be noted that in Merleau-Ponty's notions of expression and perception as something expressive many influences are at work. First of all we can detect an appropriation of the *Gestalt-psychologie* idea of the necessary correlation between figure and background, object and perceptive field: perception, including visual perception, does not primarily give us access to mere isolated objects, whose boundaries are conceived as being completely and autonomously defined. On the contrary, it has to do with selective and dynamic structures that always imply a certain degree of opacity or indeterminacy as the correlative condition for clarity and determinacy. Secondly, we can perceive the influence of the structuralist assumption that no sign has its own significance autonomously or *per se*. On the contrary, sense – both on the perceptive and on the linguistic level – is conceived as a diacritic phenomenon, that is as something emerging from the mutual differentiation of signs. Perception itself has to do with a sort of interplay among different moving features, which are not definitely given and can be fixed only provisionally and in certain situations. Frequently as I will later point out, ordinary and scientific language

tend to artificially stiffen these reciprocal differentiations among meanings by interpreting the connection between a single sign and its correlative reference as something given once and forever. From a structuralist perspective, these circumstances tend to make us consider the system of signs – *la langue* – as preeminent and pre-established in comparison to any further contingent act of *parole*⁶.

Furthermore, I would add that the concept of expression developed here by Merleau-Ponty is resonant with Heidegger's analysis of the so called «*hermeneutisches als*», which emphasizes that something – a utensil, in Heidegger's case too – can be perceived and understood as what it is only by reference to certain human practices and to an articulated web of references which are not thematic, but constitute the necessary pre-assumptions – the *Vorhabe*, *Vorsicht* and *Vorgriff* – for grasping something as that particular thing and not a different one (Heidegger 1927, § 32). Moreover, in the French philosopher's definition of expression as something implying a reference to men and to a whole human world we can detect an echo of Heidegger's interpretation of the world as the ultimate system of cross-references, which is virtually involved in the fact of experiencing something as something – a system whose ultimate reference is human existence. For this reason, I agree with Stefan Kristensen when he states that «*l'analyse de la perception devient herméneutique sans que cela n'implique la réduction du contenu perceptif à un contenu linguistique*» (Kristensen 2010, 78).

To sum up, perception, still maintains its primacy in Merleau-Ponty's thought. However, his characterization of perception as expression makes it clear that he rejected the so-called Cartesian form of intuitionism, that is the idea of perception as the direct grasping of what there is, basically coinciding with a dyadic relation between a knowing subject and a perceived object. In his view, perceptions always imply a third, more indeterminate but necessary element: a more or less nuanced field of perception, an implicitly assumed system of reciprocal differentiation between senses, a reference to a human practice and action. But his original point here is that this reference to a third aspect is realized by

⁶ On the contrary, Merleau-Ponty interpreted Saussure's inquiries as having finally established the primacy of the so-called *parole* over *langue*, which should be considered as an abstraction or as a momentary picture of linguistic utterances. On Merleau-Ponty's partial stretching of Saussure's position, see Roux 2016.

means not of a semiotic interpretation – an inference, in Peirce's terms – but rather of a body, and more precisely a bodily schema⁷.

2. The mediating body

From this point of view, the thesis that the body is the medium of perception acquires a new light. In the following lessons it becomes clear that the expressive root of perception is connected to the moving body, which shares the same field as the perceived object and actively operates from within it. The body appears as the natural subject (Lanfredini 2011, 73) of a praxis in an environment with which it constantly coordinates its moves, by practically taking into account what it meets, what can or cannot be reached, what remains opaque, nuanced or invisible simply because we, as body, are heavy and limited in our movements, and necessarily occupy a certain position in any given moment and cannot be ubiquitous. Hence, Merleau-Ponty says that the human body is expressive because in every human gesture it designs and develops an *Umwelt*⁸ – it never primarily perceives an object as an isolated entity in a vacuum, but perceives it by means of a practical triadic coordination with a certain environment constituting the third reference involved, without any need for interpretation. Simply by occupying a certain position rather than any other one at a certain moment and having to reach a different goal, the body constitutes a normative level in comparison to which something else is perceived as a variance, difference or deviation – *écart* in the French version. Finally, in one of the last lessons the bodily schema emerges as a dynamic system of coordination and selective attuning to the surrounding world, which «indique l'essentiel, [...] domine les détails, [...] dégage le sens, [...] indique un ordre». All this happens as a sort of «*aide-mémoire qui n'a même besoin d'interprétation*» (Merleau-Ponty 2011, 133) – the *Phénoménologie de la perception* employs the term «*praktognosie*». From this point of view, perception, understood as something expressive, is seen to lie at the basis of the expressive world, while the human living body is supposed to play the role of a basic medium originally configuring our cultural or spiritual world from the inside.

