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The relative and the absolute in Merleau-Ponty's account of the "spoken word"

Merleau-Ponty's general position transcends the traditional distinction between the absolute and the relative. The "lived world" is absolute in the sense that it is the ultimate context within which we are able to render intelligible the behavioural and perceptual powers of an individual, yet the lived world is relative to the individual. The difficulty in transcending the traditional distinction lies in the very nature of thought itself and, consequently, in the central assumption of Western philosophy, for which the ultimate perspective is that of the universal thinker. By means of reflection on the experience of speech addressed to us, and through an analysis of the syndrome of semantic aphasia, I will corroborate Merleau-Ponty's claim that meaning is "incarnate" in the linguistic gesture, and argue against the notion of the philosopher as a universal thinker. I will argue that the ultimate perspective is not that of the universal thinker but that of the embodied subject, which is in "contact" with others — a contact which is lived but which can never be represented in thought.

Die relatiewe en die absolute in Merleau-Ponty se siening van die "gesproke woord"

Die uitgangspunt van Merleau-Ponty verteenwoordig 'n transendering van die tradisionele onderskeid tussen relativisme en absolutisme. Die *Lebenswelt* is absoluut in die sin dat dit die finale konteks is waarin ons die gedragswyses en perseptuele vermoëns van 'n persoon kan verklaar. Nogtans is die *Lebenswelt* relatief vir elke individu. Die problematiek onderliggend aan enige poging om die tradisionele onderskeid te transendeer, is geleë in die besondere aard van die denke self en dus in die sentrale aanname van die Westerse filosofie, naamlik dat die finale perspektief altyd dié is van die universele denker. Deur 'n besinning oor die ervaring van spraak wat tot ons gerig word en deur 'n analise van die semantiese afasie-sindroom, sal ek probeer om Merleau-Ponty se stelling dat die linguïstiese gebaar betekenis beliggaam, te bevestig. Daar sal ook geargumenteer word teen die siening van die Westerse wysbegeerte wat die filosoof sien as die universele denker wat oor die finale perspektief beskik. Die uiteindelijke standpunt is die van die liggaamlike subjek wat in aanraking is met ander — 'n aanraking wat beleef, maar nooit in logiese denke geformuleer kan word nie.

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The central theme of Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology is that of embodiment. Not only is the subject always an embodied subject, but even the ultimate perspective of the reflecting philosopher is that of an embodied subject and not that of the disengaged universal thinker. His claim is that the perspective of the embodied subject brings us closer to the acts of perception and behaviour than our powers of thinking or representation can do. In his analysis of perceptual syndromes in *Phenomenology of perception* he attempts to show that the particular manner in which perceptual processes become disrupted in the event of brain injury suggests that the perceptual process is in itself as it is experienced by an embodied subject, rather than as it is represented in thought. The perspective of the embodied subject is relative to its embodiment, yet absolute in the sense that it provides a more profound understanding of the perceptual process and the way in which it becomes disrupted in the event of brain injury.

In his account of language and expression, Merleau-Ponty again adopts the perspective of the embodied subject. He describes the "spoken word", for example, which we hear and utter, as an irreducible synthesis of sound and meaning:

... the spoken word [...] is pregnant with a meaning which can be read in the very texture of the linguistic gesture. The meaning inhabits the word, and language is not an external accompaniment to intellectual processes (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 193).

Speech and other persons, therefore, cannot derive their meaning from a systematic interpretation of sensory phenomena and the 'multiple given'. They are indecomposable structures and in that sense are *a priori* (Merleau-Ponty 1967: 171-2).

The word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 182).

... it [must] be recognised that the listener receives thought from speech itself (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 178).¹

1 These descriptions of meaning inhabiting the word are applications of Merleau-Ponty's general account of the perception of objects: "... in normal perception the significance of what is perceived appears to me as built into it and not constituted by me, and the gaze as a sort of knowledge machine, which takes things as they need to be taken in order to become a spectacle, or which divides them up in accordance with their natural articulations" (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 264).

