Chapter 2 Perception Language Relationship

Among the last pages that Merleau-Ponty composed in *The Visible and the Invisible*, just before his untimely death, we find the author stating that it is too soon (in his manuscript) to attempt to clarify the relationship between perceptual meaning and the abstract ideas expressed in language. He does however provide a brief indication of the direction he will take: “the ‘pure’ ideality [of the thought produced with the help of language] already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things, and, however new it is, it slips through ways it has not traced, transfigures horizons it did not open . . .” (VI 152, my bracket addition). It is surely one of the great tragedies of the history of philosophy that Merleau-Ponty did not live to further develop his later philosophy, including this move from perception to language and thought. However, we have not been left empty-handed, for, as just mentioned, Merleau-Ponty later writings do at least provide an indication of the direction of his thought, regarding the perception to thought relationship, and, secondly, since he frequently revisits his earlier works, in order to develop them, his earlier works frequently present a great deal of what he will later develop more fully. Thus, by visiting his earlier writings, we can perhaps fill-in his late outline, especially if we are able to integrate the two.

How are we to understand the relationship between perception and language? First, stated very generally and provisionally, we must recognize that there is a sublimation of the perceptual in language. Or, rather, there is a *fundierung* relationship between perception and language. Perception suggests certain linguistic interpretations, with the latter folding back upon the perceived to help articulate it more precisely. Secondly, and just as generally and provisionally, we must recognize that forms of behavior, including linguistic behavior, i.e., words, phrases, sentences, etc., that help express and coordinate our encounters with the perceived world, can become habitual and thus culturally institutionalized. This means that certain word forms, and the perceptual meanings bound up with them, can be carried forward in time in order to be used as the basis for future expressions. In order to pursue these general insights in greater detail, let us begin with Merleau-Ponty’s early works first, for in this way we will be able to see how the (only briefly outlined) position taken in the later works is prefigured in the early writings and, in fact, is developed from them. The hope here is that the earlier works will shed some light on what is only suggested in the later, posthumously published texts.

For this chapter, Merleau-Ponty’s works (those that will be cited this chapter) can be placed in the following chronological categories. **Middle**: *Phénoménologie de la perception*, published in 1945 (*Phenomenology of Perception*, 1962). **Middle works transitioning or bridging to the later writings**: “Un inédit de Maurice Merleau-Ponty,” a text submitted for his candidacy at the Collège de France sometime in 1951/1952 (“An Unpublished Text by Maurice Merleau-Ponty” in *The Primacy of Perception*,...

1.) Let’s now turn to Merleau-Ponty’s middle and transition writings to see if we can provide some content to his brief sketch, to what he has only briefly outlined, in his later work. Let us first turn to Part 1 Chapter 6, “The Body as Expression, and Speech,” of Phenomenology of Perception. Here Merleau-Ponty challenges both the empiricist and rationalist attempt to account for language. Empiricism, he argues, cannot account for language because it reduces language to a third person, objective process and thus eliminates the speaking subject. And rationalism, he continues, fails because it claims that thought is separate from language. Both empiricism and rationalism, he asserts, are here refuted with the claim that words possess meaning.

Yet how do words possess meaning? First of all, Merleau-Ponty states that “insofar as they [words] persist within me, it is rather as does the Freudian Imago which is much less the representation of the former perception than a highly specific emotional essence, which is yet generalized, and detached from its empirical origins” (PhP180, my bracket addition). Thus words persist in me like an idealized image of my mother or father, not as an explicit conceptual representation, but as an emotional orientation that has a specific origin but that is also capable of transference and thus of general application. In addition, just as it is not necessary for me to form an explicit representation of my body and the world in order for me to move toward objects within it, so also it is not necessary for me to form an explicit representation of words and the cultural field within which they exist in order to use them meaningfully. As we have just seen, though now expressed in a slightly different language, words persist in me as existentials, as lived-through orientation schemas. They are (or can be) persistent existentials that carry the form and meaning of a word forward in time. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, for me to use a word meaningfully “it is enough that I possess
its articulatory and acoustic style as one of the modulations of my body” (PhP180, see also 235). In other words, the use of a word is possible because it fits within one of the lived-through uses of my body, one of the uses of its motor abilities (PhP180). It is this active gesturing, this active orientation, this motor orientation, this active vocal gesticulation that helps bring verbal meaning into existence. Just as musical notes and rhythms bring musical meaning into existence, so also verbal gestures, rhythms of expressed words, bring linguistic meaning into existence (See PhP182). Obviously, as I seek to express an experience that is poorly formed and new for me, I am frequently able to do so by adopting and adapting already available forms of expression. “The new sense-giving intention knows itself only by donning already available meanings, the outcome of previous acts of expression. The available meanings suddenly link up in accordance with an unknown law, and once and for all a fresh cultural entity has taken on an existence. Thought and expression, then, are simultaneously constituted . . . ” (PhP183). Thus I can use already available expressions to help express previously unexpressed experiences. Yet the existence of these already available expressions presupposes an initial silence or mute meaning that they have already expressed. We must then return to this silence and trace its articulation in human gestures, particularly in language (See PhP184).

Merleau-Ponty turns to a brief consideration of the origin of language in a section of Phenomenology of Perception entitled “The Linguistic Gesture.” Is the meaning of a gesture natural, he asks? After all, everyone knows that the smile expresses joy. Yet, on the other hand, is the meaning of a gesture simply established by convention, he continues? For, after all, many different languages exist, with different expressions for similar meanings. Merleau-Ponty does admit that the conceptual meaning of a word does appear to be arbitrary and thus open to conventional definition. Yet, even here he also states that conventional definitions always presuppose a shared world, with at least some shared meaning and shared forms of communication---for example, that pointing to something and uttering a word means naming it. Furthermore, he continues, arbitrary or strictly conventional definitions would no longer appear feasible “if we took into account the emotional content of the word, which we have called . . . its ‘gestural’ sense, which is all-important in poetry, for example. It would then be found that the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of ‘singing’ the world . . . ” (PhP187-188). Thus we should seek the origin of language in the “emotional gesticulation” that attempts to express our emotional, needful, sensual encounter with the world, while, nevertheless, not simply reducing “language to emotional expression,” that is, to a natural physiological template of emotions, for our “psychophysical equipment” leaves open a wide range of emotional possibilities. There is no simple correlate between our psychophysical equipment and specific emotions or how they are expressed (PhP188-189). Yet, it is still in our perceptual (even sensual), needful, emotional encounter with the world that we should seek the meaning of linguistic gestures. To provide a rather simple example, we might imagine the following situation. A group of early hunter-gathers is hunting
small game along a riverbed when one hunter suddenly sees a lion in the bush and fearfully shouts “yahhh!” If the other hunters hear and understand the fear in this reaction and see what the first hunter is reacting to, then this gesture/word conveys a meaning (an animal that represents a threat) that may well become established or “institutionalized” as the group’s word for (threatening) lion. Now, other expressions certainly could have been used, other emotional responses could have been elicited (for example, to fight rather than flight), and there is no single expression or emotion that captures the totality of the meaning of this encounter. There is no single expression or emotional response that is pre-determined to fit this encounter. Yet, some expressions certainly seem more appropriate than others, and by and large it is the expression that most accurately captures this encounter that should be adopted.

As Merleau-Ponty expresses it, “everything is both manufactured and natural in man, as it were, in the sense that there is not a word, not a form of behavior which does not owe something to purely biological being--and which at the same time does not elude the simplicity of animal life, and cause forms of vital behavior to deviate from their pre-ordained direction, through a sort of leakage and through a genius for ambiguity which might serve to define man” (PhP189). Behavior, then, expresses meanings that are inherent in the body’s encounter with the world but that also transcends this encounter (PhP 189). “For example, the knitting of the brows intended, according to Darwin, to protect the eye from the sun, or the narrowing of the eyes to enable one to see sharply, become component parts of the human act of meditation, and convey this to an observer.” Moreover, linguistic behavior should be understood in the same way: “a contraction of the throat, an . . . emission of air between the tongue and teeth, a certain way of bringing the body into play suddenly allows itself to be invested with a figurative significance which is conveyed outside us” (PhP 194). Furthermore, “it is impossible to draw up an inventory of this irrational power which creates meanings and conveys them. Speech is merely one particular case of it.” There are other cases, such as musical expression and painting, but language is special case, for “it can be reiterated indefinately” and in ways that remain impossible for both music and painting (PhP 189-190). “We must therefore recognize as an ultimate fact this open and indefinite power of giving significance--that is, both of apprehending and conveying a meaning--by which man transcends himself towards a new form of behavior, or towards other people, or towards his own thought, through his body and his speech” (PhP 194, my italics).

