Research Paper   Open Access

ESSAY ON MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

Charles Kasereka Muvunga, a.a.
Department of Philosophy, Catholic University of Eastern Africa, Kenya

ABSTRACT: This article aimed at expressing the originality of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, especially his demarcation from the traditional approaches. Despite the fact that Merleau-Ponty brought a very interesting contribution to philosophy of language, he did not consider language to be central in his philosophy. In order to situate him in the context of philosophy of language, I started by preliminary notions; this introduced to his philosophy of language and made it clearer. Merleau-Ponty brought a new way of looking at the triad being-thought-language; for him, these three elements are simultaneous. In addition, I showed that speech does not reveal reality as it really is because language is existential and because it speaks about a mystery.

KEYWORDS: *Being, language, meaning, speech, thought.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Language is very important in philosophy since it is the channel through which the world and ideas are articulated. The philosopher understands that he is situated in language and has interest in analysing it. What is language and what is its origin? Phenomenologists are among the philosophers who strive to clarify the conditions of possibility of language, conditions without which there would be no speech.[1] In the history of philosophy, there have been different trends of philosophy of language articulated around the triad being-thought-language. These trends are often determined by the way of classifying the three elements in the order of priority. Merleau-Ponty sees in this a problem since for him, none of the three elements has primacy over the others. How does he solve this problem? This article intends to give a presentation of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language which is best understood in terms of simultaneity of the above three elements.

In order to reach that goal, I will subdivide my work into four sections: 1) *Preliminary Notions*, in which I will circumscribe philosophy of language; 2) *Reality, Thought and Speech are One*, where I will underline the originality of Merleau-Ponty's thought, especially the equivalence of the three components; 3) *Existential Dimension of Language*, where I show that human conditions such as corporeality and temporality are crucial for the effectiveness of language; and 4) *Language as a Struggle to express the Mystery of Reality*. In this last section, I highlight the fact that language expresses being only by trial and error. A conclusion will follow to summarize the article and to give its relevance for the development of philosophy.

II. PRELIMINARY NOTIONS

Before presenting Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, I feel the need to give an introduction about language and about philosophy of language at large to circumscribe the matter at hand.

2.1 Language, a Peculiarly Human Activity

Language is "the totality of written or vocal signs with which man puts himself in communication with his own peers."[2] Human language is complex, made of words, signs, and gestures which are tightly linked to concepts and meaning. This indicates that a human being has varied means of communication; he can pass a message using signs or gestures without pronouncing a word. Hence, "Words are just one aspect of language and whereas other animals like the parrot can produce 'human' words, human language is proper only to the human person."[3] By nature, a parrot does not have human language, but has the capacity to repeat what it hears

---

[1] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Philosophe et la Sociologie," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1178.

[2] Battista Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology: Man: An Impossible Project?* (Rome: Urbaniana University Press, 1985), 129.

[3] Maurice M. Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005), 84.

from a human person. Ontologically speaking, a parrot does not possess human language since it does not utter words from reflection but only apes them: "Thus, the word of the parrot may be distinguished from that of the human person in that in the case of the latter the word is endowed with meaning and the speaker and hearer are endowed with understanding."[4]

Nevertheless, animals certainly have a kind of language that allows communication within a given species but, "strictly speaking, language is an exquisitely human activity."[5] In other words, language in the proper sense is peculiar to human nature. Of course, "The function of the word in its essence is not organic but intellectual and spiritual, which are hardly attributable to the animal world no matter the capacity of this world to ape the human world."[6] The language that I am going to analyse in this article is therefore human language, that which properly speaking is the subject matter of philosophy of language.