Clearly these descriptions of the “spoken word” are descriptions of experiences of someone familiar with the language or the discourse. Someone unfamiliar with the language would not find meaning “in the very texture of the linguistic gesture” nor would the word be the “presence of thought in the phenomenal world”. Similarly, when we attempt to disengage ourselves from any involvement in the speaking community and attempt to think about the “spoken word”, when we make it an object of thought, we are unable to find in it anything more than a purely sensory phenomenon, a stream of sounds. The perspective from which Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions are made is therefore relative to a particular perceiver who is familiar with the language and engaged in a certain linguistic community or discourse. Nevertheless, his claim is that this engaged and relative perspective is absolute in the sense that the “spoken word” is in itself what it is experienced to be by a fluent speaker of the language, rather than what it is represented as being by a disengaged thinker.

My objective is to take up Merleau-Ponty’s argument in the light of contemporary research on a form of aphasia which affects the perception and understanding of speech, namely, semantic aphasia. I will argue that this condition cannot be explained as the loss of the ability to hear a stream of sounds or as the loss of the ability to decode or interpret those sounds, but only as the loss of a “contact” with that meaning which “inhabits” the word, or the loss of the ability to “receive thought from speech itself”. In other words, I will argue that semantic aphasia may only be understood as a breakdown of a “contact” unimaginable from the absolute perspective of the thinker, but immediately evident from the relative perspective of the engaged perceiver familiar with the language. The relative perspective of the engaged and embodied speaker brings us closer to the “spoken word” than the disengaged perspective of the universal thinker.

Since the ultimate perspective in Western philosophy is that of the disengaged universal thinker, the world, other subjects and relationships between them may only be for the philosopher what they can be thought of as being. The only relationships among subjects and between subjects and the world which may be considered are those which would be possible in the world as this is represented in thought, which for rationalists and empiricists of the seventeenth century generally means Newtonian thought.

This implies that all contact with the world and with others is necessarily “mediated” through “representations”, or “contents of consciousness”, either ideas or images. For example, if I consider the anatomical structure of my eye and the nature of light, as represented in scientific thought, it is evident that the eye can provide only images of the world. The physical and chemical properties of the world affect my senses, producing sensations on the basis of which I construct an image or a model of the external world. I have a direct or unmediated contact only with these sensations and images. The actual existence and nature of the world must therefore be “inferred” from these “contents of consciousness”. Similarly, it follows that I have no direct or unmediated contact with the contacts which others have with the world, so I am obliged to “infer” that others are conscious beings from an observation and “interpretation” of their external behaviour.

Clearly, the traditional account of my relationship with the world and with others does not accord with my experience. In general, I experience myself as seeing the world itself. Rather than providing me with images of the world, perception seems to “open me up to” or to bring me into a direct contact with the things themselves, such that I am more sure of the existence and nature of the object I am looking at than I could ever be sure of my images, or of the reliability with which I could infer the existence and nature of the object from such images.

Similarly, there is nothing in my experience of other subjects to suggest that I am always limited to inferring from “signs” in their external behaviour that they are conscious beings, and that they are conscious of the world. Let us suppose that I am looking at a mountain with Paula. If I accept that the ultimate world within which we find ourselves is the world as it is represented in Newtonian thought, I would have to concede that the real mountain lies beyond all experience, and that the perceptual event is a private event, immanent in consciousness. Paula’s consciousness of the mountain would take place in the hidden recesses of her brain or her mind, and would be inaccessible to me. Paula would not actually see the same mountain I see, for her mountain would be reconstructed from information gathered from her retina. Clearly this is not the way in which I experience her perception of the mountain. At the moment that we look at the mountain together, there is something which assures me that she sees the same mountain that I do, and there

is nothing in my experience to suggest that either of us is confined to private images. On the contrary, we seem to “share” the same world, which (unlike images) appears to exist “for us” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 405).

To experience Paula as being in “contact” with or “open” to the mountain itself is not to experience her as having a reliable image of it, or as having good reasons for believing that it is there and that it is such and such, because my experience of her contact with the mountain assures me that she would be more sure of the presence and nature of the mountain than she could be about any contents of her consciousness or about the reliability of any judgments she may be able to make concerning the existence and nature of the mountain.

