



Language: Functionalism versus Authenticity

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Abstract

This paper sets out to demonstrate that a phenomenological reflection on language highlights the possibilities of authenticity in communication, and as such provides a very necessary complement to the dominant linguistic perspectives: the syntactic and grammatical perspective, Saussurean linguistics, and systemic functional linguistics. While the syntactic and grammatical perspective, which predominates in the educational context, presents language as an institutionalized, authoritarian and self-contained system, Saussurean linguistics provides a view of language as a complex, self-contained, technical system, as such reflecting the nature of modern society. The third perspective, systemic functional linguistics, describes templates of specific genre, models which aid students to construct their own, while simultaneously discouraging individual self-expression. In contrast, a reflective phenomenological perspective identifies and encourages authentic self-expression. The paper concludes by considering ways to reconcile the impetus in language teaching towards, on the one hand, the language of institutional authority, and, on the other, individual self-expression.

Language is a ball in which all is contained Language is a mirror reflecting humans as homo sapiens, homo socius, homo faber, homo ludens, homo symbolicus, homo viator, homo religiosus, and homo loquens. By providing a linguistic reflection, the language-mirror makes us exist. ... Language is a curtain hiding a secret As a window, language provides a frame in which the view of the world is captured ... [it] provides a view into our own consciousness and subconsciousness and enables a dialogue with the "Other".

(Terminska, 2001)

[For the Dogon, of Mali, Africa] speech is ... the seed that sows social relationships, the hoe that impregnates the earth, the food that perpetuates life, the web of cloth that clothes man in the spoken word. All words across the world form what might be called an immense woven web that binds all generations together.

(Calame-Griaule, 1965)

Language Today

All over the world today, people are increasingly mobile as they travel, migrate to and work in other countries, in doing so encountering unfamiliar languages and cultures. It is also a world where English has increasingly gained currency as an international language. Thus, the issue of a language, such as English, being both a worldview and a code of conduct has come to be a significant part of everyday experience.

In this paper, I place the dominant linguistic approaches - the classroom grammatical one, Saussurean linguistics and systemic functional linguistics - into a wider perspective. Despite the apparent compatibility of the latter approaches with the ethos and demands of contemporary society, the views of language propagated by Saussure and systemic functional linguists do not, however, always help us to relate the languages we learn and speak to our own experiences or to the experiences of people of significance to us. Unfortunately, with the lines of academic territoriality drawn in the sand, the discipline of linguistics excludes consideration of philosophical anthropological issues of relevance in dealing with real people with real issues. Also countering a linguistic emphasis on the human element in language use is the fact that the socio-economic environment surrounding English language teaching and learning has changed from a broadly humanistic one to one dictated by more competitive market forces. Within this broad context, the phenomenological understandings of language articulated by Merleau-Ponty are reviewed, and arguments are presented that phenomenology assists us to formulate understandings of language which are highly significant to our daily experiences of institutions and language. What will become evident is that the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty elucidates the nature of expression, and transcends cultural, social and linguistic boundaries.

Further insights may be gained from reflecting upon a metaphoric view of language, as expounded by the Dogon people in Mali, Africa - the most multilingual continent in the world. The anthropologist, Calame-Griaule, documented the Dogon's notion of language, applying a phenomenological methodology in her research to help the Dogon to express their own understandings. For them, a conversation is said to be a shared meal, which reflects their view of language as sustaining their own close-knit community. This contrasts sharply with the situation in contemporary Western countries, where one language rules the state, and where English is a cosmopolitan and utilitarian language.

Our everyday concerns with gaining both an education and vocational training, with finding suitable employment and surviving the "system", might lead us to believe that institutions have a universality, an authority and permanence which in fact they do not have. The language associated with institutions has an authority, prestige and apparent logic that gives it a high status within its own territory. But expressive speech has an authenticity and appeal which pervades the intersubjective lives of its authors and participants. The existential value of expressive speech may override the significance of language as an institution. Our own expressive utterances are more directly relevant to our own lives as we experience them.

In institutional contexts, in contrast, we might say and write only that which is to our own advantage, or which is socially appropriate, rather than saying what we really think or feel. Though institutions might rule the nine-to-five day, underneath are our subjective lives, which override the restricted timetables under which institutions operate while, under the veneer of rationality and institutional logic, the human passions of its personnel persist.