2.2 On Philosophy of Language

What is the foundation of language? What does meaning mean? Can language exist without thought and reality to which it refers? Such are types of questions asked in philosophy of language. This gives a clue of what philosophy of language is for it is defined as "the reasoned inquiry into the origins of language, the nature of meaning, the usage and cognition of language, and the relationship between language and reality."[7] To do philosophy of language, it is necessary to venture into a multidisciplinary inquiry. Indeed, philosophy of language "overlaps to some extent with the study of Epistemology, Logic, Philosophy of Mind and other fields (including linguistics and psychology), although for many Analytic Philosophers it is an important discipline in its own right."[8] Henceforth, philosophy of language is already a separate discipline. As for Maurice Makumba, "Philosophy of language developed as a distinctive philosophical discipline in the twentieth century principally seeing philosophy 'as an activity which strives to describe and elucidate, through language, difficult and basic expressions relating to reality.'"[9]

Reality or being is so central for language since it is that which language expresses. Makumba underlines the fact that philosophy of language "also treats of the relationship between words and reality, and whether words convey thoughts or facts."[10] What language articulates is precisely the meaning of reality obtained as the subject thinks about what he perceives. Of course, "The questions of meaning and understanding and the role of thoughts, and mental images in language are some of the concerns of philosophy of language."[11] Thus, the philosopher of language seeks to know the foundation of meaning and to determine the relation between speech and truth. "Contemporary philosophy of language therefore revolves around the theory of meaning but also extends to the truth-value of language."[12]

Henceforth, philosophy of language is not linguistics but semantics. Battista Mondin clearly asserts that "The name of semantics is given to the philosophical research that occupies itself with language."[13] Moreover, he distinguishes the two showing that linguistics is precisely the scientific linguistics, a study of language following a scientific method, the experimental verification. The objective it pursues is to analyse and to describe the laws regulating linguistic activity. Unlike scientific linguistics, philosophy of language uses another method, the phenomenological and transcendental method aiming at acquiring a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of language.[14] This phenomenon can be "considered in itself or in its rapport with those who use it, or with the society that creates it, or with the culture to which it belongs and of which it constitutes one[15] of the essential elements."[16] Of course, in the ancient time, these disciplines were not distinguished: "Up to the end of the last century,[17] scientific research and philosophical reflection, linguistics and semantics, made up a single discipline that had a prevalently philosophical character."[18] The distinction of the two disciplines was a development necessary for the autonomous growth of each of them. To

---

[4] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 84.

[5] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 85.

[6] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 85.

[7] "Philosophy of Language," The Basics of Philosophy, accessed March 25, 2020, https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_philosophy_of_language.html.

[8] "Philosophy of Language," https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_philosophy_of_language.html.

[9] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 85.

[10] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 85.

[11] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 85.

[12] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 85.

[13] Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 130.

[14] Cf. Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 130.

[15] "One" is my correction: the author wrote "on" by mistake.

[16] Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 130.

[17] By the last century, Mondin refers to the nineteenth century.

[18] Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 130.

be precise, "A clear distinction between linguistics and semantics was reached only recently, and is the reward from the works of F. De Saussure, one of the greatest linguistics of our time, who established this study with clarity."[19]

Brief, "language with its communicative, descriptive, expressive, ontological and persuasive functions is rightly the concern of philosophy because it possesses an extraordinary revelatory power of the being of the human person."[20] That power is not easily understood because the being of the human person it reveals is a mystery. For this reason, it provokes a serious polemic among philosophers.

2.3 Polemic on the Priority of Being, Thought or Language

Philosophy has been articulated around being, thought and / or language, as Makumba rightly asserts: "The triad being-thought-language pervades the whole of the history of philosophy."[21] Which of these three elements is the most important? For some philosophers, being is the most important element, while for others, priority is given to thought or to language. That is why Makumba continues his assertion saying: "One's understanding of the relationship between them will certainly influence their conception of philosophy of language, just as it has influenced the development of the history of philosophy depending on which of the three was given primacy."[22] Giving a panorama of the history of philosophy with regard to the matter at hand, he writes:

> Classical philosophy, for example, with its realistic approach gave primacy to being, with thought in the second place and language in the third. In the idealistic thrust of modern philosophy, primacy was attributed to thought with being in second place and language in third. Contemporary philosophy, on its part, enveloped in semanticism, gave priority to language, putting thought in the second place and being in the third.[23]

The important thing in this matter is to judge which of the three is right. To help in this judgment, I personally ask the following question: which of the three elements of the triad being-thought-language is fundamental? Aligning with Mondin, Makumba supports the classical model of philosophy as fitting for philosophy of language. He therefore writes:

> Yet, as Mondin notes, the right hierarchy between the three is decided by the truth. Truth is first in *rei* or things (ontological truth) then in thought in its *adaequatio rei* (logical truth) and finally in language in its *adaequatio menti* (semantic truth). The power of language is in truth but the truth of language is not originary. The truth of language is derivative truth, derived from thought but principally and fundamentally from reality. A correct philosophy of language has to be conscious and clear about this hierarchy otherwise it ends up robbing language of its metaphysical roots.[24]

If the position of Mondin and Makumba is the best, then the classical model is in force even in our time. In the classical time, it was indeed convincing that being or reality be given priority since, without it, there would be nothing to think about and to speak about. Nevertheless, the classical model, modern model and what Makumba labelled as semanticism have been overtaken by Merleau-Ponty who has a totally different understanding of the triad being-thought-language.

As announced from the outset, this first section was intended to give elementary notions about philosophy of language which can help to understand that of Merleau-Ponty. Nevertheless, it is good to underline that, in Merleau-Ponty, philosophy of language is not as central as philosophy of perception. In this sense, Dimitris Apostolopoulos asserts: "Merleau-Ponty's status as a philosopher of perception is well-established, but his distinctive contributions to the philosophy and phenomenology of language have yet to be fully appreciated."[25] This article will strive to show that there is something in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language which is helpful for the development of this discipline.

---

[19] Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 131.

[20] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 86.

[21] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 83.

[22] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 83.

[23] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 84.

[24] Makumba, *Introduction to Philosophy*, 84.

[25] Dimitris Apostolopoulos, "Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Language," Rowman & Littlelield, accessed March 25, 2020, https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781786611994/Merleau-Ponty%E2%80%99s-Phenomenology-of-Language.

III. REALITY, THOUGHT AND SPEECH ARE ONE

Merleau-Ponty comes up with a new way of looking at the triad reality-thought-speech: these three are one thing. Besides, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language is concerned with the relationship of language to perception and to truth as it is sketched in *Le visible et l'invisible*.[26] These are guidelines which will help in this presentation of his philosophy of language.

3.1 No more Dichotomy between Speech and Thought

Merleau-Ponty's reflection is neither that of the mechanistic (or empiricist) psychologists nor that of the intellectualist psychologists. There is a kinship between these two conceptions with regard to language since they agree that the word has no significance. For the empiricist psychologists, the word is considered to be something external without any medium of the concept but called upon by stimuli or states of mind following the laws of neurological mechanics or those of association. The word is thus nothing but an envelope of the authentic speech which is an inner process. Henceforth, the word is never the bearer of meaning unlike thought, its inner power; it is a mere psychic, physiological or physical phenomenon. The second conception nevertheless accepts that a word has a meaning due to the categorical operation that lies behind it, but it is still deprived of its own effectiveness inasmuch as it is simply taken by these conceptions as mere external sign of an internal recognition, which could take place without it, and to which it makes no contribution. Hence, the word is nothing but an empty container. Language is considered as a mere phenomenon of articulation, of sound, and precisely as an external accompaniment of thought.[27] Looking at these two trends, Merleau-Ponty arrives at the following conclusion:

> In the first there is nobody to speak; in the second, there is certainly a subject, but a thinking one, not a speaking one. As far as speech itself is concerned, intellectualism is hardly any different from empiricism, and is no better able than the latter to dispense with an explanation in terms of involuntary action.[28]

In any case, thought appears to be different from speech since thought knows itself and is self-sufficient.[29] However, Merleau-Ponty disagrees with those who see speech as being accessory for thought: "It is, indeed, obvious that speech cannot be regarded as a mere clothing for thought, or expression as the translation, into an arbitrary system of symbols, of a meaning already clear to itself."[30] Interior thought which would be conceived as pure thought — that would mean speechless thought — does not exist. In this sense, Merleau-Ponty writes: "Thought is no 'internal' thing, and does not exist independently of the world and of words."[31] This statement indicates that for Merleau-Ponty, reality, thought and speech are tightly connected. One of the ways to understand him on this point is to consider that for him nature and reason are together: "one may say, not that there is a reason hidden behind nature, but that reason is rooted in nature; the 'inspection of the mind' would then be, not the concept gravitating towards nature, but nature rising to the concept."[32] Since reason is rooted in nature and not in the mind, whatever reasoning a subject performs entails his struggle to understand reason within nature. Philosophy becomes an exercise to draw reason from nature or from reality. Merleau-Ponty avers that "there is no such difference between thinking and perceiving as there is between seeing and hearing."[33] Hence, seeing and hearing are different though they may converge to the same being, but thinking and perceiving are identical. He extends this to language: since nature and reason are tightly united in an inseparable way, they are one; and the moment I understand them, I speak of them since we understand in a language. Nevertheless, nature remains the essential element for thought to take place.