Merleau-Ponty argues that consciousness is “incarnate” in bodily behaviour, and that provided I approach it in the required way, I can be brought face to face with Paula’s “contact” with the mountain.² For example, this would happen as long as I do not attempt to scrutinise Paula’s eyes as if I were an eye specialist, but participate with her in looking at the mountain. On the periphery of my attention I am aware of her eyes, not as globes of flesh for the reception of light, but as the “incarnation” of a look or a gaze, as a power of making “contact” with things in the world, that world which exists for us.³ Thus, I experience her eyes and their movements as her “peering into the distance”, or as her “scrutinising the mountain”. In the movements of her eyes, as she follows the cable-car going up to the summit of the mountain, I am aware of her “gaze” as riveted to its object. As she fixes the cable-car with her gaze, I have no impression of there being another process taking place in the hidden recesses of her mind, a process which we might call the focusing of her attention. This focusing is incarnate “in” the fixation on the cable-car, “in” the riveting of her gaze to its object. I am aware of Paula’s contact with our world, a contact in the form of

- 2 “Through phenomenological reflection I discover vision, not as a thinking about seeing, to use Descartes’ expression, but as a gaze at grips with a visible world and that is why for me there can be another’s gaze” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 351).
- 3 “My eye for me is a certain power of making contact with things, and not a screen on which they are projected. The relation of my eye to the object is not given to me in the form of a geometrical projection of the object in the eye, but as it were a hold taken by my eye upon the object, indistinct in marginal vision, but closer and more definite when I focus upon the object” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 279).

a gaze which grips and palpates things in the world we share (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 133).

I am assured that this world to which I have direct access is also accessible to her, because in her gaze and her gestures I encounter this world's being for her. It is because I am in contact with the grip of her gaze that I am assured that the world does not merely exist for me, but for us and in that sense is more than merely what it is for me.

Because such a "contact" with the world in the form of the gaze is inconceivable as a relationship within the real world, or the world as it is represented in thought, it is not considered either by empiricists or rationalists, and any experience of such "contact" is regarded as nothing more than a subjective impression, a mere "content of consciousness". Anyone who argues that the experience of such a "direct contact" with the world's being for Paula, or the world's being for us, cannot be anything more than a subjective impression, because any "direct contact" with the other is impossible in the real world, assumes that the real world is the ultimate setting, in the sense that anything which would be impossible in this world may only exist as a representation, as a content of consciousness. Or, in other words, s/he assumes that the ultimate perspective is that of disengaged thought so that whatever cannot exist as an object of thought cannot exist at all. But how do I know that this real world is the ultimate setting? What is it that makes the real world "prevail over" the world of my dreams, or my imagination or my misperceptions? For example, when I awake from a dream to find myself in the real world, what makes the dreamt world recede to become for me just a content of consciousness? What gives the real world the status of being the ultimate setting of what is possible and what is impossible?

What gives the real world this status does not appear to be a judgment or an inference from signs. It is not, for example, as if the real world (as opposed to the world of my dreams) is the most rational or coherent, for when I wake up, even the most rational dreams are immediately recognised as dreams, while the most surprising, unexpected surroundings to which I may awake are immediately recognised as real. It is easier for me to tell whether the world I encounter is real, and the ultimate setting of all experiences, than it is for me to tell whether it

is coherent rather than incoherent, or probable rather than improbable.⁴ I appear to myself to be more sure that I am awake to the real world than I am sure about the validity of any judgment I may make about the coherence and probability of this world being the real world.⁵

The real world does not appear to be accorded its prevailing status over the world of dreams, in an act of judgment. At the moment that I wake up, the world itself appears to have been there all along. The real world prevails over the world of dreams, displacing it as in binocular perception the three-dimensional object displaces the two monocular images because it presents itself as more than is given in either of them.⁶ What characterises the real world and makes it prevail over the world of dreams is that it is encountered as “more than whatever it is for me”. Since it is this characteristic which enables it to dissipate the world of dreams, I must in some way make “contact” with its being “more than what it is for me” without this “more than what it is for me” being

4 “It has often been pointed out that even the most credible imagination, the most conformable to the context of experience, does not bring us one step closer to ‘reality’ and is immediately ascribed by us to the imaginary — and that conversely an even absolutely unexpected and unforeseeable noise is from the first perceived as real, however weak be its links with the context” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 39).

“... the most credible phantasm glances off at the surface of the world: it is this presence of the whole world in one reflection, its irremediable absence in the richest and most systematic deliriums, that we have to understand, and this difference is not a difference of the more or the less” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 40).

5 “My awareness of constructing an objective truth would never provide me with anything more than an objective truth *for me* and my greatest attempt at impartiality would never enable me to prevail over my subjectivity (as Descartes so well expresses it by the hypothesis of the malignant demon), if I had not, underlying my judgements, the primordial certainty of being in contact with being itself, if, before any voluntary adoption of a position I were not already situated in an intersubjective world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 355).