Various notions of language underpin our understandings of the world around us, the societies in which we live, and our own human nature. It must be remembered that a standardized national language - itself an institution - has greater authority than the dialects or other languages spoken within that nation. Uppermost in our memory is the childhood classroom notion of language with which we were brought up, one which stipulates correctness of grammar and the appropriacy of lexis. The classroom experience is, of course, a sheltered experience, quite different from the reality of having to learn a new language on the streets of a new and strange country. The schooldays' notion may correlate to a legalistic view, whereby the dialect of one social class - in our case, the Queen's English - has an unquestionable authority, and is itself a revered institution. As our horizons expand, however, we find that the predominance of English is challenged by the existence of thousands of other languages in the world.

But language extends far beyond this childhood grammatical view, for language is also the lens through which we view and understand our world. The Polish linguist, Terminska, quoted above, comments on language's all-pervasive nature, such that it cannot be reduced simply to a system, as there is no strict borderline between expression and language. Her poetic similes give us an insight into language not provided by empirical descriptions.

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Reflections on the nature of language help us to appreciate the nature of our experience. Saussure, drawing on Descartes's views that individuals should think and work out issues rationally, saw language as a complex technical system, one which reflected the operations and human motivations of an industrial and commercial society. Later, the systemic functional linguistics of Halliday and others showed that spoken and written acts are inextricably bound up with action, and that tasks could be generically classified, each task and text being characterized by a certain form in its layout and its structural and grammatical features. For example, a *formal letter of complaint* - such as to a retailer about purchases which turn out to be faulty - has the layout and perfunctory characteristics common to all formal letters of complaint: presenting the facts of the case and requesting compensatory action from the retailer. The writer, therefore, must adhere to a strict code of conduct. Thus, systemic linguistics assists us to produce effective texts for school and work in an efficient manner by specifying the characteristics of all texts belonging to the same genre. In education, systemic functional linguistics has assisted students to recognize the typical structure and layout of, say, an argumentative essay, and to produce such a text.

To be effective, however, linguistic expression does not necessarily have to conform to all these rules and guidelines. For instance, I have listened to a Sudanese refugee telling his story - outside of school - in a brilliant way. This man's oral expressive mode engendered a rich, authentic and spontaneous style of delivery. The power and intensity of his dramatic narrative carried his delivery forward, so that syntactic and lexical errors were rendered insignificant. His limited English was, in fact, part of his story, adding an appealing dimension.

Likewise, the curricular specification (based on functional linguistics) of giving the *pros and cons* in an argumentative text excludes a more passionate expression of and response to, for example, the topic "It is better to be single than to be married". Critics of systemic linguistics would say that an emphasis on the shape and form of a text detracts from the inherent content and message of a text, and restricts the opportunities for an individual to express himself in his own unique way. Furthermore, the emphasis is on producing structurally orthodox texts, rather than on critical thinking or authentic self-expression.

The English language, as currently treated in educational institutions, appears to have been increasingly subject to commodification and associated with functional activities, being bound up with an Anglo-Saxon commercial, legal and political

world. The pragmatic and commercial value of English as a world language is highly regarded. A neo-Marxist educational rationale (see, for example, Luke, 1996) holds that competency in language and literacy is cultural capital, and both promotes access to institutions and heightens the institutional power of the individual. However, it must be remembered that an institution's sphere of influence - or an individual language's territory - is limited, while consciousness, thought and expression themselves are primordial.

A linguistic system or institution is usually viewed as being static, and thus standing outside of time, despite the plethora of local and individual variations of linguistic expression reflected in people's movements around the world as tourists or employees, as migrants or refugees. The world is, furthermore, viewed as divided between two spheres - the English speaking world and the perhaps less fortunate "non-English speaking world". Despite the fact that embodied expression, as an effective means of communication between the two "worlds", evokes universal understanding and appreciation, however, the linguistic approach classifies gestures, for example, as *non-verbal* and rejects the notion of the body as an expressive space, with speaking played out instead in the disembodied *non-place* of linguistics.

Our formal education seems to teach us that what we utter is not our creation, nor an expression of our thought, but is instead imposed on us by larger forces. Furthermore, the language associated with our institutionalized childhood education may seem to be the vehicle of a standardized, cognitively biased view of our English and the English speaking world, determining what is right and wrong, especially as English seems to rule our multilingual world. However, there are now many varieties of English, such as Indian Englishes, and there are many speakers of other languages (unfamiliar to us) who need to express themselves to English speakers, even with their rudimentary knowledge of English, and to whom we must respond. When we ourselves are in unfamiliar linguistic territory in a foreign environment, we also grope for words with which to express ourselves, and resort to gestures to communicate.