This captures the above triad of the tradition of philosophy, namely, being-thought-language. At this juncture, it is good to note that for Merleau-Ponty, thought springs from perception. Therefore, to understand his philosophy of language, one needs to relate it to his philosophy of perception. James M. Edie clearly underlines "the relationship between thought (language-using consciousness) and perception (the prelinguistic

---

[26] James M. Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (July 1975): 395, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/227743/pdf.

[27] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962), 205, PDF e-book.

[28] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 205.

[29] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1440.

[30] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 452.

[31] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 213.

[32] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 48.

[33] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 247.

objectification of the world)."[34] Hence, thought which is language within consciousness is intimately related to the perceived object. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the crucial role played by perception for thought to spring up, but underlines at the same time the fact that both conjugates for the same purpose. Edie expresses this as follows: "The structures of thought are therefore of a different order from the structures of perception — which are 'absolutely' prior to thought — but at the same time it is only through thought that the structures of perception are 'made manifest.'"[35] This is very crucial since perception which is prior to thought is nevertheless conditioned by thought for its manifestation. To put this clear, I can say that for Merleau-Ponty, perception is in thought and vice-versa, as it comes out from the following statement of Edie:

> Merleau-Ponty does not attempt to reduce the higher-order structures of thought and value to perception but rather to show how the most fundamental structures of perception reappear in a transformed and more complex, but still recognizable, manner in such higher-order activities as speaking, thinking, reasoning, choosing, evaluating, knowing, etc.[36]

In other words, these higher-order activities are founded on perception and therefore cannot be without the latter. What is astonishing is that Merleau-Ponty puts the three elements of the triad mentioned above (being, thought and language) in a relationship of simultaneity. None of them has priority over the two others. Edie finds in this equivalence the core or the thesis of the philosophies of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty, which however, these two authors did not exhaust, leaving it open to the inquiry of future phenomenologists. The abovementioned thesis can be framed this way: all factual truth is rational truth and every rational truth is factual truth. This can be understood in the realm of what Merleau-Ponty after Husserl calls *Fundierung*, that is to say, founding term or originator. In the view of Merleau-Ponty, the originated is the determinate, the explicit form of the originator. *Fundierung* is a two-way relationship between fact and reason, time and eternity, the unreflective and reflection, perception and thought or thought and language.[37]

Fundierung can be easily understood if it is connected to another Husserlian term, *Wesenschau*, which means intuition or vision of essences. The point of departure towards the *Wesenschau* is perception, and the relationship between perception and the *Wesenschau* is a relationship of *Fundierung* (Foundation). At this point, it can be concluded that the vision of essences is founded on perception. That would mean that perception has primacy over essences, or that perception is the ground on which is built the vision of essences — an intellectual resumption or retaking, an elucidation or explication of what was concretely experimented. The vision of essences is essentially posterior to the things from which it springs up; it is essentially retrospective.[38] It is therefore impossible, in Merleau-Ponty's perspective, to have intuition of essences prior to perception. Indeed, vision of essences is awkward in the absence of the perceived reality.