⁷ I am here making an implicit reference to the critical analysis of Descart's form of intuitionism suggested by Charles Sanders Peirce in his *Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man* (Peirce 1868). On this delicate turning point see Paolucci 2016, 30 and 34.

⁸ I am reformulating here Merleau-Ponty 2011, 58.

3. The peculiarities of languages

What about language? It has to be said that Merleau-Ponty's analysis in this course makes almost no reference to language and linguistic practices until the very last pages. Coherently with the traditional phenomenological approach to perception and language, he warns us that «*ceci nous amènerait au langage sans que nous y entrions cette année*» (Merleau-Ponty 2011, 53). Therefore, the idea that human perception can be investigated apart from language is taken for granted.

Nonetheless, these lessons provide at least two important indications on this subject.

The first one is clearly stated in the last lesson: if the meaning of a bodily gesture is strictly connected to the bodily movement, intended as a sign, language guarantees a «*transcendance radicale du signifié à l'égard du signifiant*» (*Ibidem*, 162). While in perceptive expression the signified cannot be definitely separated from the signifier, in the case of linguistic expressions we can clearly operate this distinction and act as through the reference to a certain object were direct and obvious. This is a very important feature of linguistic expression in comparison to perceptive expression, which is constantly pointed out in Merleau-Ponty's works from the fifties: as verbal meanings can be separated from linguistic signs, language gives us the chance to sever the intimate connection between a gesture and its own significance – a wink, a nod or a grimace are inseparable from what they mean. On the contrary, linguistic expressions can be relatively fixed: they are shared and subject to sedimentation. This kind of process can be so strong as to lead us to slip into the fallacious belief that the reference to a specific thing by a certain word is given once and for all and is independent of any speech act – as if the system of the *langue* should be a priori and autonomous in respect to any act of *parole*.

In this last lesson Merleau-Ponty notes that this is not the case with dreams, where this kind of transcendence of meanings with respect to significant gestures is lacking and the apparently direct symbolism of articulated language seems to be substituted by a sort of gestural language, where the signified cannot be released from the signifier. In the following course the possibility of a language where connections between signs and meanings remain open, unfixed and not taken for granted is investigated within the field of literary language, by emphasizing the duality between a

functional, ordinary language and the so-called «*langage conquérant*» – which will be discussed later.

A second element useful to articulate language peculiarities can be identified in Merleau-Ponty's attempt to explain the passage from the practical, concrete attitude to the categorial one – which will be further developed in the course on *Le problème de la parole*, where his aim is to explain how the uttered word can be the source of essence. The central point here is the passage from the gestural dimension of expression to the level of idealities.

In the course on the expressive world we can already find an important element connected to the notion of virtual space, which is discussed in connection to pathological cases of apraxia. Virtual space is not interpreted as a pre-given general category in which we should subsume each particular space; but nor is it understood as the inductive result of the generalization of common properties shared by single cases. According to Merleau-Ponty, activities such as pointing at and showing something implicitly involve a reference to a virtual space which is the result of a system of correspondences and mutual differentiations between one actual space and the space of other situations (both in the past and in the future). This is a first element that reveals the genesis of an eidetic reference in expressive contexts according to the French philosopher (*Ibidem*, 65). Hence, the emergence of a categorial attitude seems to be linked to processes of reciprocal differentiation across diverse contexts and of mutual differentiation of the relations between figure and background – neither inductive generalization nor the subsuming of particular cases into an alleged intuitively given category is the key element.

However, as Kristensen has noted, the point is more widely explored in the following course on *Le problème de la parole*. Here Merleau-Ponty criticizes the common idea according to which concepts should be considered logical intuitions that can be applied to single, unique things by means of linguistic predications, in reference to which concepts would be independently and previously given. From this point of view, the categorial attitude should be «*la cause de l'articulation linguistique*» (Kristensen 2010, 138), whereas Merleau-Ponty maintains that it is the outgrowth of speech acts and that the place of words is between things and concepts. Hence, linguistic meanings are neither perceptive nor conceptual, but function as the processes generating conceptual meanings from the perceptive field. More precisely,