Our upbringing occurred under the shadow of a universal law "based on the rights and responsibilities of an individual" (Logan, 1986, p. 145), accompanied by the propagation of an alphabetic system of writing (associated with English as a "universal" language) and the consequent elevation of the written text, which has been given superiority over the act of speaking. This upbringing encourages us to forget the perceptual and experiential ground of expression, and

to think of linguistic expression as simply playing a social role and carrying out the functions expected of us. Of course, for practical purposes, a language must be a “closed” system for the sake of stability (which makes it an identifiable language) (Koukal, 2000, p. 603), but historically there is no such phenomenon as a closed system or a pure language, and this is particularly so in the contemporary world where borders, though carefully policed, are breaking down. The fragmentation of international and linguistic borders is increasingly accompanied by the imposition of universal epistemologies and language based on law, commercialism and rationalism.

Contemporary trends in education and linguistics accentuate even further the commodification and commercialization of language. We know that Western epistemologies, typical of public life, are founded on the notion that there is a universal, rational core of reality, accessed through thinking. Language reflects this rational core of reality. According to Cook (1982), this notion implied that, since there was only one “reason”, a universal and necessary set of truths, only René Descartes’s *lingua universalis* could presumably express these truths. But if there were many languages, there were also many truths (Cook, 1982, p. 532), many worldviews.

The culture instilled by education provides individuals with a common body of thought categories which, in a very pragmatic way, makes communication possible. The state-funded, secular and monolingual education systems of modern states have to provide for a mass population, which includes people from diverse indigenous and ethnic linguistic/epistemological backgrounds, as well as various communities that have distinct varieties of linguistic, religious and social outlooks. A prime example is the former Soviet education system, which was meant to serve many ethnic, religious and linguistic groups. Pragmatically, a secular, rationalist and cognitivist education has the widest applicability, but there is nevertheless little possibility of including the epistemologies of small communities, let alone the perspectives of individual students. It is enough for schools to inculcate “democratic values” and cognitive skills, the formal assessment of which allows students access to higher institutions. Furthermore, in the area of teaching English as a second or foreign language, many students do not have a liberal, Western educational background, while some refugee adults have had minimal formal education.

Market forces are increasingly contributing to the commodification of so-called “learning outcomes”. The delivery of vocational training in Australia by

further education institutions is increasingly being privatized. Commercialism has also invaded the provision of English as a second or foreign language, and might reflect the Saussurean view of society and language as a factory. Non-English speakers overseas, and migrants and refugees in Australia, need certification of English language skills in order to access vocational training and employment. As a result, there is often an urgency to acquire English language skills as soon as possible. The haste with which learning has to be undertaken, and the pressure on institutions to deliver instruction in an efficient and productive way, means that functional criteria for judging the success of instructional institutions and students’ performances in assessment have priority.

Therefore, against this trend, and beyond the sphere of education and training, the individual needs to embark, as they say, on a *journey of self-discovery* in extra-institutional contexts - a journey in which personal experience and dialogue with other individuals will assist in developing understandings and allow for individual self expression, and as such enable the individual to face up to existential issues and gain an appreciation of his own uniqueness and self-worth. After all, we can detect when our utterances are, in reality, the voices of others, not our own, and are not born of our own experiences and understandings. Kurt Lewin explains that “what exists as ‘reality’ for the individual is, to a high degree, determined by what is socially accepted as reality” (Lewin, 1967, p. 57). In all societies “each new generation is taught how it must understand. ... such teaching is the crux of socialization” (Wolf, 1984, p. 191). In addition, such epistemologies are shaped by the vehicle of language. In Whorf’s words, “thinking also follows a network of tracks laid down in the given language, an organization that may concentrate systematically upon certain phrases of reality, certain aspects of intelligence, and may systematically discard those featured by other languages” (Whorf, 1956, p. 256). Derrida may have said that “all societies capable of producing, that is to say of obliterating, their proper names, and of bringing classificatory difference into play, practise writing in general” (Derrida, 1994, p. 135). Yet, for Derrida, meaning is always primarily linguistic in nature, for there is “nothing outside the text” (Derrida, 1994, p. 158). However, the understandings of the Dogon, quoted above, and the phenomenologists, assert the primacy of gesture and speech, rather than Derrida’s *écriture*.