Merleau-Ponty shows that the sensible world is older than the universe of thought, since the first is visible and true and that the second, invisible and with deficiencies, has its truth only if it leans on the canonical formulas of the first.[39] The expression "canonical formulas" is a key to understand the metaphysics of Merleau-Ponty. The sensible world is true and offers a canon to the world of thought without which the latter would be a pure mental construction. The truth of the sensible world is testified by the fact that it is really there, prior to any knowledge, and it is perceivable. The world of thought however is inexistent unless it is considered to strictly be the meaning of the perceived world. The former is therefore drawn from the latter of which it is nothing else but an abstraction. Reflection is a retrospective construction for it comes in principle after an experience of the world and of what is true; it is subsequent to facts since it is established in an order of idealization and of after-words (*l'après-coup*).[40] Merleau-Ponty shows that perception is prior to reflection when he says that a child perceives before he thinks.[41] The crucial point of this philosophy is about the condition of possibility of thought, which is nothing else but perception. The event of perception opens to a perceived thing which precedes it and which is true before it.[42] What Merleau-Ponty underlines by that is not temporal priority, but the origin of thought. His aim is to counter the intellectualist conception of the origin of thought. It is clear that for Merleau-Ponty, evidence comes through experience, as he asserts: "The first philosophical act would appear to be to

---

[34] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 388.

[35] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 390.

[36] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 387.

[37] Cf. Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 388.

[38] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Les Sciences de l'Homme et la Phénoménologie," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1233.

[39] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1647.

[40] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1678.

[41] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1647.

[42] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1520.

return to the world of actual experience which is prior to the objective world,"[43] the intellectualists' world. Merleau-Ponty insists on this and says that *formalization is always retrospective* or that *formal thought feeds on intuitive thought*.[44] It becomes clear that thought is nourished by experience and that without the latter, the former is impossible.

Does Merleau-Ponty mean that thought is less important than perception? In answering this question, I need to bring out his position about the role thought — the originated — plays for perception — the originator. The two-way relationship between fact and reason mentioned above implies a certain reciprocity inasmuch as the originator seems not to have primacy. Edie explains it as follows: "*the originator* is not primary in the empiricist sense and *the originated* is not *simply derived*, since it is *through the originated that the originator is made manifest*."[45] This simply means that none of the two has primacy over the other. In ordinary language, of course, the originator has priority over the originated, but in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, the word "origin" or "priority" "is not temporal or historical, but logical; the same consciousness which *perceives* the world also *thinks* it, and language (or thought) is contemporaneous with the silent objectifications that surround it and that it enables us to articulate."[46] As the subject perceives, he thinks — and since for Merleau-Ponty thinking is the equivalent of interior speech, by thinking, the subject speaks. Henceforth, perception, thinking and speaking are simultaneous or even the same thing.

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty states the following: "The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world."[47] By saying that, Merleau-Ponty has inverted the triad which is now presented as word-meaning-world to show that what speech brings out is the meaning of the world or being — however the inversion is only the expression of the way back in the reciprocal relation between the originator and the originated. In other words, by listening to a well articulated speech, one gets into contact with being, or simply, one understands being. Henceforth, speech (*la parole*) is the vehicle of truth given that it "implants the idea of truth in us as the presumptive limit of its effort."[48] Speech (*la parole*) targets truth, the meaning of the perceived reality; it cannot therefore be disconnected from the world. Indeed, speech is the expression of the world as Merleau-Ponty puts it:

> It would then be found that the words, vowels and phonemes are so many ways of 'singing' the world, and that their function is to represent things not, as the naïve onomatopoeic[49] theory had it, by reason of an objective resemblance, but because they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence.[50]

The metaphorical phrase "singing the world" is another way to say expressing the world. Words, vowels and phonemes are a means to translate the world into speech. Coming back to the notion of simultaneity of the three elements, I can assert that consciousness retains the perceived world, and that that retention is food for thought. In turn, speech flows from that retention since it is, in the words of Merleau-Ponty, the exteriorization of thought. This shows clearly that between the perceived and thought, there is no consecutive relationship but simultaneity. The same applies to thought and speech as Merleau-Ponty avers insisting on the intimate relationship between them:

> What misleads us in this connection, and causes us to believe in a thought which exists for itself prior to expression, is thought already constituted and expressed, which we can silently recall to ourselves, and through which we acquire the illusion of an inner life. But in reality this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner language. 'Pure' thought reduces itself to a certain void of consciousness, to a momentary desire.[51]

Merleau-Ponty has already shown that thought and speech are but the same thing: thought is the interior speech and articulation is the exteriorization of thought. The same can be said of concept and word.[52] Speech and thought are respectively the exterior and interior of the same reality: "'Categorial behaviour and the possession of meaningful language express one and the same fundamental form of behaviour. Neither can be a

---

[43] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 66.