according to Merleau-Ponty language accomplishes the passage from an affective level of meaning to a properly linguistic meaning: while in the first case each gesture is intimately linked to what it means and its significance cannot be separated from the occurrence of the gesture itself, on the linguistic level meanings are still open and can change, but are not arbitrary, as they must take into account the complex web of reciprocal differentiations shared by an intersubjective community⁹. Eidetic features cannot derive from the identification of invariant elements. Otherwise, essences would emerge as the result of these open processes of differentiation, as selected figures brought into the foreground with respect to a dynamic and unclosed reciprocal configuration of signs, when the context is considered in the widest possible sense as the whole configuration itself¹⁰. Language can transcend a particular context or a regional field and consider our experience by differentiating it from the perspective of a more inclusive background. Essences are figures coming into the foreground when the field is envisaged as the whole system of mutual linguistic differentiations.

L'attitude catégoriale ne se distingue donc de l'attitude concrète que par le changement d'échelle qu'elle entraîne. Les catégories sont simplement des figures apparaissant sur le fond du monde lui-même tandis que le perçu apparaît dans des champs locaux. C'est ce geste de nouvelle contextualisation qui à proprement parler produit l'idéalité (*Ibidem*, 155).

But this means that the contours of concepts are never definitely determined because they depend on the reciprocal and dynamic interplay between a figure and an always relatively changing background. Language is never static and the temporary picture it draws always depends on the dynamic movements taking place among its components.

4. A few doubts

Let us briefly return to Merleau-Ponty's characterization of perception as something expressive. As has already been argued, he was able to develop a sort of hermeneutic or – if we like – semiotic

⁹ This is the reason why Maurice Merleau-Ponty understands connections between signs and meanings as something conventional yet not arbitrary.

¹⁰ To reconstruct the content of the still unpublished notes of this course I am relying on Kristensen 2010, 125 ff.

conception of perception, in the sense that perception in his view involves a kind of silent *semiosis* which takes place through moving body rather than through interpretation or intellectual inference. The lessons on *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression* clearly presents this view, which can partially be glimpsed in other works roughly belonging to the same period, where it is not articulated in the same detailed way.

This is no doubt a brilliant, insightful thesis that must be taken into serious account. What also makes it extremely interesting in my opinion is the fact that it allows us to distinguish between two meanings of perception as a direct or immediate phenomenon. We can consider perceptive experience as the direct grasping of what is out there, as the mere reception of neutral data with no meaning in themselves. Alternatively, we can understand perception as something direct or immediate in the sense that it is very often irreflexive and based on a kind of practical bodily knowledge and provides immediately perceived meanings or relations – and, of course, this latter option becomes acceptable starting from a perspective like the one developed by Merleau-Ponty¹¹.

However, I have some doubts about the idea that such an expressive form of perception could be possible without the emergence of language in the human world. In other words, I am reluctant to endorse the assumption that bodily mediation could be sufficient to explain such a complex form of perception in humans. Here I am neither supporting a return to the old-fashioned approach to language as the transcendental condition of possibility for human experience nor upholding a form of linguistic reductionism. I am rather considering the hypothesis that the emergence of language, with its strong relational structure, could have acted upon perception itself by configuring it as the distinctively human form of perception that Maurice Merleau-Ponty helps us to understand – that is, as an already meaningful, expressive experience, implying references to a *Lebenswelt* or a form of life, to put it simply. Unless we accept the direct reference theory, a triadic conception of meaning must be seen to be first of all peculiar to human language. Should we not consider the possibility that this linguistic feature could react on perception and influence it by configuring perceptive experience in somewhat analogous ways?

¹¹ A different way of envisaging this kind of distinction can be found in Dewey 1988, Chapter III.

In my opinion, one problematic point can be seen to emerge even from a typical phenomenological perspective. Could perception involve such a complex relational structure between a thematic foreground and a more nuanced background, not to speak about human activities, practices and forms of life, which are not present, without being based on deeply developed capacities of memory and imagination – pro-tensions and pre-tensions in the past and in the future? For sure, bodily habits can be considered non-linguistic mnemonic and imaginative devices, yet they have not only a compulsory, repetitive side, but also an innovative dimension, very often lacking in the case of other animals whose behavior is more instinctive or mechanical. This creative side involves references to virtual situations and contexts that would be difficult to imagine in relation to a non-linguistic form of life. Moreover, behavioral habits clearly have social roots and typically human forms of sociality cannot be considered to be independent of language.