When analyzing this power, Merleau-Ponty argues that “it cannot be said of speech either that it is an ‘operation of intelligence’, or that it is a ‘motor phenomenon’: it is wholly motility and wholly intelligence” (PhP 194). Thus, what is needed is a notion that integrates acts of intelligence and motility. What is needed is what might be called an existential power of projection, for in certain patients both intelligence and the power of movement remain intact and yet the use of language by the patient appears flat and uninvolved.

“. . . the intention to speak can reside only in an open experience. It makes its appearance like the boiling
point of a liquid, when, in the density of being, volumes of empty space are built up and move outwards. ‘As soon as man uses language to establish a living relation with himself or with his fellows, language is no longer an instrument, no longer a means; it is a manifestation, a revelation of intimate being and of the psychic link which unites us to the world and our fellow men.’” (PhP 196)

It is this existential power of projection that has declined in certain patients and that helps explain a speech that is \textit{wholly motility and wholly intelligence}, that helps explain that speech is an \textit{operative intentionality}, a lived, active, aware, meaningful engagement with the world and others.

2.) In a brief text submitted for his candidacy at the Collège de France sometime in 1951/1952, Merleau-Ponty explicitly remarks that his first two books (\textit{The Structure of Behavior} and \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}) attempted to underscore the originality of perceptual meaning and that he was preparing works to “show how communication with others, and thought, take up and go beyond the realm of perception . . .” (PrP 3). Yet he also proceeds to make the following claim.

“[K]nowledge and communication with others which it presupposes not only are original formulations with respect to the perceptual life but also preserve and continue our perceptual life even while transforming it. Knowledge and communication sublimate rather than suppress our incarnation, and the characteristic operation of the mind is in the movement by which we recapture our corporeal existence and use it to symbolize. . .This metamorphosis lies in the double function of our body. Through its ‘sensory fields’ and its whole organization the body is, so to speak, predestined to model itself on the natural aspects of the world. But as an active body capable of gestures, of expression, and finally of language, it turns back on the world to signify it.” (PrP 7)

Thus we see very early on that Merleau-Ponty was interested in the relationship between perception and language, that it was never a question of considering one or the other but, rather, how they cross into and influence each other, and that it is the double function of the body the will help us understand how this crisscrossing relationship is possible.

3.) We see Merleau-Ponty proceeding to make this effort to understand the relationship between perception and language in his \textit{The Prose of the World}, which was posthumously published, and in his “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence,” a published version of parts of \textit{The Prose of the World}. We should briefly consider these texts, for in both Merleau-Ponty continues to refine and develop themes he has already broached in earlier texts, now claiming that painting and language are comparable because they are similar as \textit{acts of creative expression}. Just as the painter takes up light, shadows, and colors and makes them express something new, some new “vision” in his or her experience, so also the writer takes up words, phrases, and common forms of expression to express something new regarding his or her openness upon the world (PW 47-48). Thus, in order to follow artistic expression to other forms of human expression, Merleau-Ponty first turns to a detailed consideration of the act of painting, for it is this creative act that will act as a model for others. The painter’s act, he states, is first and foremost an active form of expression, one that sublimates or sublates (in Hegel’s \textit{aufheben} sense of lifting up and integrating at a new level) our active perceptual openness upon the world and the structures that are formed therein. The artist’s active, lived-
through style takes up, prolongs, and expresses our active perceptual openness upon the world and does so in a way that is more integrated (PW 59-61). Artistic expression articulates our perceptual experience in a more unified way and stable way, but it is, after all, perception that is the first act to unify and stabilize the perceptual field and its objects. “All perception…is already primordial expression. This means that perception is…the primary operation which first constitutes signs as signs. Perception makes what is expressed dwell in signs, not through some previous convention but through the eloquence of their very arrangement and configuration” (PW 78; see also ILVS in Signs 67). Again, since it is perception that first actively unifies scattered data into a meaningful whole, that first creates the sign as a sign, it is our perception that provides the basis for both artistic and linguistic expression, for the reference to a unified meaning. Painting and writing are similar because they are both creative acts of expression, prolonging the act of perception. Furthermore,

“Art is not imitation . . . It is a process of expressing. Just as the function of words is to name—that is, to grasp the nature of what appears to us in a confused way and to place it before us as a recognizable object—so it is up to the painter . . . to ‘objectify,’ ‘project,’ and ‘arrest’. . . Forgetting the viscous, equivocal appearances, we go through them straight to the things they present. The painter recaptures and converts into visible objects what would, without him, remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness: the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.”

There is thus a two-way relationship between expression and perceptual experience. Perceptual structures suggest certain interpretations, yet these interpretive expressions, often creative, are needed to bring the perceptual structures fully to light.

Moreover, since perception is already primordial expression, since “perception already stylizes” (PW 60), the artistic act of painting may be regarded as a sublimation of the artist’s perceptual encounter with the world. Merleau-Ponty underlines this point with an appeal to Husserl. “Husserl has used the fine word Stiftung—foundation, institution—. . . to designate that fecundity of the products of culture which continues to have value after their historical appearance and open a field of work beyond and the same as their own. It is thus that the world as soon as he has seen it, his first act of painting, and the whole past of painting create for the painter a tradition . . .” (PW 68; ILVS 59). Moreover, Merleau-Ponty continues, “it is the expressive operation of the body, begun in the least perception, which amplifies into painting and art . . . The first sketch on the walls of a cave founded a tradition only because it gleaned from another—the tradition of perception” (PW 83). Thus, just as artistic expression is an amplification or prolongation of perceptual experience, so also linguistic expression is an amplification or prolongation of perceptual experience, but at a more abstract level.

Even though Merleau-Ponty characterizes painting and language as similar acts of expression, he does proceed to distinguish them. When I try to calculate the area of a parallelogram, for example, I may first posit that it can be seen as two triangles, and from this structure I am able to derive what is needed for
the calculation, the combined area of the triangles. Seeing the parallelogram as a combination of two triangles does not displace or negate the properties of the parallelogram. “This is not just a substitution of one [specific] meaning for another but a substitution of equivalent meanings, in which the new structure is latent in the old one while remaining present in the new. The past is not simply surpassed, it is understood . . .” (PW 104ff; my bracket addition). Language thus helps us understand the events that preceded it. It is not just a recasting or reshuffling of them. “Heraclitus’ writing casts light for us as no broken statues [or early paintings] can, because its significance is . . . concentrated in another way than theirs is in them, and because nothing equals the ductility of speech. In short, language speaks, and the voices of painting are the voices of silence” (Sign 80-81).

“Thus, when we compare language to mute forms of expression such as gestures or paintings, we must point out that unlike these forms language is not content to sketch out directions, vectors, a ‘coherent deformation’, or a tacit meaning on the surface of the world, exhausting itself as animal ‘intelligence’ does in kaleidoscopically producing a new landscape of action. Language is not just the replacement of one meaning by another, but the substitution of equivalent meanings. The new structure is given as already present in the old, the latter subsists in it, and the past is now understood.” (Signs 81)

We see, then, that painting and language are similar because both embrace and sublimate perceptual meaning but also that language has the power to do this in a way that allows for a greater understanding of what preceded it.

4.) In the series of courses offered at the Collège de France between 1952 and 1960 that came to be published as Themes from the Lectures we find that Merleau-Ponty once again addresses the relationship between perception and language.

“There is truly a reversal when one passes from the sensible world, in which we are caught, to a world of expression, where we seek to capture significations to serve our purpose, although this reversal and the ‘retrogressive movement’ of the truth are solicited by a perceptual anticipation. Properly speaking, the expression which language makes possible resumes and simplifies another expression which is revealed in the ‘archaeology’ of the perceived world.” (TFL 4)

Merleau-Ponty continues here by stating that the proper contact with perception (perception as lived-through) leads us to a new understanding of understanding. With the help of Gestalt psychology, he says, we have learned the following. To those who think of the understanding as “a pure power of bestowing significations and the capacity of absolute survey” we must oppose an understanding that is situated in perception.

“For the meaning of a perceived object when picked out from all others still does not stand isolated from the constellation in which it appears; it is articulated only as a certain distance in relation to the order of space, time, motion, and signification in general in which we are established. The meaning of the object is given only as a systematic deformation of our universe of experience, without our being able to name its operative principle.” (TFL 3-4)
Perception thus teaches us that our understanding of the world cannot be fully detached from our engagement in it, cannot be a fully detached intellectual construction of it. We are immersed in a world of experience or our experience is immersed in the world, and, either way, our understanding takes shape in this experience. This immersion must be understood from a point of view situated in it and not form a point of view completely outside or above it. Merleau-Ponty continues.