Saussurean Linguistics

Descartes proposed the primacy of the cognitive function, viewed as entirely independent of the body:

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[W]hile I decided thus to think everything was false, it followed necessarily that I who thought thus must be something; and observing that this truth: I think, therefore I am [*cogito ergo sum*], was so certain and so evident that all the most extravagant suppositions of the sceptics were not capable of shaking it, I judged that I could accept it without scruple as the first principle of the philosophy I was seeking. (Descartes, 1637/1968, pp. 53-54)

A person, as envisaged by Descartes, inhabited a body, a machine, but one “incomparably better ordered” (Descartes, 1637/1968, p. 73) than the bodies of animals, one that can use words and signs, but is nevertheless still a machine. Thus, Descartes distinguished between mind and matter, between religion and science, and it was matter which was to be investigated by science. Mind and matter had no way of interacting, and hence a satisfying account of the interaction of cognition and perception could not be established, as “mind and matter seem incomplete apart but incomprehensible together” (Fox, 1980, p. 359). This distinction and quandary has carried over to linguistics and the social sciences.

It followed, for Descartes, that the only reliable principle of investigation for this person who thinks is the discipline of mathematics, because only “mathematicians have been able to arrive at any proofs, that is to say, certain and evident reasons” (Descartes, 1637/1968, p. 42). Descartes accordingly decided to borrow “all the best from geometric analysis and from algebra” in order to carry out his project (Descartes, 1637/1968, p. 42). His method was a rejection of “dialectical thought as a means of reasoning from reputable opinions to conclusions, of the use of metaphor and other rhetorical devices, and of the claims of history and historical narratives to knowledge” (Gare, 2002, p. 83). Descartes located the soul in the pineal gland, so reducing the body to an “object without a subject, a thing to be mastered by ‘objective’ science” (Devisch, 1985, p. 394). Descartes thought that he would borrow all the best from geometrical analysis and from algebra, and would correct all the defects of the one by means of the other, to help him determine the nature of the person (Descartes, 1637/1968, p. 41).

In a similar spirit, and in order to overcome “tribal” or perceptually oriented approaches to speaking, for Saussure the linguistic focus became scientific, and *la langue* - rule based language - took precedence over *la parole*, the actual experience of speaking, which, because of its unpredictability, fell outside the realm of science. Linguists who study *langue* “study

something that is by definition superindividual ... a ‘shared’ system, that is a system that is of interest only insofar as it can be treated as identical from individual to individual” (Johnstone, 2000, p. 408).

Saussurean linguistics is a science which does not accommodate the uniqueness of the speaking subject, on the basis that a scientist must meet the need for a “nonreducible structure consisting of universal, constant and complete laws through which he may account for all linguistic phenomena” (de Saussure, 1959, p. 3). Saussure sought a “static and systematic structure through which to examine linguistic phenomena” (Koukal, 2000, p. 601). He established a science of language by “avoiding situational contingency for the sake of structural form This decision eliminates the speaking subject” (Hohler, 1982, p. 292).

Structuralists took up Saussure’s innovative focus on *la langue*, the language of the speech community of individuals, and gave it priority over that of the study of *la parole*, the individual and interpersonal speaking action. So, for structuralists, as explained by Lanigan (1992, p. 69), language has priority over speech, simply because speech may be too chaotic for scientific study. However, *la langue* covers over and hides the “living relationships expressed in *la parole*” (Berman, 2004, p. 139). This, according to Schrag (1986, p. 124), leaves us with an abstracted notion in which there is no place for the question “Who is speaking?” In other words, the process of working through a philosophical anthropology is outside the realm of linguistics.

In similar vein, for Levi-Strauss, language “must precede thought and be independent of it” (Warnick, 1979, p. 251), thus inferring that we are the “dupes of the abstract system of language which is working within us by its own rules” (Pettit, 1972; as cited in Warnick, 1979, p. 251). Such a view minimizes a human being’s individuality and ability to make moral choices based on intuition and life experience. Furthermore, Levi-Strauss minimizes the influence of the individual and history on social action, as “history is subordinated to the system” (Levi-Strauss, 1962/1972, p. 233).