[44] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 448.

[45] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 388.

[46] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 390.

[47] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 214.

[48] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 221.

[49] According to the Oxford Dictionary, onomatopoeia is "the fact of words containing sounds similar to the noises they describe, for example *hiss*; (…)." Onomatopoeic is an adjective: "*Bang and pop are onomatopoeic words*."

[50] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 217.

[51] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 213.

[52] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 206.

cause or effect of the other.' In the first place, thought is not an effect of language."[53] It is good to say about language with regard to meaning what Simon de Beauvoir says about the body in relation to the spirit: that is neither first nor second. In the same sense, language is not at the service of meaning and does not govern meaning. There is no submission between them. Here, none of them commands and none obeys.[54] It is to be noted that "The link between the word and its living meaning is not an external link of association, the meaning inhabits the word, and language 'is not an external accompaniment to intellectual processes'."[55] For Merleau-Ponty, the word is not a mere meaningless external phenomenon, an expression of thought, but thought itself: "Thus we refute both intellectualism and empiricism by simply saying that *the word has a meaning*."[56] The speech I give or that which I listen to is pregnant of meaning which comes up from the structure of linguistic gestures, to the extent that a hesitation, an alteration of the voice, and the choice of certain syntax modify it.[57] Indeed, it is meaning that animates speech as the world animates my body.[58] Meaning is the heart of speech; it is carried out and expressed by speech.

3.2 Expression as Fulfilment of Thought

The insight of Merleau-Ponty necessary for the understanding of his philosophy of language is that expression is based on thought and, inversely, thought is fulfilled by expression. This can be pushed further: thought is based on the perceived being and thought is the fulfilment of perception. This would mean that the three elements of the triad are equal in value and are tightly connected. I figure out perception without thought; it has no epistemological value. The same can be said about thought without speech; this, for Merleau-Ponty, is an impossibility inasmuch as thought and speech are the same phenomenon. Even if it was possible to think without expression, this thought would be immanent in a solipsist subject, and would be good for nothing for other subjects. Hence, there is a deeper relationship between thought and speech; they should not be separated from each other, as Merleau-Ponty states:

> If speech presupposed thought, if talking were primarily a matter of meeting the object through a cognitive intention or through a representation, we could not understand why thought tends towards expression as towards its completion, why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name, why the thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken and written them, as is shown by the example of so many writers who begin a book without knowing exactly what they are going to put into it. A thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist even for itself.[59]

I present my thought to myself through internal or external speech without which a thought is not mine; it is through expression that I make a thought my own.[60] Without expression, no ideas can be attributed to an author; to quote an author is to acknowledge that he is the one who expressed that particular idea. If no thought is expressed, I cannot be aware of it and of its author. Thus, "That which is called an idea is necessarily linked to an act of expression, and owes to it its appearance of autonomy."[61] In Merleau-Ponty's perspective, an idea without expression does not exist. Any idea, as soon as it appears, is always in form of expression (or word) within consciousness.

Besides, language is that fabulous apparatus which helps to express an indefinite number of thought using a finite number of signs.[62] Thought is expressed when the words which aim at it are eloquent and capable of designating it unambiguously to me its author or to others.[63] The only virtue of language is to suppress

---

[53] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 223.

[54] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1511-1512. (« Il nous faut donc dire du langage par rapport au sens ce que Simone de Beauvoir dit du corps par rapport à l'esprit : qu'il n'est ni premier, ni second. (…) Le langage, de même, n'est pas au service du sens et ne gouverne pourtant pas le sens. Il n'y a pas se subordination entre eux. Ici personne ne commande et personne n'obéit. »)

[55] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 224.

[56] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 206.

[57] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Sur la Phénoménologie du Langage," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1193.

[58] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Sur la Phénoménologie du Langage," 1194.

[59] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 206.

[60] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 206.

[61] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 453.

[62] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1438.