“Every perception is a perception of something solely by way of being at the same time the relative imperception of a horizon or background which it implies but does not thematize. Perceptual consciousness is therefore indirect . . . in relation to an ideal of adequation which it presumes but never encounters directly.” (TFL 4)

Perceptual consciousness is always indirect. I never enjoy a complete adequation with the perceived. The perceived is never fully possessed in the act of perception. The perception is never fully equal to the perceived because the perceptual horizon, both spatial and temporal, always runs beyond the act of perception. Moreover, if this is the case, if perception is an open-ended gestalt field, then “it would be just as absurd to reduce everything else to this as to impose upon it a ‘universe of ideas’ which owed nothing to it” (TFL 4). Perception is neither the simple basis for language in the sense that language simply copies it nor the simple product of abstract ideas. Perception suggests certain linguistic expressions, certain expressions that nevertheless require creative interpretation to bring the perceived more fully to light. Perception and interpretation must be thought of as crossing back and forth into each other, and it is this theme that Merleau-Ponty here pursues at a deeper level.

“We have studied the phenomenon of movement as an example of this transition and reversal,” as an example of how language resumes the expression found in perception by folding back upon the perceptual structures that motive it, in order to express them more precisely (TFL 4). First of all, Merleau-Ponty continues, the study shows that the attempt to understand motion as a strictly objective event ends in failure, as we have known since Zeno. The study thus reveals “that the simplest perception of movement presupposes a subject who is situated spatially” in the world. Furthermore, “the description of motion as a change in location or variation in the relations between a ‘mobile’ and its coordinates is a retrospective schema . . .” That is to say, the description of motion requires that we “understand how the immediate unity of our gesture is able to spread itself over external experiences and introduce into them the possibility of a transition which from the standpoint of objective thought is unreal” (TFL, 4-5). To continue to make his case for the interaction of the perceiving subject and the “mobile” Merleau-Ponty reports the following details of the study. Two points of light flash in rapid succession upon a screen directly before an observer. The observer reports seeing not two points of light but a single trace of light across the screen. This phenomenon can be explained as follows (TFL 5). “Here what happens is that external forces insert themselves into a system of equivalents that is ready to function and in which they operate upon us, like signs in a language, not by arousing their uniquely correspondent signification but, like mileposts, in a
process which is still unfolding, or as though they were picking out a path which . . . inspired them at a
distance” (TFL 5-6). There is thus a reciprocal and simultaneous exchange between the perceiving subject
and the data of the environment, with the introjection of each term into the other. It is this exchange that
produces perceptual meaning. It is this exchange that allows us to grasp the movement of an object across
the perceiver’s visual field, for the unity of the human body and our gestures is projected unto the unity of
the object’s motion across the visual field. Merleau-Ponty thus recognizes that it is this active perception
that helps produce meaning, and that “perception is already [a form of] expression.” Moreover, he even
calls perception a “natural language,” even though it is a “language” that lets what is expressed “adhere in
its own way more to the ‘perceptual chain’ than to the ‘verbal chain’” (TFL 6, my bracket addition). We
must therefore recognize in perceived movement a sort of pre-linguistic meaning or rhythm that is not yet
expressed in verbal gestures and that is not constituted by it.

Merleau-Ponty’s existential or lived through understanding of time helps us understand his analysis
here. Time is a dimension of the world, yet the subject must be present in order to recognize the passing of
time, for without this awareness there is only the present. Yet, the subject certainly does not constitute time,
for in this case time would be reduced to simply what is present before the constituting subject, thus again
eliminating the possibility of the passing of time. The embodied, situated, experiencing subject lives within
time as a dimension of the world, and is aware of the past flowing into the present and toward the future.
An awareness on the part of the subject is needed here to see the moments of time folding into one another
and overlapping, yet no subjective synthesis is needed here because the moments of time pass into one
another and overlap in the world. In the example offered here in the lecture notes, the data of the study, the
flashing lights, are introduced or introjected into the experience of the embodied, situated, perceiving
subject. Since the human body must be recognized as an open-ended gestalt whole (for studies have
demonstrated this), and since it is thus existentially unified, the data received are unified—here in the sense
that the data appear like mileposts, intrinsically indicating what is ahead, yet not doing so with any sort of
complete certainty. Thus we already see here in the body’s perceptual experience of the world a structure
that is similar to the general structure of language, an open-ended gestalt whole, with parts referring to other
parts that are not yet fully present.

Merleau-Ponty comments that we can only understand the above mentioned pre-linguistic
“implication” only if “one undertakes an analysis of the subject who is its source and retrace the birth in
him of what is properly called expression” (TFL 7). In order to accomplish this, he once again appeals to a
study carried out by Gestalt psychologists. The study reveals the following.

“On the one hand, gnosis [or, here, knowledge of space] is founded upon praxis, since the elementary
notions of point, surface, and contour in the last analysis only have meaning for the subject modified by
locality and himself situated in the space in which he unfolds the spectacle of a point of view . . . On the
other hand, gnosic space is relatively independent of the practical expression of space, as is evident from
pathological cases where serious practical impairments are compatible with the ability to handle spatial symbols.” (TFL 8, my bracket addition)

Merleau-Ponty proceeds to draw the following conclusion.

“The relative autonomy of superstructures which outlast the practical conditions which generate them…permit us to say with equal truth that we are conscious because we are mobile and that we are mobile because we are conscious. Consciousness, in the sense of knowledge, and movement, in the sense of displacement in objective space, are two abstract moments of a living structure which can very well extend its limits but would also destroy its powers if it were to abolish those limits.” (TFL 8)

Here again, we see that meaning must be located in the body’s active encounter with the world. Yet we also see that some interpretive schemas can outlast some of the practical engagements that originally gave rise to them. However, there are limits to the extension of our limits, for if they extend completely beyond our perceptual engagement with the world they will cease to have meaning. Moreover, insofar as we recognize praxis “as an original domain”, Merleau-Ponty says, we “are in position to understand the strict relations between mobility and all the symbolic functions . . .”, between the body’s active involvement with the world and the linguistic schemas that fold back upon it, that help express it, and that gain some freedom of use beyond it, even though this freedom is never complete (TFL 8).

Insofar as we begin with praxis, with the body’s lived-through, active engagement with the world, we will have the opportunity to grasp the relationship between the body’s movement and symbolic expression. The active body (the body in motion) opens upon and interacts with a world that forcefully impacts upon it. The moving body and the world fold in upon one another and perceptual meaning is formed. This relationship (as we have seen it revealed immediately above) is the precedent for the perception to language relationship, for the folding in upon one another of perception and language, with perception as the primary term. The moving, perceiving body interacts with the forceful structures of the world, which are the founding terms, since perception attempts to make more precise what is already there, albeit often in vague and imprecise forms. This relationship between the world and perception is the model for the relationship between perception and language, with perception as the founding term for language, which attempts to express the perceptual in more precise categories.

We should once again reference Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the fundierung relationship. In Phenomenology of Perception the phenomenological fundierung relationship is presented as a two-way relationship, with founding and founded terms, each of which influences the other.

“The relation . . . of thought to perception is a two-way relationship that phenomenology has called Fundierung: the founding term, or originator— . . . perception—is primary in the sense that the originated [thought expressed by language] is presented as a determinate or explicit form of the originator, which prevents the latter from absorbing the former, and yet the originator is not primary in the empiricist sense and the originated is not simply derived from it, since it is through the originated that the originator is made manifest.” (PhP 394; see also 127)
In the context of the present discussion, perception is the founding term for language, which, of course, is founded upon it, yet with this founded term language folding back on the founding term perception in order to express it more precisely. Moreover, this fundierung relationship between perception and language is rooted in the more primary fundierung relationship between bodily movements (i.e., perception) and the world, with the now founded term perception folding onto the founding term world in order to express it more precisely. Merleau-Ponty thus concludes this particular lecture course with the following claim.