6 “Monocular images float vaguely in front of things, having no real place in the world; then suddenly they fall back towards a certain location and are swallowed up in it, as ghosts, at daybreak, repair towards the rift in the earth which let them forth. The binocular object [...] absorbs the monocular images, which in this new light, finally recognize themselves as appearances of that object” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 233).

something for me. What makes the world real and the ultimate setting for what is possible and what is impossible, is therefore precisely what makes it escape my full possession.⁷ As for Descartes, it is because I am confined to that which is for me that the difference between the real world and the world of my dreams has to be established in an act of judgment.

Certainly such a contact with what is not for me is paradoxical, yet I cannot dismiss all experience of such a contact as a mere “content of consciousness” simply because it is impossible within the real world. It is only because of such a “contact” that the world emerges as something which is more than whatever it is for me and thus as prevailing over the world of my dreams and therefore as the ultimate world within which things and relationships are deemed to be possible or impossible. It is because of this contact that the real world is encountered as that within which anything which is not possible may exist only as a content of consciousness. The prevalence of thought over experience is established not by thought, but by a “contact” which can never be represented in thought.

The world’s being more than whatever it is for me actualises itself not merely as outrunning any perspective I may have of it, but also as “being there for others”. What characterises the real world and distinguishes it from the world of my dreams and illusions and what makes it the ultimate setting of what is possible and what is impossible is that it is “there for others” (Husserl 1969: 91).⁸

7 “What makes the ‘reality’ of the thing is therefore precisely what snatches it from our grasp” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 233).

8 “... I experience the world [...] as other than mine alone [*mir fremde*], as an inter-subjective world, actually there for everyone, accessible in respect of its objects to everyone” (Husserl 1969a: 91).

“The existence-sense [*Seinsinn*] of the world and of nature in particular, as objective nature, includes after all [...] thereness-for-everyone. This is always co-intended wherever we speak of objective actuality” (Husserl 1969a: 92).

“World-experience, as constitutive, signifies not just my private experience, but community experience. The world itself, according to its sense, is the one identical world, to which all of us necessarily have experience access, and about which all of us by changing our experiences — that is: by making them common — can reach an understanding” (Husserl 1969b: 236).

I cannot therefore dismiss all experience of sharing the world with Paula as being no more than a subjective impression simply because such a sharing is impossible or unthinkable within the real world. It is only because the world is encountered as being there “for us” that it has the status of being the ultimate setting of what is possible and what is impossible.

Certainly, many of my experiences of such “contacts” may prove to be illusory. I may discover that I was mistaken about being in contact with the contact which another has with the world. What I take to be Paula’s “gaze riveted to its object” may turn out to be a blind stare. However, we cannot assume that all such contacts with others are mere contents of consciousness, and we will have to find other ways of dealing with the phenomenon of illusion, ways which do not reduce all experiences of such “contacts” to contents of consciousness. Whether the experience of such a contact with the contacts which others have with the world is anything more than a mere subjective impression may only be decided on the basis of evidence; it cannot be decided on the basis of what is possible and what is impossible in the real world. We need to reflect, therefore, on an experience of sharing one unique world, or on an experience of the world existing for us, and to consider what evidence there is to corroborate such an experience or to reject the experience as a mere content of consciousness.

The experience we will reflect on is the experience of the speech of the other. I will argue that in the speech of the other I find his/her consciousness of the world, as speech makes itself a “gaze of the mind, [an] *intuitus mentis*” (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 155), and that through my contact with this speech I can be drawn into the world as it is for her, such that the distinction between the world as it is for me and the world as it is for her is abolished.

Certainly the world emerges for me and prevails over my dreamt world even when I am physically alone. It is not the physical being there for others which makes this world the real world. Its actually being there for others would be a “fact”, and I would have to infer this fact from the behaviour of others. The world’s being there for others is something I encounter directly even when others are physically absent, so that when they appear, their position has already been established and their gaze merely actualises a potential of the world.