[63] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, " Sur la Phénoménologie du Langage," 1195-1196. (« On dit qu'une pensée est exprimée lorsque les paroles convergentes qui la visent sont assez nombreuses et assez éloquentes pour la

confused allusions or to express things without equivocation.[64] This would mean that the virtue of language is accuracy since there must be correspondence between meaning and what is meant. That is why Merleau-Ponty says that to express is nothing more than to replace a perception or an idea by a sign agreed upon which announces, invokes or abbreviates (abstracts) it.[65] What I express is what I perceive and think about; my expression takes up the structure of my thought and communicates it to another subject for the latter to be aware of what I perceive or think about.

At this juncture, the gist of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language is quite clear and can be formulated as follows: expression comes simultaneously with the recognition of an object.[66] This short sentence has said everything since it implies that expression takes place along with thought and the perceived object, not in a parallel manner, but in an interweavement state. This comes out clearly in the following assertion of Merleau-Ponty: "The denomination of objects does not follow upon recognition; it is itself recognition."[67] As already mentioned, the simultaneity of the three elements of the triad is not temporal but logical. Hence, Merleau-Ponty is convinced that neither thought nor expression is prior to the other, but they are simultaneously constituted.[68] Speech goes hand in hand with consciousness; to express, for a speaking subject, is to bring out what is in consciousness.[69] In this sense, "the listener receives thought from speech itself."[70] It is out of this conviction that Merleau-Ponty shows quite clearly that speech and thought are interwoven: "There is thus, either in the man who listens or reads, or in the one who speaks or writes, a *thought in speech* the existence of which is unsuspected by intellectualism."[71] Thus, he has completely suppressed dualism when he shows that thought and speech are but one thing; speech is not mere servant of thought, but thought itself: "We must recognize first of all that thought, in the speaking subject, is not a representation, that is, that it does not expressly posit objects or relations. The orator does not think before speaking, nor even while speaking; his speech is his thought."[72] It is now obvious that speech is not the consequence of thought, but thought expressed and therefore fulfilled. As Merleau-Ponty nicely avers, speech is never "the 'sign' of thought, if by this we understand a phenomenon which heralds another as smoke betrays fire."[73] Instead, speech or word and thought or sense are to be considered as expressions of the same reality, "the sense being held within the word, and the word being the external existence of the sense."[74] Insisting on the unity of speech and thought, Merleau-Ponty writes: "The word and speech must somehow cease to be a way of designating things or thoughts, and become the presence of that thought in the phenomenal world, and, moreover, not its clothing but its token or its body."[75] In this sense, the phenomenon is not a thing itself as it is in nature, but a thing translated into words (thought) as it appears in consciousness.

Brief, being, thought and speech are interwoven to the extent that they cannot be separated. Perception which is the foundation of thought is wondrously affirmed by the latter; in addition, thought which in turn is the foundation of speech is fulfilled by the latter. Therefore, the meaning of the perceived being is fulfilled by expression. Nevertheless, not all the three elements of the triad mentioned above persist in time; only meaning remains after the other two elements have vanished.

3.3 Expression fades away for Meaning to emerge

3.3.1 Language and Speech: the Theme of "Silence"

One of the important elements to understand Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language is to distinguish language from speech. To understand this better, it is good to go back to the original language, French, where *la langue* means something different from *la parole*. *La langue* is language like English, French, Kiswahili, Yira,

---

désigner sans équivoque à moi, auteur, ou aux autres, et pour que nous ayons tous l'expérience de sa présence charnelle dans la parole. »)

[64] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1439.

[65] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1437.

[66] Expression is always expression of something; a name always designates something or someone; a word is always an articulation of something; and a statement always declares something. This supports the idea that expression takes place only from the moment a subject recognizes something. To speak without recognizing anything is to utter chimeras.

[67] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 206.

[68] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 213.

[69] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, " Sur la Phénoménologie du Langage," 1195.

[70] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 207.

[71] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 209.

[72] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 209.

[73] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 211.

[74] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 211.

[75] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 211.

etc. *La parole*, on the other hand, is word or speech, but in the context of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, it is mostly speech.