“The body is the vehicle of an indefinite number of symbolic systems whose intrinsic development definitely surpasses the signification in ‘natural’ gestures, but would collapse if ever the body ceases to prompt their operation and install them in the world and our life.” (TFL 9)

In another lecture course entitled “The Problem of Speech” Merleau-Ponty states that he will attempt “to illustrate and to extend the Saussurean conception of speech as a positive and dominating function.” In addition, he claims that Saussure’s “definition of the sign as ‘diacritical, oppositional, and negative’ means that language is present in the speaking subject as a system of intervals between signs and significations, and that…the act of speech simultaneously operates the differentiation of these two orders.” He appreciates Roman Jakobson’s Saussurean attempt to distinguish “between the mere factual presence of a sound or phoneme in the child’s babbling and the proper linguistic possession of the same element as a means of signifying.” This of course means that the child must be reflectively aware of these distinctions within a language. Yet when Jacobson analyzes this phenomenon he appeals to an abstract judgmental awareness rather than, as Merleau-Ponty insists, the totality of the child’s lived-through, pre-conceptual experience (TFL 20). Merleau-Ponty also points out that studies do link the acquisition of language to emotional development, yet, he cautions, we should not seek to establish some sort of strict causal link, or chronological sequence of links, between emotional development and the acquisition of language. Rather, Merleau-Ponty seeks to understand the totality of the child’s experience, for all aspects of experience develop together and inform each other reciprocally, as the child forms relationship with the world and other human subjects. This means that “there is thus a sort of spirit of language . . . For language is the system of differentiations through which the individual articulates his relation to the world . . . The Saussurean notion of the diacritical sign [is] . . . interrelated and akin to Humbolt’s idea of language as a ‘perspective on the world’” (TFL 23, my bracket addition).

“Just as the painter and the musician make use of the objects, colors, and sounds in order to reveal the relations between the elements of the world in a living unity . . . so the writer takes everyday language and makes it deliver the prelogical participation of landscapes, dwellings, localities, and gestures, of men among themselves and with us . . . [The writer’s] task is to produce a system of signs whose internal articulation reproduces the contours of experience . . .” (TFL 24-25, my bracket addition)

To order to speak or to write, then, we must attempt to give expression to our lived-through experience, our lived-through relations to the world and others. There is no set blueprint for this translation, for it is an act
of creative expression. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty once again states that the relationship between the means of expression and experience is reciprocal. For, after all, “to speak or to write is truly to translate an experience which, without the word that inspires, would not become text”, and, we could just as well say, without the experience that inspires, would not become text (TFL 26).

Even though Merleau-Ponty doesn’t discuss here the process by which something (in particular language) becomes “institutionalized,” he does address the “nature of institution as the act of birth of all possible speech” in another course entitled “Institution in Personal and Public History” (TFL 26, 39). With respect to a definition of “institution” he here asserts that “what we understand by the concept of institution are those events in experience which endow it with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning, not as survivals or residues, but as the invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future” (TFL 40). Thus the “institutionalization” of experience, this past experience carried forward that helps frame present experience, also provides possibilities for future expressions. It even “produces a table of diverse, complex probabilities, always bound to local circumstances, weighted with a coefficient of facticity, and such that we can never say of one that it is more true than another, although we can say that one is more false, more artificial, and less open to a future in turn less rich” (TFL 44).

Again, referencing our existential temporality, an experienced temporality that is a dimension of the stable world upon which our experience opens and with which it blends, Merleau-Ponty states that “I think in the near past, or rather yesterday’s thought passes into today’s thought: there is our encroachment of the passive upon the active which is reciprocal.” We thus once again witness experiences crossing into one another and overlapping, here moments of time. Yet, Merleau-Ponty proceeds to relate the crisscrossing or overlapping of experiences to an essential aspect of any language, intersubjectivity. “Speech passes from the sphere of one consciousness to another by the same phenomenon of encroachment or propagation. As a speaking and active subject, I encroach upon the other who is listening, as the understanding and passive subject I allow the other to encroach upon me. Within myself and in the exercise of language I experience activity in every case as the other side of passivity. And it is thus that ideality ‘makes its entrance’ (Eintritt)” (TFL 118-119). Obviously, an essential step in the formation of ideal meanings is the comparison of one’s own experiences to those lived through by others. Within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, one’s lived through embodied experience opens upon a public world that includes it. While Merleau-Ponty does not claim that one individual can literally experience the lived through experience of another, he does claim that, since experience is primarily the body’s openness out upon the world, that human experiences can overlap in the world, can overlap at the things within it, especially as members of the same species focused on similar practical tasks. Since the individual’s experience is fundamentally a relationship to a public world, is fundamentally intersubjective (or, rather, inter-corporeal), the move from one’s own embodied perceptual experiences, which are experienced as opening upon a public world, to the shared, more abstract
world of linguistic meaning, is not difficult to see. Yet, one more step is needed. “It is writing which once and for all translates the meaning of spoken words into ideal being, at the same time transforming human sociability, in as much as writing is ‘virtual’ communication, the speaking of x to x which is not carried by any living subject and belongs in principle to everyone, evoking a total speech” (TFL 119). Moreover, if we wish to understand the development of thought within a culture, and within a culture over time, i.e., though history, then, we must understand it as generated through human experience (not outside of it, as Hegel would have it) and within the context of social institutions, including language.

In a later section of *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty repeats what he said earlier about the nature of the word, that the word must be “taken up by a power of speech and, in the last analysis, by a motor power given to me along with the first experience I have of my body and its perceptual and practical fields.” Proceeding from this discussion of how the word is articulated or spoken, he moves on the consider the word’s meaning. “I learn it,” he says, “as I learn to use a tool, by seeing it used in the context of a certain situation. The word’s meaning is . . . first and foremost the aspect taken on by the object in human experience . . .” (PhP 403). This is obviously a complex claim, for the meaning of a word comes from two primary sources, from both the body’s needful, active/passive, lived-through encounter with the world and from how it is used in a certain situation, that is, by how other needful, embodied subjects use language, obviously in groups, as a tool to assist with their adaptation to each other and to various natural and social environmental conditions. Furthermore, as we witnessed earlier, when discussing the meaning of a word, Merleau-Ponty mentions the importance of time, i.e., that past forms, uses, and meanings are institutionalized in such a way that past forms, etc., can be taken up in the present, can be “deformed” in order to express current concerns, and can subsequently be used as the basis for future expressions. As he states it here, late in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “To give expression . . . is to ensure . . . that the new intention carries on the heritage of the past, it is at a stroke to incorporate the past into the present, and weld that present to a future . . .” (PhP 392).

Again in his *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty states that in order for the word *cogito* to have a meaning the word must come into contact with our lived experience; the spoken *cogito* must have contact with a tacit *cogito*. (PhP 402). Yet he also says that we do not find fully formed, precise meanings in lived-through experience, for experience is open-ended and often ambiguous. “The consciousness which conditions language is only a global and inarticulate seizure of the world . . ., and though it is true that all particular knowledge is founded on this primary view, it is true also that the latter [i.e., the primary view] waits to be reconquered, fixed, and made explicit by perceptive exploration and speech.” (PhP 404; translation altered; my bracket addition) Thus here in *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty is fully aware that lived through experience is open and ambiguous and that even though it provides the basis for linguistic interpretations that these interpretations are needed to articulate the lived through more clearly.
As he says earlier in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “visual contents are taken up, utilized and sublimated to the level of thought by a symbolical power which transcends them, but it is on the basis of sight that this power can be constituted.” As we have seen, “the relationship between matter and form is called in phenomenological terminology a relationship of Fundierung: the symbolical function rests on the visual as a ground” (PhP 127). Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the geometer’s abstract construction of a triangle serves as an appropriate example of the fundierung relationship with respect to the relationship between abstract expression and perceptual experiences.

“I ‘consider’ the triangle, which for me is a set of lines with a certain orientation, and if words such as ‘angle’ or ‘direction’ have any meaning for me, it is insofar as I place myself at a point, and from it tend towards another point, insofar as the system of spatial positions provides me with a field of possible movements. Thus do I grasp the concrete essence of the triangle, which is not a collection of objective ‘characteristics,’ but the formula of an attitude, a certain modality of my hold on the world, a structure, in short . . . [The construction of the triangle and its auxiliary hypotheses] express my power to make apparent the sensible symbols of a certain hold on things, which is my perception of the triangle’s structure.” (PhP 386, my bracket addition)

We see here that even the abstract language of geometry expresses our perceptual hold on the world. True, this language helps us draw out and make explicit certain relationships not fully visible, that, for example, a line drawn through the apex and parallel to the base creates three angles whose sum equals 180 degrees, but the basis for these relationships must be found in our perceptual field. Perhaps it will be objected that the example offered here is “loaded” in the sense that geometry deals with spatial and thus visual relationships and, of course, that linguistic expressions about these relationships have their roots in the perceptual. Yet Merleau-Ponty makes the same case even for the abstract algorithms of mathematics. He does not deny that these formulas can be used as abstract calculators. He does not claim that their abstract calculations are meaningless. He does not claim that they must, at each step, refer to some perceived object. He does claim, however, that these formulas will remain virtually meaningless if they do not at some point relate back to a perceived field (See PW 107).