Not surprisingly, Saussure uses a capitalist analogy, equating the relationship of signifiers and signified to the relationship between currency and goods (de Saussure, 1959, p. 115). Wang (1995) provides cogent arguments that Derrida himself draws on Saussure to create his key concept of the “self-referential text” which parallels the “autonomy of the market under late capitalism” (Wang, 1995, p. 261). Saussure showed that the “bond between signifier

(acoustic sound) and signified (image of the referent) is arbitrary” (Wang, 1995, p. 278), so that Saussure’s linguistics bears a very close resemblance to market mechanisms. In the market place, Marx (1867/1959) explained, the price of a product is not always related to its inherent value. Thus it can be demonstrated that the “value of each commodity is not determined with reference to human needs but with reference to other commodities” (Wang, 1995, p. 278). For Wang, commodity production and exchange is liberated from human needs as a reference point, so that limits are removed to the extent to which the human body can be manipulated to maximize consumption and profit.

Systemic Functional Linguistics

Historically, there was a move against Descartes’s rejection of the body and perception, so that functional linguistics recognized, perhaps not the body, but definitely human activity. In the twentieth century, both functional linguists and Soviet psychologists such as Rubinstein and Vygotsky elevated the role of activity, a move which pleased the Marxists with their emphasis on labour (Brushlinskii, 2004, p. 71). Instead of Descartes’s “I think”, there emerged a “new cogito of intentionality or lived experience in which one recognizes the ‘I am able to’, ‘I can’ ...” (Lanigan, 1988, p. 46). Searle developed the speech act theory, the aim of which was to locate and describe the basic types of illocutions in a systematic taxonomy (Searle, 1979). Within the tradition of British analytical philosophy, Austin’s cognitivist notion of “performative utterances” or “operative utterances” (Austin, 1961, p. 223) emphasizes the fact that a person does something as well as simply saying something. Austin distinguishes between locutionary acts and illocutionary acts, the former being the utterance of utterances, the latter being the acts we perform in uttering some utterances (Harris, 1976, p. 389). Austin explains that “the more we consider a statement not as a sentence (or proposition) but as an act of speech ... the more we are studying the whole thing as an act” (Austin, 1961, p. 20). To make certain utterances is to “perform the action - an action, perhaps, which one could scarcely perform, at least with so much precision, in any other way” (Austin, 1961, p. 147). The act of doing something is inseparable from the act of saying something. Thus, for Austin, the linguistic behaviour of a person is more significant than any formal structures of language.

Systemic functional linguistics uses a technical and extensive meta-language to describe the functions and metafunctions of language. Language is a tool, as linguistic communication is behavioural, and symbols

elicit behavioural responses. Conversation is a transaction and a negotiation. Language as a tool is represented by Vygotsky’s activity theory and Halliday’s systemic linguistics. For Vygotsky, however, a tool is not a simple hand-held hammer or paintbrush, but a modern, technologically complex tool. Functional linguistics adds a sociological dimension to scientific linguistics, as it emphasizes the instrumental character of language and stresses that language is not a self-sufficient entity (Davidse, 1987, p. 40). It accordingly focuses on the speaker’s strategy and purpose “rather than on the process by which speaker and audience share meanings and develop possibilities for common experience” (Warnick, 1979, p. 250).

In an effort to be a system, like Saussure’s scientific language, systemic functional linguistics excludes contingent speech and the person who is speaking. Although it rescues language from the state of being a pure science and relates language to everyday use by having recourse to sociological theory, functional linguistics, like the natural sciences, seeks to compile taxonomies of language use rather than to explicate the experience of speaking and interacting. Rather than pertaining to a community of individuals of various ages and personalities, its sociology is impersonal, universal and standardized.

In this way, Halliday’s systemic linguistics tries to describe “the linguistic differences associated, not with different communities of speakers, but with different activities in social life” (Lemke, 1995, p. 26), so that “our uses of language are inseparable from the social functions, the social contexts of actions and relationships in which language plays its part” (Lemke, 1995, p. 27). According to Halliday and Matthiessen (1999), in a systemic grammar every category “is based on meaning, rather than being a formal grammar which is autonomous and therefore ‘semantically arbitrary’” (pp. 3-4). It regards cognition as a “social semiotic rather than as a system of the human mind” (Kilpert, 2003, p. 166), and so puts less emphasis on the individual. Rather, it sees meaning more as a social process and has, in other words, a sociocognitive approach to language (Atkinson, 2002, p. 525).