When I am able to put aside my thoughts about what is possible and what is impossible, and reflect in an authentic manner on my experience of the speech of another, I find that when I am genuinely caught up in what the other is saying, I am not at all aware of interpreting or “decoding” sounds, or of having any thoughts, judgments, or inferences marginal to the text. I am not conscious of any “simultaneous translation” of the words into ideas. The words of the speaker fully occupy my mind and the meaning “inhabits” those words, or is “incarnate” in those sounds, rather than being inferred from them and grasped separately as an idea.⁹ There is nothing in my experience to suggest that I identify and decode sound patterns, because from the moment that I am caught up in their meaning, these codes (as pure physical entities) “dissolve”, “surrendering their place” to that which is expressed. When I am reading, my eyes follow the lines on the paper, but at some point, I am drawn into the world of the author and I lose sight of the printed words. The meaning “swallows up” the signs, says Merleau-Ponty, just as the actress ceases to be present to us and the character she portrays begins to live through her.¹⁰ The word ceases to designate a thought and becomes the presence of that thought.

- 9 “... the spoken word (the one I utter or the one I hear) is pregnant with a meaning which can be read in the very texture of the linguistic gesture. The meaning inhabits the word, and language is not an external accompaniment to intellectual processes” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 193); “... when a text is read to us, provided that it is read with expression, we have no thought marginal to the text itself, for the words fully occupy our mind [...] and exactly fulfil our expectations, and we feel the necessity of speech” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 180).
- 10 “In the same way the actress becomes invisible, and it is Phaedra who appears. The meaning swallows up the signs, and Phaedra has so completely taken possession of Berma that her passion as Phaedra appears the apotheosis of ease and naturalness. Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, installs it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all, or conversely plucks the signs themselves — the person of the actor, or the colours and canvass of the painter — from their empirical existence and bears them off into another world” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 183); “Expression fades out before what is expressed [...] This certainty which we enjoy of reaching, beyond expression, a truth separable from it and of which expression is merely the garment and contingent manifestation, has been implanted in us precisely by language” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 401).

There is no need to infer from Paula's external behaviour that she is a conscious being like me, or that she is conscious of the world. Language, in use, rather than providing a system of codes with which to reconstruct in my mind the world as it is for the speaker, seems to abolish the distinction between the world as it is for me and the world as it is for her and to usher in a world as it is "for us".¹¹

The communication makes us witnesses of one sole world, as the synergy of our eyes suspends them on one unique thing [...] And it is this unjustifiable certitude of a sensible world common to us that is the seat of truth within us (Merleau-Ponty 1968: 11).

We cannot reject language's power to bring us into the same world simply because such a power is impossible in that world. This world is the "seat of truth within us" and, as such, relegates whatever is impossible within it to the realm of the subjective, only because it is able to emerge as something "for us", as one sole world into which we are brought through the power of language.

The traditional reaction to these descriptions of the "spoken word" is that the decoding of linguistic sounds is an unconscious process which could cause the perceiver to gain the mistaken impression that the meaning is "incarnate" in the perceived sounds and, along with this, the equally mistaken impression of being drawn into the world of the speaker. It is argued that we are not aware of decoding signs and inferring their meaning, because these processes are both unconscious and instantaneous. However, to assume that this impression of the "spoken word" being "pregnant with its meaning", is always the product of unconscious decoding is to assume that it is always no more than a "content of consciousness". This, in turn, may be to assume that we are always confined to "signs" that the other is conscious and that the world exists for him/her, which would mean that I can never be drawn into a world which is there for us, that I am always confined to the world as it is for me. This would be to assume that what gives the real world its power to

11 "I project myself into the other person, I introduce him into my own self. Rather than imprisoning it, language is like a magic machine for transporting the 'I' into the other person's perspective" (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 19); "... speech catches us indirectly, seduces us, trails us along, transforms us into the other and him into us, abolishes the limit between mine and not mine" (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 145).

prevail over my world of dreams and private experience would be, like the world of dreams, just another content of consciousness. If language's power to transport the "I" into "the other person's perspective" (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 19) and to abolish the limit between what is mine and not mine (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 145) is rejected as a subjective experience simply because it is impossible in the real world, then it may be that the notion of what makes the world real and what makes it the ultimate world within which some events are "in themselves" possible and others no more than contents of consciousness, must itself be seen as no more than a content of consciousness.