5.) Moreover, Merleau-Ponty makes clear that this is also the way that he intends to interpret Saussure’s linguistics. “Yet try as each word may (as Saussure explains) to extract its meaning from all the others, the fact remains that at the moment it occurs the task of expressing is no longer differentiated and referred to other words -- it is accomplished, and we understand something.” (*Signs* 81) Even though signs and their significations form a system of lateral relations, at some point we must understand that they refer beyond themselves to the world, to a world of perceptual objects that also form a field of relations.

“Saussure may show that each act of expression becomes significant only as in modulation of a general system of expression and only insofar as it is differentiated from other linguistic gestures. The marvel is that before Saussure we did not know anything about this, and we forget it again each time we speak . . . This proves that each partial act of expression . . . is not limited to expanding an expressive power accumulated in the language, but recreates both the power and the language by making us verify...the power that speaking subjects have of going beyond signs toward their meaning.” (*Signs* 81)
It is important to note here that the word “power” is being used in two distinct senses, one referring to the “expressive power accumulated the language,” the other to the more basic power of subjects to express themselves, which is the basis of the power accumulated in the language. We have seen this power in the human subject to speak and express (a bubbling up of expression) outlined above in some detail, and without it human language would be impossible. “Signs do not simply evoke other signs for us and so on without end, and language is not like a prison we are locked into or a guide we must follow blindly; for what these linguistic gestures mean . . . finally appears at the intersection of all of them” (Signs 81). Linguistic gestures mean something because they mean something for human subjects, for subjects who attempt to express their experience of a public and perceptual world that is always already there. As Saussure has taught us, words and their meanings are caught up in a system of relations. Yet these words and meanings must also, at some point, refer to objects in the world, for, after all, they are primarily a sublimation of it. This means that what we mean when we speak “is only the excess of what we live over what has already been said.”

Merleau-Ponty continues:

“With our apparatus of expression we set ourselves up in a situation the apparatus is sensitive to, we confront it with the situation, and our statements are only the final balance of these exchanges. Political thought itself is of this order. It is always the elucidation of a historical perception in which all our understandings, all our experiences, and all our values simultaneously come into play -- and of which our theses are only the schematic formulation.” (Signs 83)

The meaning that language expresses is culled from experience in general, from the body’s lived through openness upon the perceptual field of the world and upon a cultural field of already established meanings, not just from words deferring to other words ad infinitum.

What Merleau-Ponty especially appreciates in Saussure’s linguistics is that it allows us to overcome the untenable separation between subject and object, between sign and signification, between individual and community, a separation that ultimately renders human experience, human communities, and human history unexplainable. Yet, if we understand sign and signification as folding back and forth into one another, if we understand the will to speak and social institutions as folding back and forth into one another, then we have a greater chance of grasping human experience, human communities, and human history. Thus, it is a theory of signs, in particular Saussure’s theory, that helps us overcome the opposition between things and consciousness, that helps us understand human societies and their movement through history, that helps us understand “what, across the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects, wishes, speaks, and finally thinks.” As Merleau-Ponty interprets Saussure linguistics, it allows us to grasp both the presence of the individual in social institutions and the presence of these institutions in individual, it allows us to understand the individual and the social as an integrated whole, albeit as an imperfectly integrated whole, and it allows us to grasp social and linguistic systems as wholes, as an interaction of
mutually influencing parts. Finally, it allows us to more fully understand the relationship between perception and language, for this relationship must be understood as forming a whole, a whole whose parts always already inform one another, yet with perception still remaining the primary term.

We have traced Merleau-Ponty’s comments regarding the relationship between perception and language from his earlier writings, through his works that may be regarded as transitioning or bridging to his later writings, and we have found a rather consistent treatment of this relationship. We have seen that as early as the *Phenomenology of Perception*, and in his lectures and published essays during the 1950s, a consistent concern for making a claim for the originality of perceptual meaning, but also for the creative and even constructive role that language plays in bringing this perceptual meaning more fully to light. We have seen that the *fundierung* relationship between perception and language had already been discussed as a two-way relationship in the early *Phenomenology of Perception*, just as the two-way relationship between the active, perceiving body and the world had already been characterized as a primordial relationship, as a fundamental relationship from which others will, so to speak, draw their inspiration, yet without being reducible to it (See also *Signs* 21). The body’s relationship to the world as the most fundamental relationship and the *fundierung* relationship between perception and language are present from the early writings on, but they are discussed in far greater detail in the essays and lectures of the 1950s, especially the relationship between perception and language. We have seen that the body’s two-way relationship to the world, with the body and the world simultaneously influencing each other, yet with the world remaining the primary term, helps us understand perception’s two-way relationship to language, with perception and language simultaneously influencing each other, yet with perception remaining the primary term. To speak freely, then, we can think of the relationship between the earlier *Phenomenology of Perception* and the later 1950s works as a *fundierung* relationship, for earlier work influences the later, just as the later works fold back on the earlier to help draw out its meaning and its consequences. The early work remains primary, but the later, transition writings are creative and significantly add to the earlier text. Let us now turn to the author’s late writings to see if the same themes are present in them.

*The Visible and Invisible and other later text* First of all, it is clear that Merleau-Ponty still embraces a phenomenology that opens upon a pre-existent world and would not accept what is currently being labelled “postmodernism,” with its emphasis on language and the inability of language to refer to anything other than linguistic meaning, i.e., the inability of language to refer to anything beyond itself. He states that the properly reflective philosophy “would not lose sight of the brute thing and the brute perception and . . . would not cut the organic bonds between the perception and the thing perceived with a hypothesis of inexistence. On the contrary, it would set itself the task . . . of reflecting on the transcendence of the world as transcendence, speaking of it not according to the law of the word-meanings inherent in the given language, but with a perhaps difficult effort that uses the significations of words to express, beyond
themselves, our mute contact with the things, when they are not yet things said” (VI 38). Again, this clearly sets him apart from the currently trending philosophy of postmodernism, from the view that language cannot refer beyond itself to capture and express the meaning of the world itself. Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty states, “we are not asking ourselves if the world exists; we are asking what it is for it to exist . . . When we ask what it is for the things and for the world to exist, one might think that it is only a matter of defining a word” or even “that the rules for the legitimate use of the word can be clearly read in a univocal signification. But the linguists teach us that this is precisely not the case, that the univocal signification is but one part of the signification of the word, that beyond it there is always a halo of signification that manifests itself in new and unexpected modes of use . . .” (VI 96). In other words, words always appear in a linguistic and historical context, just as a gestalt perceptual figure (or foreground) always appears within the context of a visual horizon (or background). In both cases, the foreground meaning is nested in a context that is not fully present but that opens out and is rich with implication. In addition, Merleau-Ponty states here that not only does the supposedly univocal definition (of the world and its things) imply and rely upon a horizon of linguistic and cultural significations in order to express its meaning but that it also implies and relies upon our situated-ness in the actual world. The supposedly univocal definition does not solve the problem of defining the world but doubles the problem, for it does not account for how the word gets its meaning from other words or from our actual contact with the world. Merleau-Ponty insists that we must ask ourselves if the field of significations produced by language is a closed system, or, rather, if “it does not have a horizon of brute being and of brute mind, from which the constructed objects and the significations emerge and which they do not account for?” (VI 97)43 Of course, Merleau-Ponty answers the latter.

However, he is fully aware of the difficulty (or even the paradox) of trying to grasp a world that is prior to our attempts to express it and that attempts to grasp it through various modes of expression, which may distort what is given. (VI 102). Yet, as he argues elsewhere, since we keep trying to express the world more and more accurately, more and more truthfully, there must be something in our experience that beckons this effort. We do not construct the world, as idealism claims, nor do we enjoy a complete coincidence with it, as realism claims. Rather, “we have with our body, our senses, our look, our power to understand speech and to speak, measurants (mesurants) for Being, dimensions to which we can refer it” (VI 103). We have with our body various ways to measure (experientially, not just mathematically) the world, to reveal it, to couple with it, to adapt to it, and finally to bring it to expression. Moreover, it is speech that is most able to express this encounter. “Speech prolongs into the invisible, extends unto the semantic operations, the belongingness of the body to being . . .” (VI 118, my italics). In addition, the birth of meaning in this active, embodied encounter with the world means that the essence of the thing is not above us but is given as the infrastructure of the perceived thing. That is to say, fact and essence are given together in the perceived object. The gestalt structure of the perceived object is its form, its essence. “As
the nervure bears the leaf from within, from the depths of its flesh, the ideas are [the gestalt structure of experience,] the texture of experience, its style, first mute, then uttered. Like every style, they are elaborated within the thickness of being and, not only in fact but also by right, could not be detached from it, to be spread out on display under the gaze” (VI 119, my bracket addition).