Despite its pragmatic uses, functional linguistics - which, after all, is only one of many views of language - excludes bodily self-expression and consciousness, and is also based on the monetary/goods exchange model of capitalism, whereby information is exchanged and tasks are performed without regard for their inherent value or meaning. Thus, the commonality of functional linguistics with the Saussurean text as commodity is exposed.

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Phenomenological Approaches

The mid-twentieth century, marked by the advent of poststructuralism, saw the “linguistic turn” by which existential problems came to be regarded as linguistic ones, problems about language, with the person perceived as constituted by larger forces such as society and language as an institution. This was part of a broader movement in the human sciences in which language constituted reality, and so the focus

shifted away from the study of man as a *subject* of experience, as the cogito in whom and for whom the world is constituted as meaningful, toward the objective structures of thought (and language). ... the focus is shifted away from the ‘heroic’ vision of man as the source and creator of his own history and of his social institutions to the supposedly infrahuman and ‘automatic’ rules governing his behaviour. (Edie, 1971, p. 307)

Phenomenology, in contrast, upholds both the uniqueness and the commonality of embodied human expression - whereby we all have more or less the same sort of body and perceptual processes, but each of us has a uniquely individual quality of conscious life, shaped by our unique socio-temporal situatedness. Phenomenology asserts the primacy of speaking over the static and institutionalized character of written texts. Speaking is associated with consciousness and subjectivity, and is subjected to the “non-repeatable, uncontrollable irruptions of free choice” (Edie, 1971, p. 307). Merleau-Ponty, in *The Prose of the World*, sought to understand the unity of *la langue* and *la parole*, of rule and practice, of objective analysis and lived experience. He sought to abandon

the abstract universality of a rational grammar which could contain the common essence of all languages, [so that] we would only rediscover the concrete universality of language, which can be different from itself without openly denying itself. (Merleau-Ponty, 1969/1973a, pp. 39-40)

In other words, embodied expression transcends linguistic and cultural barriers. Merleau-Ponty, in *Signs*, integrates Saussure’s hypothesis regarding the functional nature of signs with a phenomenological perspective. He “set in motion a dialectic through which the two disciplines [the objective science of language and the phenomenology of speech] open

communication” (Merleau-Ponty, 1960/1964b, p. 86). Nevertheless, speaking, for all of us, seeks to break out of the limiting circumstances of a sedimented language that tends to “consolidate, formalize and regulate established meaning” (Koukal, 2000, p. 602). After all, human behaviour and speech can become habitualized and institutionalized, and so inhibit authentic expression. Speech, unlike a written text, “says, reveals, and shares” (Hohler, 1982, p. 290). According to Merleau-Ponty in *Sense and Non-Sense*, language must nevertheless “remain open to the initiatives of the subject ... always [be] capable of the displacement of meanings, the ambiguities, and the functional substitutions which give this logic its lurching gait” (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/1964a, p. 87).

In *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that our utterances are unselfconscious, poetic and individualistic. “One does not know what one is saying, one knows only after one has said it” (Merleau-Ponty, 1969/1973a, p. 46, footnote). Being is not a static form of life but a “dynamic becoming” (Keller, 2005, p. 178), just as language and meaning are neither static nor determinate. Our utterances, in fact, arise from thought and experience, rather than from an abstract linguistic system or from a society which speaks through us. The words we speak can be poetic: we as embodied beings express ourselves in unique and unrepeatable ways, our bodies moulding sounds into words, utterances which express an affective tone reflecting our spatio-temporal situatedness - being older or younger, a foreigner or a local. Our utterances translate desires into words, and perceptual meaning into symbolic expression in linguistic form.

Ethics characterizes such a phenomenological approach, whereas law as a system supports the notion of language as a functional system, where everyone is “just doing their job.” Spoken interaction (unlike reading a book) is necessarily interpersonal, and, as human beings, our gestures and affectivity, like our utterances, are moulded by the participants. Hence interactions are ethical - but in terms of an ethics which is affectively toned and lacking in a binary distinction of right and wrong. In contrast, linguistics would talk about the “social rules of conversation”, while logical positivist bases of law and scientific linguistics would deny the “cognitive meaningfulness of ethical, aesthetic and religious discourse” (Weinzweig, 1977, p. 117).