There may of course be decoding mechanisms as identified above, and it may be that the perception of speech is not a manifestation of the unmediated contact I have with others, and does not enable me to be drawn into a world existing for us. It may be that I am drawn beyond myself and make contact with a world which exists for us in ways other than through an experience of their speaking. However, whether or not there are such unconscious decoding mechanisms and whether or not a particular experience of speech being pregnant with its meaning is no more than a "content of consciousness" may only be decided on the basis of evidence. The onus is on the rationalists and empiricists to show that there is other evidence for the existence of such decoding mechanisms. It is not enough to argue that they are possible. However, as we will see below, even when the perception and understanding of speech become disrupted, as in semantic aphasia, there is no evidence that the breakdown is due to a loss of decoding capacity. Everything about the aphasia suggests that what the patient has lost, and what distinguishes him/her from the non-aphasic, is an inability to receive the thought of the speaker from the words themselves.

This speech, in which meaning is incarnate in the sounds, exists for me only on the periphery of my conscious life, when I am engrossed in the world of the speaker. As soon as I make it the focus of my attention, as the linguist does, it becomes, once again, a stream of pure sounds. How can we take as "indecomposable structures" and therefore as *a priori* (Merleau-Ponty 1967: 171-2) something which dissipates as soon as we attempt to reflect on it? Can we assume that only that which survives direct scrutiny may be more than a mere content of consciousness? Can we assume that anything encountered on the periphery of con-

sciousness, and which dissipates when we make it the focus of our attention, must be subjective or illusory, must be a mere content of consciousness? If it is through the speech of another that I am drawn beyond my own perspective, that the distinction between what is for me and what is for the other is abolished, the speech of the other pregnant with its meaning cannot be merely something for me. If the speech of the other can offer me a way out of my perspective, it cannot be something which can be fully described from within my perspective. To confine myself to whatever may become the focus of my attention may well be to confine myself to whatever is for me and to overlook whatever is more than it is for me.¹² We will have to accept the possibility that peripheral consciousness, rather than being a purely psychological phenomenon, may be the zone of the “contact” between two perspectives, through which there is a world which exists “for us”. When I focus my attention on Paula’s speech, I am left with a stream of sounds, not necessarily because that is all there ever was, but because that is all that may be fully described from my perspective. What focusing my attention leaves me with may be no more than the “silhouette” or “profile” of that which I encounter on the periphery of my conscious life, namely speech “pregnant” with its meaning.¹³

I do not always understand the speech of others; sometimes I misunderstand what they are saying, and I do not understand speech in a foreign language. How then can we claim that meaning is incarnate in the linguistic sounds?

The traditional empiricist and rationalist arguments from illusion assume that the illusion is a process that takes place in the real world.

12 “Thus the other is not to be found in the things, he is not in his body [...] The other is nowhere in being. He slips into my perception from behind” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 136).

“It is not sufficiently noted that the other is never present face to face [...] The other, in my eyes, is thus always on the margin of what I see and hear, he is on this side of me, he is beside or behind me, but he is not in that place that my look flattens and empties of any ‘interior’” (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 133).

13 It is of course inconceivable that meaning or consciousness could be incarnate in those sounds or those linguistic gestures ... and here Descartes is right. But there is no such undertaking. We simply want to point out that the “stream of sounds” is arrived at through a process of abstraction.

If the phenomenon of failing to understand is evidence from which we can deduce that meaning is never incarnate in sound, this could imply that there is no unmediated access to others, and thus no common perspective from which the world could appear as something for us, or logical inferences as valid for us. There would therefore be no way of verifying the logic I use when, from my failure to understand others, I draw the conclusion that the meaning could not be incarnate in the sounds. As has been argued above, we cannot assume that the perception and understanding of speech are processes in the world as represented in scientific thought. For the same reason we cannot assume that misperceptions and failure to understand speech should be explained, or should be processes which take place in the world as represented in thought. Whether or not these corrupted forms of perception are to be depicted as events in the world as represented in thought may only be decided on the basis of evidence. Thought cannot prescribe what contact between subjects is possible, nor can it deduce from the phenomenon of failing to understand others that all perception of speech is based on a mediated contact in which signs are interpreted, because the universality of thought is itself grounded in an unmediated contact with others. The fact that it may be impossible to represent to ourselves how perception could offer such a “direct contact” with others, or how there could be a “direct contact” in spite of the phenomena of misinterpretation and foreign languages, cannot be a sufficient reason to ignore the testimony of experience. Traditional philosophy is unable to accept evidence for a relationship between speaker and audience which cannot be represented in thought, because it assumes that thought prevails over experience and that thought must provide the ultimate perspective. For the phenomenologist, the question is not what we are able to think about the phenomenon of failing to understand others, but how we experience this phenomenon, and the evidence we have to corroborate it (Wait 1997: 221-42).