Language, then, is not a veil over things. It does not break the body’s perceptual bond with them. Rather, it is our means to attempt to bring the “mute ideas” of perception to a more precise articulation, especially if we use it correctly, if we attempt to use it to express the whole of our body’s sensible openness upon the world. This is an operative or lived-through use of language, one that we do not organize ourselves but that speaks through us, one in which words “combine through . . . [us] by virtue of a natural intertwining of their meaning, through the occult trading of the metaphor—where what counts is no longer the manifest meaning of each word and of each image, but the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers and their exchanges.” There is a “birth of speech as [a] bubbling up at the bottom of . . . mute experience” (VI 125-126, my bracket additions). That is to say, just as lived perception reveals itself as a gestalt structure, as a figure against a background, as a foreground in the context of an open and implied horizon, as a presence with the context of an absence, as a stable presence within a field of explicit and implicit relationships, so also language reveals itself in the same way. More specifically, in creative acts of speech, we benefit from and can take advantage of the lived-through meanings that have been sublimated from perception and that are lived as part of the organic, structural whole of language. In our acts of speech, the field of meanings that we express ourselves within can provide a multitude of associations that come together as a strain of thought or, rather, as a strain of lived through meaning. As Merleau-Ponty says, these associations come together according to some unknown law, for they are lived through rather than know or constructed reflectively.44

Yet, we should still ask, how does this happen? How do we move from our lived through perceptual openness upon the world, from our meaningful, structural interaction with it, from the perceptual meaning or ideality that is formed in this interaction, to the ideality that is expressed in language? Here, in The Visible and Invisible, Merleau-Ponty begins to express his answer. “With the first vision, the first contact, the first pleasure, there is initiation, that is, not the positioning of a content, but the opening of a dimension that can never again be closed, the establishment of a level in terms of which every other experience will henceforth be situated” (VI 151). Language, just like an artist’s painting, can take up, within the “tradition” of perception, an already established perceptual meaning in order to move it forward, in order to express something new. And how is this possible? Here again is Merleau-Ponty’s provisional answer.

“However we finally have to understand [the relationship between perceptual ideality and the “pure” ideality of thought], the ‘pure’ ideality already streams forth along the articulations of the aesthesiological body, along the contours of the sensible things, and, however new it is, it slips through ways it has not traced, transfigures horizons it did not open, it derives from the fundamental mystery of those notions . . .
that lead their shadowy life in the night of the mind only because they have been divined at the junctures of the visible world . . .” (VI 152-153, my bracket addition)

Clearly, it is the body’s perceptual hold on the world that provides the basis for more abstract linguistic expressions, even though this “hold” is not explained very thoroughly here. Moreover, it is precisely here that Merleau-Ponty informs us that “we shall have to follow more closely this transition from the mute world to the speaking world” and that he provides only a brief sketch of what this transition might be (VI 154). “When the silent vision falls into speech, and when the speech in turn, opening up a field of the nameable and the sayable, inscribes itself in that field, . . . this is always in virtue of the same fundamental phenomenon of reversibility which sustains both the mute perception and the speech . . .” (VI 154-155, my italics). Here we have the compression of numerous themes of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy in just one sentence, or at least the compression of a series of reversibilities that his philosophy has revealed. As the sensing body actively opens upon the world, and the world’s patterns forcefully fold back upon the body, a perceptual meaning is born. As active perceptual meaning gives rise to the active gestures of speech, and as speech folds back upon the perceptual to articulate it more thoroughly, verbal meaning is created. As an active, precocious speech gives rise to a field of meanings, and these meanings rebound back upon speech, artistic and scientific culture begins to take hold and even begins to flourish. Perception and the world fold in upon one another, as do perception and speech, as do speech and ideal significations. Thus, what we have here is a gestalt whole, with all aspects of experience simultaneously influencing each other. Yet it is the body’s active engagement with the world that is primary, that opens the initial pathways for artistic and linguistic expression. We witness this (i.e., the gestalt or dialectical nature of experience that nevertheless prioritizes the world) clearly in the closing lines of last partially completed chapter of The Visible and the Invisible. We will see momentarily that this is comparable to the fundierung relationship that Merleau-Ponty highlights in his earlier Phenomenology of Perception.

“[Meaning] is the totality of what is said, the integral of all the differentiations of the verbal chain; it is given with the words for those who have ears to hear . . . In a sense the whole of philosophy, as Husserl says, consists in restoring a power to signify, a birth of meaning, or a wild meaning, an expression of experience by experience, which in particular clarifies the special domain of language. And in a sense, as Valéry said, language is everything, since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of the things, the waves, and the forests. And what we have to understand is that there is no dialectical reversal from one of these views to the other; we do not have to reassemble them into a synthesis: they are two aspects of the reversibility which is the ultimate truth.” (VI 155)

Let us pursue further what Merleau-Ponty says in his later works about the relationship between perception and language and how it is established. In the “Working Notes” of The Visible and Invisible Merleau-Ponty notes the following:

“Naiveté of Descartes who does not see a tacit cogito under the cogito of Wesen, of significations—But naïveté also of a silent cogito that would deem itself to be an adequation with the silent consciousness, whereas its very description of silence rests entirely on the virtues of language . . .” (VI 179)
As is now well-known, Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the naïveté of the silent cogito is a reference to a position that he took in his earlier Phenomenology of Perception. In The Invisible and Invisible he is more fully aware of the role that language must play in the effort to reveal the perceptual. Yet, as we have seen, he is not unaware of the role of that language must perform in his earlier work, including the Phenomenology of Perception, and here in his later work he once again stresses the importance of perception, yet now more fully integrated with language.

“There would be needed a silence that envelops the speech anew, after one has come to recognize that speech enveloped the alleged silence of the psychological coincidence. What will this silence be? As the reduction finally is not for Husserl a transcendental immanence, but the disclosing of the Weltthesis, this silence will not be the contrary of language.” (VI 179)

Here again we see that the perception and language are not opposites. It is not the case that we find a field of perceptual meanings over against a field of linguistic significations. Rather, we find them enveloping each other. Moreover, since Merleau-Ponty invokes Husserl here, let us briefly consider his comments regarding Husserl in one of his late essays on Husserl, entitled the “Philosopher and His Shadow.”

“Reflection cannot ‘go beyond’ this opening to the world, except by making use of the powers it owes to the opening itself. There is a clarity, an obviousness, proper to the zone of Weltthesis which is not derived from that of our theses…When Husserl insistently says that phenomenological reflection begins in the natural attitude . . . , this is not just a way of saying that we must necessarily begin with and go by way of opinion before we can attain knowledge. The doxa of the natural attitude is an Urdoxa. To what is fundamental and original in theoretical consciousness it opposes what is fundamental and original in our existence. Its rights of priority are definitive, and reduced consciousness must take them into account . . .” (Signs 164)

It is clear from what Merleau-Ponty says here about Husserl’s position that he (Merleau-Ponty) accepts our perceptual openness upon the world as primary. Reflection must account for and take off from our primordial openness upon and encounter with the world. He continues.

“There is a preparation for phenomenology in the natural attitude. It is the natural attitude which, by reiterating its own procedures, seesaws in phenomenology. It is the natural attitude itself which goes beyond itself in phenomenology—and so it does not go beyond itself.” (Signs 164)

It is thus the return to the natural attitude that should be phenomenology’s starting point, and this is a return that Merleau-Ponty embraces, yet, as is indicated, not without qualification. Thus, let us pursue an analysis of the above comments a bit further.

Phenomenology, as the description of experience, begins with the body’s perceptual openness upon a pre-existent world. Merleau-Ponty has pointed out that even Kant, as the rationalist extraordinaire, admits that we must begin our account of knowledge with our experience of the world. True, Kant seeks the transcendental (the abstract and even formal) conditions that make this experience possible, but, contrarily, we should point out that it is this experience of the world that is primary and fundamental to everything that
follows. It is the beginning point of all experience and all the analysis that follows it. The idealist, rationalist philosopher admits this but then, as has often been said, pulls the ladder of abstraction up after this beginning point, in order to grasp the essential structures of experience, in order to construct all subsequent experience based upon them. Yet, Merleau-Ponty points out, these abstractions are always dependent upon the prior conditions given in experience, and, furthermore, these abstractions do not, and cannot, match the richness, fecundity, and “presence” of the original openness upon a really existing world. Phenomenology thus opens upon a pre-existent world and, as such, confirms the natural attitude and operates within it. Moreover, as Merleau-Ponty comments above, the natural attitude reiterates its own procedure; it goes back and forth phenomenologically. This is reminiscent of Hegel’s phenomenological method as he presents it in the introduction to his *Phenomenology of Mind.* There he states that experience contains its own criteria, for the only reason that we know that one experience is wrong is because it is corrected by another that we accept. We know that our experience that the stick in the pond is bent is wrong because we perceive the stick as straight when it is removed from the pond. Experience is continually self-correcting, with perceptual experiences continually correcting each other.