Thus, self-expression’s ethical implication is self-responsibility and answerability to the community: it is in relation to the community that I find the affirmation that “I am”, in contrast to my more impersonal membership of a state, which “reshapes[s]

individuals to meet its needs” (Hart, 1992, p. 397). Hart explains that it is only in the community that the individual can meet the “reality of cooperation, indebtedness, and the chance for gratitude and gracious initiative” (Hart, 1992, p. 397). Self-expression, both ethical and aesthetic, forges individual identity. For Husserl, the basis of personal identity is one’s ethical life, as to a certain degree a person is responsible for the unity and identity of his personal being.

Identity is found in a person’s embodied aesthetic expression, by the performance of which some of us might be attracted, some repelled. Merleau-Ponty compares a person’s highly individualized gestural expression to a melody, an “intentional arc”, which brings about the unity of the senses, of intelligence, of sensibility and motility (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 136). The Dogon of Mali, for example, see words as being produced inside the body, so that each organ, with its different characteristics, makes different contributions to the kind and quality of words as well as tones and intonations. For the Dogon,

[G]estures are important to speech because they increase its quantity of oil. Words on their own have a water base. Gestures lubricate them, make them “flow” better, easier to understand Certain gestures are meant to help words come out when they have difficulty expressing themselves. (Calame-Griaule, 1965, p. 63)

Merleau-Ponty, in *The Phenomenology of Perception*, describes speech as being a continuity with gesture: speech itself is a gesture. A person is not, however, an autonomous monad: speakers interacting with others take on others’ style of speaking and gesturing; comprehension comes about through the “reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of others” (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 185). The adjective *aesthetic*, therefore, characterizes not only the expression of the eloquent professional artist, but also the hesitant gestures and utterances of a newcomer whose lexical resources are limited in the local language. Aesthetic self-expression is married to mimetic behaviour, in which people who are enjoying “intersubjective closeness” mirror each other’s bodily comportment, so that gesture and speech are harmonized in speaking, and synchronized with each other.

Western epistemologies may challenge those of other cultures, but Husserl, writing in the 1930s, supported the inherent worth of epistemologies of other cultures, saying that “every people, large or small, has its own

world in which, for that people, everything fits well together, whether in mythical-magical or in European-rational terms, and in which everything can be explained perfectly” (Husserl, 1936/1970, p. 373). Thus the anthropologist, Cordova-Rios, in learning an Amazonian language, is able to adopt a sensorial approach, rather than a cognitivist one:

... the first stage of acquiring a language is a question of opening oneself to the elemental feeling of its sonorous field of sense, attuning oneself to its underlying song, the way that the language sings, and listening towards the various affective and expressive qualities audible in its constituted field of sound. (Cordova-Rios; as quoted in Lamb, 1974, p. 28)

I myself, in Thessaloniki, Greece, only began learning Greek when I put away the grammar books and opened my heart, so to speak, to the local community.

Calame-Griaule, in describing the Dogon of Mali, provides a comprehensive account of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of Dogon language, and demonstrates in the process that an ordinary person anywhere can speak creatively, poetically and intuitively. Unlike the dictionary one-to-one correspondence of sign and signified, the Dogon maintain

... that a “sign” or symbol and that which it symbolizes is reversible; that signs, substitutes, and images constitute a vast system of correspondences, in which every term is interlocked within what seem to be specific categories. These categories in their turn, whether linked or opposed, are themselves correlated. (Calame-Griaule, 1954, p. 83)

Aesthetic self-expression, rather than the formulation of linguistic texts, is the expression of being and personal identities by interlocutors who mutually recognize each other and are mutually responsive. In speaking, a person improvises, using the resources of language and thought borrowed from both others and himself in the past, and thus gains autonomy and authenticity (O’Neill, 1970, p. 58), even though he is still part of a social institution and the social institution is part of him.

Speech reconciles language as a system or institution with voice, so that “we are the language we are talking about” (O’Neill, 1970, p. 62). We might struggle against the imposition of institutional servitude, in Hegel’s sense, so that a person’s history

is a struggle for emancipation from such servitude. For the phenomenologist, it is the degree of individuation of an embodied self which - although involved with other embodied persons - has, nevertheless, "a capacity to distinguish itself consciously from others and to regard its history and prospects as its own" (Wilshire, 1991, p. 226). So language can be used to "revolt against such membership in a community and identification with its traditions" (Hamrick, 1994, p. 405). The unity of personal identity gives continuity to a person over the vicissitudes of time and space, for "we stand out at the centre of our conscious experience" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 34), which is found in the "interplay of memories, imaginations and perceptions, and in the flow of our awareness of interior time" (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 33). Such a concept of identity persists in the midst of the spatio-temporal, linguistic and cultural changes that pervade our environments, and in spite of the prestige of institutional authority and language.