This aspect raises a further doubt. Could perception be structured as something expressive, meaningful or provided with sense without considering the social dimension or the shared experience of the environment in which human beings find themselves from birth? In other words, could we speak of affective meaning as characterizing the perceptive gesture without taking into account the already communicative environment in which humans are involuntarily immersed from their very first perception as members of a social group, at least insofar as they depend on a mother or another care-giver? At a certain point in his lessons, Merleau-Ponty draws attention to the «*libidinale*» dimension of the bodily schema: it should always involve some presentations of myself from the point of view of other individuals, which would not be intellectually articulated, but rather based on desire (or rejection, I would add)¹². However, he neither poses the question as to whether such a complex configuration could have emerged in a completely silent world, nor clearly lets this interpretation influence his conception of perception.

More generally, at different stages Merleau-Ponty presents an image of language as involving a reorganization of human experience, but he never explores the full consequences of this idea: he never asks whether the notion that perception involves a kind

¹² See Merleau Ponty 2011, 159.

of primary meaningfulness *per se* could still be supported, given the current socio-linguistic environment of the human animals, which we cannot deny, if we start from the natural subject we are rather than the disembodied conscience of the phenomenological tradition.

5. The idea of the two languages

Merleau-Ponty held the course *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage* at the France College together with that on expression. The aim of these investigations is clearly stated at the end of the second lesson: to configure a theory of language and of symbolism more generally. While the course on expression provided a crucial contribution to the more general effort to develop an articulated theory of symbolism, these lessons were mainly intended as an important step towards a phenomenological conception of language. Merleau-Ponty's inquiries into the field of literary language are a means for him to criticize the typical conception of language as «*langage objectif* i.e. *fondé sur conventions préalables signe-signification et possession de celle-ci*» (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 87). This idea of language – a common-sense notion also widely endorsed in the field of the philosophy of language – should be called into question by considering the experience of the writer trying to find new words to say what was never said before, that is a different experience of language characterized as *langage conquérant*, where the relations between signs and things are not already and obviously given, but have to be configured again and again.

It has been noted (see Zaccarello 2013, 32) that Merleau-Ponty's approach to language, with its focus on literary forms, was meant to produce a kind of phenomenological *epoché* of our traditional beliefs on language and a deep reorientation of our usual way of seeing language as basically consisting of fixed connections, both stable in time and closed from the point of view of the reference of a specific sign to its correlative object.

The distinction between established language and *parole parlant* is not new in Merleau-Ponty's work and can be traced back to his *Phénoménologie de la perception* (see Dreon 2007, 86 and ff). However the clarification of the notion of expression suggests a further interpretation of this distinction: objective, functional, prosaic language is the kind of language which has lost its expressive powers and deceives us into thinking that words are mere means to gain direct access to things once and for all, inde-

pendently of other variables, without any kind of opaqueness or residue. «Conquering», poetic language is an expressive language that is able to create new, unseen connections between words and things, by not hiding their provisional, open and relational or diacritic status and the plurality of senses that can only artificially be removed. Very often this distinction between the two alleged languages seems to take the form of a dichotomy rather than of a differentiation between two functions of language. However, Merleau-Ponty's ultimate goal is apparently to show that the real operating mode of language – including ordinary language – is diacritic and expressive, and consequently innovative and creative; the summary of the course states that «*la justification de la poésie réhabilite donc le langage tout entier*». From this point of view, the idea that common language consists in the mere reproduction of fixed connections between signs and their references appears to be a rather simplified parody of the rich and often opaque character of ordinary speech acts.

As quite rightly suggested by Jean-Pierre Cometti, who criticized this dichotomic view of language, the idea of the two languages may be traced back to Rousseau and Herder, who shared the idea of the superiority of poetry over prose and ordinary language (Cometti 2016, 93). The allegedly authentic expressiveness of poetry is opposed to the apparent transitivity of prosaic language, which gives us the illusion of gaining direct access to the meaning of the word, not least because if someone does not understand what I mean, I can simply substitute my first sentence with a second one, and this translation will leave no residue. To complete the comparison, the privilege of poetry is connected to its alleged closeness to our sensible experience. I honestly think that Merleau-Ponty was not seeking to propose a form of dogmatic dualism between two kinds of language¹³. Nonetheless, the engagement with literary language in these lessons seems to lead him to endorse such a dualistic view. To be more precise, what seems misleading is Merleau-Ponty's engagement not simply with literary language in its various forms, but with a particular experience of writing (and painting) in modern western culture – an inquiry into classic epic poetry, for example, would probably have yielded different results.