If, however, we return to our experience of misunderstanding others, we find nothing to suggest that meaning is not incarnate in the linguistic sounds, because at the moment that I discover that I have misunderstood a speaker, it is as if I have finally “heard” what was present in the sounds all along. The experience is not one of having found a new decoding strategy, a new and more consistent hypothesis with which to interpret the same stream of sounds. There is therefore nothing in this

experience which undermines my conviction that I find the meaning incarnate in the sounds, because the misunderstood speech dissipates in the presence of the correctly understood speech, in which the “correct” meaning is equally incarnate. As with Gestalt figures, I need to hear the speech in the right way but when I do, the sounds themselves are transformed and offer up their meaning without any decoding or interpretation on my part. Ultimately, it is impossible for me to distinguish between misunderstanding and mishearing.

Similarly, there is nothing in my experience of hearing a foreign language to suggest that linguistic signs are arbitrary, or that all perceived speech is no more than a series of signs which merely need to be decoded. In comparison with the words of the foreign language, the words of my own language appear natural and appropriate.¹⁴

Learning to understand another language is more like learning to hear the words in the right way. Whether the experience is one of a language with which I am familiar or of one with which I am unfamiliar, I do not experience the words as arbitrary. They are either “natural” and appropriate, or unnatural and inappropriate.

We shall now proceed to examine what evidence there is to suggest that the spoken word is in itself the way in which it is experienced rather than the way in which it is represented in thought or revealed under close scrutiny? What evidence is there to suggest that the relative perspective of the engaged speaker is more “absolute” than that of the universal thinker?

Following Merleau-Ponty’s example, I will look for corroborating evidence by reflecting on descriptions of the way in which the perception of speech becomes disrupted in the event of brain injury. I will show that what the aphasic lacks is an ability to hear the meaning incarnate in the sound. What s/he has lost is a certain contact with the speaker.

Patients classified as “semantic aphasics” are able to understand individual words or groups of words, such as “an elephant”, “a fly”, and so on but are not able to understand constructions such as “An elephant is bigger than a fly”. The deficiency suggests that the process of under-

14 “And from the point of view of her native language, a peasant woman from Francophone Switzerland was right to be astonished: how can cheese be called *Käse* since *fromage* is its only natural name” (Jakobson 1978: 112).

standing a complex sentence consists of at least two distinct operations: grasping the meanings of the individual parts of the sentence and grasping the relationships between them, in order to grasp the general meaning of the sentence as a whole. For the semantic aphasic it would appear that while the former operation has remained intact, the latter has been disrupted. If the patient is unable to grasp relationships such as “bigger than”, the syndrome would seem to be due to a weakness in the understanding, due to a loss of concepts such as that of the relationship “bigger than”, which is why s/he is unable to relate the expressions “an elephant” and “a fly”.

However, Luria (1976: 198) points out that in spite of their disorder, such patients are able to arrive at the overall meaning of complex constructions. He claims that they “guess” or produce hypotheses about the possible links between the fragments of a text and hence about its overall meaning. But if the patient is able to “guess” or “create hypotheses” about the overall meaning, then s/he must possess the concept of “bigger than”. In fact, rather than presenting a picture of intellectual deficiency, these patients show remarkable intellectual ability and have clearly not lost “concepts”, since without the concept of “bigger than” it would be impossible to “guess” or produce the required hypothesis about the meaning of the complex construction. On the contrary, what characterises these patients, and what distinguishes them from non-aphasics, is that their only means of understanding the sentence is through such an intellectual operation. The aphasic goes about deciphering a given sentence in the same way that the student of a foreign language translates a difficult text. Given the meanings of the individual words, both are obliged to invent a series of hypotheses about the meaning of the sentence as a whole and then to cross-check each hypothesis with the given words.

These procedures carried out by the aphasic patients contrast with, and thus throw into relief the spontaneous and unmediated access which the non-aphasic has to the meaning of an expression as a whole. The non-aphasic perceiver appears to be “present” or “open” to such meanings and thus “present” to the thoughts of others.¹⁵ For him/her the sentence

15 We can say of Luria’s patient what Merleau-Ponty said of Schneider: “The thought of others will never be present to him, since he has no immediate experience of it. The words of others are for him signs which have to be severally deciphered,

“speaks” and is significant, the arrangement of words “means” something straight away, whereas for the aphasic “the meaning has to be brought in from elsewhere by a veritable act of interpretation” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 131).