Authentic speech is identical with thought: "Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 183). Thought and inner speech are not locked up in a private mind, as Merleau-Ponty explains: "Thought is no 'internal thing', and does not exist independently of the world and of words" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 183). Or, as Schrag puts it: "The spoken word is not an exterior garment that clothes an inner thought. The spoken word is the performance of thought" (Schrag, 1986, p. 44). Thoughts, intuitions and perceptions can only gain objective validity in the act of expression in language (Koukal, 2001, p. 28), but Husserl provides a relevant qualification when he says that a person "does not 'express' all his psychic life in language: nor is he ever able to do so" (Husserl, 1929/1969, p. 22).

Speaking is always a striving, a seeking out of an intersubjective sphere where expression can take place, and its authenticity has an intensity. This intensity of speaking is manifest through the body, the tongue, mouth and throat, the nose; through the breath, the gaze, the posture and demeanour. Philosophically, gestural speech has reference and intentionality (Hohler, 1982, p. 290), unlike a "spoken text". The fabric of intentionality is desire, and desires, unlike needs, cannot be fulfilled (Barbaras, 2003, p. 165): the object of desire frustrates the subject, but the individual still needs to express and articulate his desires. A complete expression is unthinkable, and each person struggles with his language "to discover what he thinks" (Kaelin, 1962, p. 267). Self-expression may manifest itself in silence as well as in utterances, in withdrawal as well as in participation. After all, according to Merleau-Ponty, a

face, even in repose or death, is "always doomed to express something" (1945/1962, p. 452).

The ideal of objective thought is both "based upon and ruined by temporality" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 333). Spatially, we are tied to a horizon, which may be historical or cultural, an intersubjective (Clarke et al., 1984, p. 51) world which is always ahead of us. Schutz (1962, p. 324) pointed out that speech, like music and dance, is an intersubjective time-process, one which is negotiated between participants. A person's "field of presence" has spatial and temporal dimensions, enclosed within shifting horizons (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 416). The body is an expressive space in which speech and gesture are comprehensible by listeners, because they embody a "reciprocity of my intentions and the gestures of others, of my gestures and intentions discernible in the conduct of other people" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 185). My body is perceptually intertwined with my surroundings. Casey explains the relevance of a physical place:

To be at all - to exist in any way - is to be somewhere, and to be somewhere is to be in some kind of place. Place is the requisite for the air we breathe, the ground on which we stand, the bodies we have. (Casey, 1997, p. ix)

The body's movements relate a person to his spatio-temporal situations, and thus is the "basis for the unity of the senses" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945/1962, p. 234). But place is also associated with language, and one moves from place to place, from one language to another language, from a place where one can communicate linguistically to another where one cannot, from the strictures of institutionalism to the sphere of authentic self-expression.

The Dynamic Interplay of Institutional Language and Expressive Speaking

Saussure defined *parole* as the conscious, individual act of speaking, the utterance, and *langue* as a systemic code underlying speech, which code is "unconscious, impersonal, passive and which the individual acquires but cannot change" (Warnick, 1979, p. 251). Merleau-Ponty stressed the co-dependency of *langue* and *parole*, spoken communication being inextricably linked with the subjectivity and temporality that is associated with the specificity of the experiences of each person.

Expressive speech recognizes the ever-changing nature of experience, while institutional language seeks permanence and stability. Merleau-Ponty

distinguishes between a speaking word [*parole parlante*] and a spoken word [*parole parlée*]. The former, in Adams's words, refers to that already-accomplished linguistic deposit of built-up meanings, while the latter refers to a not-yet-accomplished speech act performing the enactment of a new meaning (Adams, 2001, p. 210). Merleau-Ponty further reflects in *Signs* that speech,

as distinguished from language, is that moment when the significative intention (still silent and wholly in act) proves itself capable of incorporating into my culture

and the culture of others - of shaping me and others by transforming the meaning of cultural instruments. (1960/1964b, p. 92)

For these reasons, one must sometimes, and in some spheres, transcend institutional languages, and the language of institutions which are so strongly associated with formal educational institutions and one's duties to society. A phenomenological reflection helps us to do so.

About the Author



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