¹³ By contrast, Zaccarello seems to endorse the thesis of a contrast between the two languages in her introductory essay to Merleau-Ponty's notes.

In the case of Paul Valéry, his efforts were meant to create a new language for literature, because the French poet regarded the traditional literary language as exhausted and no longer capable of ensuring any authentic form of expression. In Merleau-Ponty's reading of Valéry's texts, his mistrust of a specific literary language gives rise to the distinction between modern or absolute literature and classical literature – compared to the differentiation between modern and classical painting. Just as modern painting emerges when artists lose their belief in the representative capacity of mimesis, absolute literature emerges when writers lose their trust in the conventional relations between words and things and try to create completely new meaningful connections.

The adjective 'absolute' could be understood literally, to indicate a sort of *creatio ex nihilo*, as though the creative act of the writer producing new senses were freed from any restraint represented by previously established meanings. When Merleau-Ponty writes that «*toute l'opération d'un artiste, c'est de faire quelque chose de rien*» (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 89), he seems to be endorsing this kind of interpretation, which nonetheless represents a peculiar kind of aesthetic sensibility, connected to the Romantic conception of artistic production as a completely innovative creation and of the artist as a solitary genius.

However, even leaving aside Merleau-Ponty's incautious historical and cultural generalizations, the comparison with the case of the writer trying to radically renew language is a potentially misleading one even for more strictly philosophical reasons. If we push the implications of this comparison to the limit, it represents the creation of allegedly completely new relations between signifiers and signifieds by a single agent, with no guarantee that he will be understood by his public. This could be interpreted as a case of private language invention, because the need to understand linguistic rules more flexibly than philosophers of language and linguists usually do seems here to lead to the opposite extreme of negating any previously established and shared linguistic rule or of inventing completely new, but inevitably unshared, rules. Actually, what we have here are incomplete and informal notes, where it is not always easy to understand whether Merleau-Ponty is supporting his own thesis or whether he is reconstructing Valéry's approach to language. Hence, it would be incorrect to regard his position on the matter as a firmly held view. Nonetheless, I think that it can be philosophically useful to consider what the

consequences could be of fully developing some of his suggestions.

Merleau-Ponty would appear to have been aware of the dangers involved in the private language argument if the work of the writer is literally interpreted as «absolute literature», because he explicitly raises the issue of the public. Even if there is no public who can share the innovative expressive work of the writer, he should somehow be able to foresee the possible reactions on the part of his readers¹⁴.

To sum up, the point here, in my opinion, is that the lecture course does not consider the issue of the need for both the innovation and sedimentation of meaning in language. To put it differently: while the use of language cannot be reduced to the mere application of rules already independently configured or intuited through an act of *parole*, shared language has to do with following common rules and changing them, so as to derive new rules from old ones.

6. Some alternative suggestions

My opinion is that, as Merleau-Ponty's choice not to publish his book *La prose du monde* suggests, his work on language had not reached a final form in the fifties, but rather served as a kind of laboratory, where he could test his ideas about language by examining them in different contexts. Literary language – particularly Valéry's or Stendhal's reflections on the creative work of the writer – was not the only field of inquiry explored by Merleau-Ponty, who was also very interested in psychological and linguistic works focusing on language, and particularly on language-acquisition by infants and on the loss of verbal abilities in pathological cases.

I would argue that his 1949 course on *La conscience et l'acquisition du langage* provides some evidence for a partially different approach to language dynamics, maybe a more pragmatic and less Romantic one – even though, for the above-mentioned reasons, it would be misleading to emphasize the apparent contrast between his different paths of inquiry.

The approach is first of all different because Merleau-Ponty was considering the case of language-acquisition in human in-

¹⁴ See Merleau-Ponty 2013, 115. Indeed Merleau-Ponty also claims that, like common language, literary language is «pour autrui» (Merleau-Ponty 2013, 114), but this remark comes only late in his exposition.

fants, which prevented him from being fascinated by any kind of Romantic mythology about the artist – both the modern painter or the modern writer – fighting to radically change the established language and shared conventional meanings by means of subjective acts of expressions.