Furthermore, as Merleau-Ponty points out above, for Husserl the reduction to transcendental immanence is never complete, for it always leads to the realization that experience always opens upon a pre-existing world. Merleau-Ponty accepts this and more, for he realizes that the reduction to transcendental immanence requires both reflective thought and language, and yet that there is always something left over: our openness upon a really existing world. However, for Merleau-Ponty, the starting point of being in the world, of “silent” or “mute” perception is never complete either, for, as we have seen, we need language to help express this starting point. Again, just as Husserl’s reduction to transcendental immanence leads to a Weltthesis, to a renewal of our evidence of being in the world, so also Merleau-Ponty’s “reduction” to silent perception leads to the awareness that language is always there. With this awareness, however, we are even more fully aware of the silent perception that envelops speech anew, i.e., we have a renewed awareness that speech has its roots in perception. After all, even the abstract algorithms of science and mathematics, which can be manipulated independently of our sense experience, must at some point refer to the sense world if they are to be meaningful. We are aware of a mute perceptual meaning in our experience. It is the horizon of all linguistic expression and yet, again, we have a full awareness of this because it is expressed in language. Moreover, we have seen that for Merleau-Ponty description of perception is always also an interpretation. There are mute perceptual meanings and yet our linguistic descriptions/interpretations are needed to articulate them with greater clarity. Most of what we perceive is thus frequently covered over by these “constructions” or interpretations. Yet these interpretations are suggested by what is already there. What is already there is not seen through constructions composed of a wholly different (linguistic or conceptual) material. Moreover, this means that the meaning of the perceived world is still there, in the
expression, for the expression is bringing what is already there to greater clarity, is articulating it more precisely. Again, as Merleau-Ponty says, perception and language are not opposed or contrary terms, for language helps bring perceptual meaning to a more precise expression. Language helps express perceptual meaning through itself, through the very arrangement of its words. Moreover, if we perceive with fresh eyes, we can perhaps see the world anew, see new perceptual configurations, see a new richness of perceptual meaning. Perception and language continually cross into one another and color one another, yet with our perception of a really existing world as the more primary term (VI 179).50

Now we can more fully understand Merleau-Ponty’s concluding comments to the partially quoted “working note” just above.

“I will finally be able to take a position in ontology, as the introduction [to The Visible and the Invisible] demands, and specify its theses exactly, only after the series of reductions the book develops and which are all in the first one, but also are really accomplished only in the last one. This reversal itself . . . is not hesitation, bad faith and bad dialectic, but return to Σκῆ [silence] the abyss. One cannot make a direct ontology. My ‘indirect’ method (being in the beings) is alone conformed with being——‘negative philosophy’ like ‘negative theology.’” (VI 179, my bracket additions)

We witness here the reference to the Heideggerian-like phrase “being in the beings” and elsewhere Merleau-Ponty speaks about doing ontology “within the zone of transcendence” (VI 213). In both cases here he maintains that a region or level of being always occurs in the context of an open horizon, just as a perceptual figure or foreground always occurs within the context of an open field or horizon or background. In fact, he believes that each region of being always opens to and overlaps with all the others.

“Circularity: everything that is said at each “level” anticipates and will be taken up again... the thematization of language overcomes another stage of naïveté, discloses yet a little more the horizon of Selbstdesverständlichkeiten——the passage from philosophy . . . to the transcendental field, to the wild and ‘vertical’ being is by definition progressive, incomplete. This is to be understood not as an imperfection...but as a philosophical theme: the incompleteness of the reduction (‘biological reduction,’ ‘psychological reduction,’ ‘reduction to transcendental immanence,’ and finally ‘fundamental thought’) is not an obstacle to the reduction, it is the reduction itself, the rediscovery of vertical being.” (VI 177-178)51

We disclose certain areas, like biology, psychology, various aspects of perception, etc., but realize that this disclosure is never complete, this “reduction” to one area is never complete. Each of these “regions” or “layers” of being always opens upon and overlaps with all the others. There is always an implied horizon. We can never achieve adequation, i.e., consciousness can never become equal to or one with its object. Moreover, since this is the case, this is how Merleau-Ponty will approach the study of these regions in The Visible and Invisible. Each region will be studied but also studied as it opens upon and overlaps with the others.

This is how he expresses it in Nature: “Our subject: Regarding nature, the concern was to study it as an ontological leaf---and in particular, regarding life, the concern was to study the unfolding of the leaf of nature—regarding the human, the concern is to take him at his point of emergence in Nature. Just as there
is an *Ineinander* of life and physiochemistry—or structure, so too is the human to be taken in the *Ineinander* with animality and Nature . . . ” (Na 208). We must not regard these different regions as different “substances”, as has frequently been done in the Western tradition, but as open-ended structures that flow into one another and overlap. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty continues, “because the Nature of which we spoke (it can obviously be only Nature perceived by us) and the mode of being that we described will be clarified by the description of the human body as perceiving: it is the same *Ineinander* that we gradually approach from the two ends . . .” (Na 208).

Here in *Nature* Merleau-Ponty studies nature, life, animal life, and the human body/being in the sequence just listed, in order to more fully understand the human body/being and its evolution from that which preceded it (and with which it overlaps), i.e., nature and life. The study of the structures of nature, life, and animal life was approached through the lived-through perception of the human body, with the hope of more fully understanding the functioning of the perceiving human body, and the study of the perceptual structures of the perceiving human body is approached with the hope of better understanding the structures of nature and life. Each should be studied in an attempt to understand the relationship to the other, and each side should be used to correct and understand the other (*Nature* 208).

We have seen that Robert Vallier, the translator of *Nature*, translates the French term *feuillet* as “leaf” (as he does in the passage: “study [nature] as an ontological leaf”): but that it also means ‘folio-leaf’---a sheet of paper that is folded, almost indefinitely, to create the pages of a book, and that Merleau-Ponty thinks of nature in the same way, that nature folds and unfolds in indefinitely different ways (*Nature* 305).

Thus when Merleau-Ponty speaks about the series of reductions that his *The Visible and the Invisible* is to carry out, he is speaking about the different ways that nature reveals and manifests itself, as, for example, material nature, as living organisms, as animal life and as human life. The studies that he carries out in *Nature* follow these different ways of being and do so through acts of lived-through perception. His studies of nature, life, and animal life, he says, lead to a more complete understanding the ontology of human life, which he also studies in detail, and, inversely, his study of lived-through perception helps us more properly understand each of the preceding regions. Moreover, each of these regions flows into the others and overlap, as do all of these regions with lived-through perception. His studies, then, must be carried out from both ends, in both directions, from nature up to the living, acting, sensing human body, and from the perceiving human body opening back upon these regions to reveal them more exactly. And here again we see the folding into one another of nature and perception, and we see that they are co-determining but with nature as the more primary term.

There is always an implied horizon. When we study one thing, one aspect of nature, there is the horizon of the other aspects. When we shift to them, others are implied, including the first, and so on. This is even reminiscent of Otto Neurath’s well-known epistemological metaphor of repairing a ship on the high
seas for our repairing and correcting the base of human knowledge. We have to repair one part at a time, and always in connection with the other parts in a structural whole. For Merleau-Ponty we have to study one region of being at a time, and always in connection with the other regions in a structural whole, a structural whole with boundaries that remain open, a structural whole that changes over time. “We are making a philosophy of the Lebenswelt,” Merleau-Ponty says, but what precisely is this philosophy of the Lebenswelt? It is a focus on our lived-through perceptual experience and on the world as it presents itself to us through all of its dimensions. The world presents itself to us only through our lived-through perceptual experience but it also presents itself as transcending this experience, as having an existence of its own. The world as we live it is always already there, and is presupposed by all statements that attempt to describe it. Language is needed to describe it more precisely, yet the truth of linguistic descriptions must in fact be measured by the lifeworld, by the world as we live it. Moreover, Merleau-Ponty here again says, there is no antinomy between the lifeworld, along with the universal being that it reveals, and the language that expresses it. For this language is a description (and is thus in a sense a product of the lifeworld, for the description is trying to match the world as closely as possible) that is also a creation (for language is needed to express the world more precisely, is needed to bring the perceptual world out of the darkness of ambiguity). In other words, it is the linguistic interpretation that is the most descriptive, the most clarifying and adaptive, that we should call true (VI 170). Thus, here again we see the folding into one another of the aspects of experience, this time lived-through perceptual experience of the world with our linguistic descriptions of it---yet with perception as the primary term.