Luria says that such patients have partial success in reconstructing the general meaning of a text by “guessing” the possible links between the parts of a sentence or creating hypotheses about the overall meaning of the sentence “as a means of compensating for their primary speech defects”. But what are these primary speech defects? Luria argues that the patient understands “the elephant”, “bigger than” and “the fly” and with this understanding of the “elements”, is able to guess the meaning or produce an hypothesis about the meaning of the expression. Luria’s explanation appears to suggest that for the non-aphasic there is some other way of arriving at the “overall meaning”. Within the bounds of the natural attitude, which Luria never appears to question, the “overall meaning” of the sentence has to be supplied by the perceiving subject in an act of interpretation, of decoding, and associated with the perceived sounds. Even the non-aphasic would have to produce hypotheses about the possible links between the parts of the expression, because in terms of the theory, the links are not present in the world, and cannot therefore be “perceived” directly.¹⁶ Wherein, then, lies the difference between aphasic and non-aphasic perception? What is the aphasic’s “primary” defect?

Could we argue that the non-aphasic “guesses” the meanings or produces hypotheses instantaneously and unconsciously and that the aphasic, having lost this unconscious automatic function, must carry out the process consciously? Such an explanation would rely on a rather bizarre

instead of being, as with the normal subject, the transparent envelope of a meaning within which he might live. Like events, words are for the patients not the theme of an act of drawing together or projecting, but merely the occasion for a methodical interpretation” (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 133).

- 16 The Frazier-Kaplan “context-construction hypothesis”, for example, claims that the comprehension process involves formulating hypotheses about the meaning of the sentence while the sentence is being perceived. These hypotheses guide the comprehension of the latter parts of the sentence, which in turn makes possible the testing of the hypothesis. Understanding a sentence involves a continuous process whereby the “sensory input” is “being matched or mismatched with the output of an on-going hypothesis-refining process” (Rieber 1976: 16).

account of normal perception and understanding of speech. If the interpretation process were unconscious, the origin of the meaning of the perceived speech would be a total mystery to me. How could the unconsciously produced hypothesis present itself to consciousness? The experience of listening to someone speak would be like the kind of experiences we have in dreams, where someone speaks and, miraculously, his ideas immediately fill our minds without any impression of having heard what was said. Luria's patient is aware of this aspect of normal speech perception and feels that his/her defect is precisely an inability to derive his/her understanding from the expressions themselves:

Naturally I know what an elephant and a fly are, which is large and which is small. But I just didn't understand the words smaller or bigger in those expressions (Luria 1973: 133).

Furthermore, if the decoding process were unconscious, I would never be sure whether I had arrived at "the" meaning of the expression or simply some completely irrelevant idea triggered off in me by some purely fortuitous aspect of the sound of the expression. In fact, I would have little choice but to accept the conclusions of the decoding process with what would amount to an act of blind faith. I would be like the calculating machine which has no idea why its results are true (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 15). This way of accounting for aphasic perception in terms of the loss of an unconscious decoding ability goes against one of the most conspicuous distinguishing features of aphasic and non-aphasic perception. Luria (1976: 198) points out that those patients who manage to decipher perceived speech through the production of hypotheses are never confident of having arrived at the correct meaning in spite of their painstaking attention to "intonational organisation" and their efforts to avoid irrelevant associations. How can we account for the fact that the non-aphasic, for whom the interpretation has been carried out unconsciously and who is therefore unaware of the rationality of each step in his decoding, is nevertheless confident of having grasped the meaning of the expression while the aphasic, who has consciously executed each step, and is therefore aware of the rationality of each step and of his hypothesis, is not confident?

As has been argued above, we are not free to speculate about hidden mechanisms unless we can find other evidence for their existence. However, when we reflect on the way in which the perception of speech be-

comes disrupted in the event of brain injury, we find nothing to suggest that the syndrome is due to the breakdown of a decoding mechanism. On the contrary, everything suggests that what characterises aphasic perception is the loss of the ability to “hear” the meaning incarnate in the sounds themselves. Everything suggests that the relative perspective of the embodied subject inextricably bound to a particular linguistic community can bring us closer to an understanding of perception itself than the absolute perspective of the universal thinker.

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