On the contrary, any inquiry into the acquisition of a mother language brings us face to face with what the French philosopher calls «*le langage ambiant*» surrounding the baby from his very first breath. Merleau-Ponty points out that it is the environmental language that «*appelle*» the child's thoughts, and leads him to find his own style both within gestural and linguistic communication (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 46 and 23). While the preeminence of shared language over individual utterances by the infant is self-evident, this does not mean that no subjective space is left. On the contrary, the acquisition of an active role in gestural and linguistic conversations appears to be strictly intertwined with the emergence of self-identity in comparison to the identity of others – primarily the parents and care-givers of the new apprentice speaker. This seems to be connected to the capacity to react to the stimuli of one's social (or affective) environment, to say 'I' not by merely copying the words of one's parent¹⁵, but by finding one's own style, in Merleau-Ponty's words – or, to put it differently, by finding one's own way of following shared linguistic and existential rules. Simply put, in this case the direction is from public, shared language to the individual, but not private, act of *parole*. This kind of approach is confirmed by Merleau-Ponty when he states that «*Tout mot isolé suppose un état présent du dialogue. Chaque phrase est la modulation d'un pouvoir d'expression total que nous avons en commun*» (*Ibidem*, 81).

Further useful notes can be found in the last part of the course, where Merleau-Ponty discusses the approach to language in linguistics. As we have seen, the picture of the two languages is characterized by a sharp hierarchical order, which causes a complete overturning of the traditional view of linguistic utterances as based on pre-established linguistic norms, by rather considering *la parole parlé* as derived from and secondary with respect to *le langage conquérant*. By contrast, here the French philosopher speaks of language as being characterized by two different func-

¹⁵ For a similar, yet completely independent, criticism of the recourse to the concept of imitation in a similar context, see Mead 2011, 12 ff.

tions or needs, which are necessary to one another and whose tension seems to lie at the core of language dynamics.

Le langage se caractérise par deux besoins contradictoires: besoin d'uniformité et besoin d'expressivité; il faut qu'une forme soit en usage pour être comprise, et cependant une forme employée trop fréquemment perd son sens: (formidable, épatant) le besoin d'expressivité lutte contre l'usure de mots et des formes et suscite des créations linguistiques à un moment donné. Ces créations ne répondent bien entendu à aucun plan préétabli. Elles sont systématiques mais elles utilisent la plupart du temps un hasard de l'histoire de la langue (*Ibidem*, 76).

Common, shared linguistic uses or practices are as constitutive of language as the inventive creation of new meanings, because language is neither a mere subjective enterprise nor a completely pre-established device, to which speakers simply need to conform their utterances.

The creation of innovative connections between signs and meanings very often occurs without any plausible reasons; however the transgression of previous linguistic habits or norms is not arbitrary, because it must take into account all its consequences for the complex system of mutual differentiation constituting the *langue* at a given moment. Moreover, here Merleau-Ponty privileges the image of a re-use, reshuffling, or new attempt to speak about the way in which innovation and the shattering of previous connections take place, rather than the image of *creatio ex nihilo*: pre-established linguistic practices are derived from innovative, risky or even casual uses, but the latter are in turn dependent on previously established connections, without which they would be unintelligible. Circularity – not asymmetrical subordinations between the two functions of language – would here appear to be the model for understanding how human language works¹⁶.

A final remark should be made on Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the notion of *relativement motivé* in relation to the risky linguistic move (*Ibidem*, 85)¹⁷. On the one hand, there is the idea of the diachronic system of language being influenced by, but also partially stemming from, the hazardously (or casually) introduces no-

¹⁶ An interesting point regarding the positive aspects of Saussure's idea of the diacritical dynamics of meaning can be found in Roux 2016.

¹⁷ Kristensen reports that even the course on *Le problème de la parole* emphasizes this idea of the «relatively motivated» in meaning changes and notes that this formula involves a reference to the issue of tradition and institutions (Kristensen 2010, 133).

velty. A comparison is drawn with a planetary system, where a single planet implodes, causing a rearrangement of the whole equilibrium among the existing forces. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty seems to be aware of the need for new meanings to be «repris et élaboré au moyen d'expression systématique par la communauté des sujets parlant» (*Ibidem*). There has to be a shared and active public answer to a new act of *parole* in order for it to be included in a language and not be rejected as private jargon.

To conclude, let us consider Merleau-Ponty's final suggestions in his lecture course: language is a *Gestalt* in movement (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 85), whose dynamics cannot be definitively fixed; and «cet engrenage du hasard et de l'ordre» (Merleau-Ponty 2001, 86) has to do with «la situation commune des hommes»¹⁸, as history shows.

¹⁸ Here Merleau-Ponty is speaking about his own interpretation of Saussure's idea of language.