In addition, how does the philosophy of the Lebenswelt account for the intersubjectivity of language? “It is indeed speaking that constitutes, in front of myself as a signification and a subject of signification, a milieu of communication, an intersubjective diacritical system which is the spoken tongue [la langue] in the present, not . . . an objective spirit [as Hegel claimed]-----The problem is to restore this, in the present and in the past, the Lebenswelt history, to restore the very presence of a culture” (VI 175, the 2nd bracket addition is mine). Merleau-Ponty states here that the tacit cogito that he spoke of in Phenomenology of Perception does not solve this problem. It does help us understand the possibility of language, he says, but it does not help us understand “what, across the successive and simultaneous community of speaking subjects, wishes, speaks, and finally thinks” (VI 175-176). He does not elaborate an answer here in the “Working Notes” of The Visible and the Invisible, but he does indicate an answer in other texts. Commenting on Mauss’ method of study in anthropology, he states the following.

“We think our way into the [social] phenomenon, reading and deciphering it. And this reading always consists in grasping the mode of exchange which is constituted between men and institutions, . . . through the systematic way in which they govern the use of tools, manufactured and alimentary products, magical formulas . . . , dances, and mythical elements, as language governs the use of phonemes, morphemes, vocabulary, and syntax. This social fact, which is no longer a massive reality but an efficacious system of symbols or a network of symbolic values, is going to be inserted into the depths of the individual. But the
regulation which circumvents the individual does not eliminate him. It is no longer necessary to choose between the individual and the collective.”52

Language gives us the key to help answer this question of “What speaks . . . ?” It does so first of all because it helps us overcome the subject/object opposition of the western tradition. Instead of trying to understand society and the movement of history as either a strictly objective event or as the result of the intentions of individual subjects, we must try to read how they come together, i.e., read the mode of exchange between subjects and the social institution of language. Subjects are born into the institution of language and learn its rules for proper use, and sometimes even do so subconsciously (speaking, for example, according to accepted rules of grammar without being fully aware of these rules). Subjects “live” these rules, take them up, and use them to express their encounters with the world and others. This is what we must try to read and understand: as whole persons, whole subjects, we must place ourselves in these exchanges in order to try to grasp them, in order to try to understand how subjects interact with all the rule-governed institutions of society---for which language remains a primary model. Thus, when attempting to make sense of a society, and its movement through history, it is no longer necessary to choose between objective socio-economic conditions and the intentions of individuals. We must attempt to understand how they cross into one another, and it is language that is the focal point of this chiasm.

To summarize this section dealing with Merleau-Ponty’s late writings, we have seen that he still maintains that philosophy should not lose sight of brute being or our lived-through perceptual contact with it. Philosophy should attempt to grasp our lived-through bodily, perceptual contact with a world that transcends us. It should not attempt to define the world and our contact with it simply by using word meanings. Language, rather, should attempt to give voice to our mute perceptual contact with the world (See also VI 126). Moreover, appealing to univocal definitions of the world and its objects is certainly out of the question, for words appear in the context of other words, with their meanings varying with these linguistic contexts. In addition, and even more importantly, words appear in varying natural, perceptual, and practical/social contexts, with meanings varying here as well. The univocal definition ignores or fails to capture the relationships of these linguistic contexts, and, furthermore, linguistic context alone fails to grasp the relationships formed in natural, perceptual, and practical/social settings. In fact, the primary role of language is to express our lived-through bodily encounter with these settings. The role of language is primarily to extend the belongingness of our body to the world, to prolong and express, in the more ideal meanings of a more abstract language, our bodily being in and contact with the world with others. Merleau-Ponty has even argued that the essence of things can only be elaborated in the thickness of our perceptual encounter with them, thereby conflating fact and essence. What language attempts to do is express these essences as they are formed in our active, embodied, concrete perceptual encounter with the world, and this means that language is not a veil over things (i.e., a veil over their meaning, their essence) but an attempt
to bring them to light. Speech thus bubbles up in our mute, bodily, perceptual encounter with the world. How does this happen? How do we move from perception to language? Merleau-Ponty’s answer here is only provisional but he does state that the relationship between perception and language must be understood as a “phenomenon of reversibility.” We must understand the significations of perception as a result of the body’s sensual, perceptual encounter with the forceful patterns of the world, as a crisscrossing relationship between them, with the world remaining the primary term, and we must understand the significations of language as a result of the crisscrossing relationship between perception and language, with perception remaining the primary term. Merleau-Ponty states explicitly here in his last work that language is the voice of things and also that perception and language form a dialectical relationship with one another, i.e., form a gestalt relationship, a whole whose parts mutually influence and define one another, for they are aspects of a whole which is a more primary truth (yet with certain aspects of this whole still more primary than others).

**General Summary and Conclusions**

**The middle and transition writings.** For the purpose of the present chapter, Merleau-Ponty’s middle and transition writings and lectures reveal a number of important points. They have consistently revealed the originality of perceptual meaning. They have revealed that perceptual meaning is *fundamental*, not in the logical sense of logically deduced conclusions from fixed premises or principles, but in the sense that lived through, embodied, perceptual experience is the open ended starting point from which our knowledge must begin and to which it must return. They reveal that the *fundierung* relationship between perception and language is rooted in an even more primary two-way relationship between the world and the body (with each term of each couplet simultaneously influencing the other, with the former term remaining more primary). The perception/language relationship must be understood as existing in a *fundierung* relationship with the body/world relationship, with the body/world relationship as the more primary term. The *fundierung* relationship between perception and language has thus already been discussed in the early work as existing in a two-way relationship with the perceiving body and the world, with perception and the world as the primordial source of meaning. The transition writings, according to Merleau-Ponty’s own research agenda, discuss these ideas more thoroughly, more probingly, and with a greater concern for clarifying the relationship between perception and language.

**The later writings.** We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s later works still embrace phenomenology, still embrace the attempt to grasp our “brute perception” as it encounters “brute being.” Moreover, he says explicitly that it is the role of speech to prolong “the belongingness of the body to being,” that language does not oppose our perceptual encounter with the world but helps bring the perceptual world to a more precise expression. Even though Merleau-Ponty here only sketches what he believes the relationship between perception and speech to be, he does say that it must be understood as a “phenomenon of
reversibility,” thus continuing the fundierung theme of the earlier works. He even stresses that the dialectical relationship between perception and speech must not be understood as a reciprocal relationship of parts, one after the other, in need of synthesis, but as a simultaneous reversibility of aspects that already form a structural (gestalt) whole. Thus, we experience the birth of speech as a form of expression bubbling up in the depths of our lived-through, mute perceptual experience and as attempting to bring the perceptual to greater expression, to the point where we realize that perception, language and thought all cross into one another and all help form and manifest a similar gestalt structure.

While Merleau-Ponty’s later writings are (purposely) more attuned to the role that language plays in bringing perception more fully to light, more fully to expression, he is also more fully aware that the silence of perception engulfs language anew. True, language helps articulate the perceptual, but this does not mean that language creates perceptual meaning ex nihilo (or that language is totally responsible for or totally constructs the meaning of the perceived world). Language is influenced by the perceptual and helps articulate the perceptual meaning of the world more clearly. Again, language is not opposed to perception but is a sublimation of it that folds back into it in order to interpret and express it more precisely and clearly, helping to form this meaning as it is brought to expression. As we have already seen above, since perception is frequently imprecise, open, and even ambiguous, different linguistic expressions are always possible, and there is no definitively correct interpretation, yet some interpretations are better than others, for they are more clarifying of and adaptive to what is perceptually present (perceptually present in the wide sense of a stable foreground in the context of a spatial/temporal horizon).

We have seen that Merleau-Ponty’s posthumously published The Visible and the Invisible was interrupted before he was able to lay out more precisely the folding or crisscrossing of perception and language into one another. Yet we have also seen that his research and writing up to the composition of this manuscript already contain a multitude of attempts to express what he was moving toward in what came to be his last work. Merleau-Ponty consistently recognizes the originality of perceptual meaning, he consistently treats perceptual meaning as fundamental, i.e., as providing the existential basis for the development of sublimated forms of meaning, and he consistently treats the relationship between perception and language as a fundierung relationship. He consistently treats perception as the founding term for language, but for a language that is in turn needed to grasp and interpret the perceptual and express it as a more fully formed meaning. If anything, Merleau-Ponty’s later works more fully develop what is largely already present in his earlier writings. Yet one way in which his later works do go further is that they are more thoroughly dialectical. For they more fully overcome the stubborn dualisms of Western culture, science and philosophy, the dualisms between humanity and nature, subject and object, self and other, subject and intersubjectivity, the individual and social institutions, for they more fully recognize that the
aspects of nature, society, and human experience all fold and cross into one another, yet with some sometimes playing a more primary role.