Merleau-Ponty introduces the notion of "silence" in his philosophy of language in order to clarify the relationship between language and speech. This topic is developed in his *La Prose du monde* which he left unpublished, and in his posthumous work, *Le visible et l'invisible* — this is a signal that his work on "silence" is probably unfinished. To introduce to the theme of silence, Edie writes:

> The first step in this development was to elaborate a theory of the relationship of language and speech to 'silence.' This he accomplished in the writings which date from the period of his assuming his new chair at the College de France. We cannot pursue this in complete detail here, but it is possible to get some idea of what Merleau-Ponty means by the 'silence' which surrounds language and enables it to occur as speech if we recognize the distinction between *la langue* and *la parole*, institute *la langue* and make it live, but* on the other hand speech itself is possible only on the background of all the subunderstood phonological, morphological, and syntactical rules, as well as within the context of the particular lexicon, of our *langue*.[76]

It comes out of this quotation that language (*langue*) is surrounded by silence and thus, it turns to be speech (*parole*). In Merleau-Ponty's viewpoint, language (*langue*) is a system of symbols, sounds and words which a specific group of people uses to communicate. Brief, it is a set of symbols and signs helping to communicate and to understand something, and also a set of vocabularies and grammar useful to formulate sentences. Furthermore, speech (*parole*) is more than that since it uses language but the latter falls into silence to give room for expression to come out. In other words, speech uses language on which it adds radical reasoning. As for Edie, "We use *la langue* in the way we use our bodies, without thought and without explicit consciousness of the structures which we are bringing into action at any one point."[77] It seems too ambiguous to say that we use language (*la langue*) without thought, since even to communicate, we need to have some understanding of what we express. However, as I put it, speech overtakes language by the power of radical or rigorous thinking. Indeed, "The first meaning of the 'silence' which makes speech possible is that of *la langue*, which does not itself speak but which is the *ground* of all speech."[78] After *la langue* has brought *la parole* out, it falls into silence to let speech (*la parole*) remain alive.

From 1959, Merleau-Ponty sought to bring to maturity his theory of "Speech and Silence" as he composed his papers which constitute his *Le visible et l'invisible*. As Edie puts it, "The background silence of *la langue* and the context of discourse which enables authentic acts of new speaking to take place, is but *one* of the structures of what, in final work, he called 'the invisible.'"[79] The invisible is therefore the silent language and the context of speech which both withdraw for meaning to emerge.

3.3.2 Emergence of Meaning

Though Merleau-Ponty seems to acknowledge that the only virtue of language is to express things without ambiguity, he later recognizes another virtue which consists in throwing people to what it means; its triumph is to erase itself and to give people access, beyond words, to the very thought of the author, to share with him without words, spirit to spirit. Once the words become cold, they become simple signs and are forgotten.[80] I can remember very well the message of someone or the gist of someone's speech, but I cannot pretend to remember it word by word. I can be capable to share with someone else the content of that speech, or at least the essential points, without using the same language which actually has vanished to leave room to meaning. That is the reason why Merleau-Ponty says that the result of language is to make itself forgotten after succeeding to express something.[81] In other words, language withdraws into silence after expressing something. Merleau-Ponty insists on this showing that when someone — an author or a friend — succeeded to express something, the signs are forgotten immediately, only the meaning remains and the perfection of language is to pass unnoticed.[82]

Even though Merleau-Ponty equates thought and speech, he nevertheless differentiates both from the object saying that speech about a thing is not that thing. This would mean that philosophy is not fully in

---

[76] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 394-395.

[77] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 395.

[78] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 395.

[79] Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," 395.

[80] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1443.

[81] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1442. (« Or, c'est bien un résultat du langage de se faire oublier, dans la mesure où il réussit à exprimer. »)

[82] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1443. (« Quand quelqu'un — auteur ou ami — a su s'exprimer, les signes sont aussitôt oubliés, seul demeure le sens, et la perfection du langage est bien de passer inaperçue. »)

possession of the truth of speech and of the world, but that it is the recovery (*recupération*) and the first formulation of the *Logos* (of the esthetical world) which is scattered or dispersed in the world and in human life, tied to their concrete structures.[83] Of course, thought and speech cannot translate the world as it really is; it is therefore impossible to arrive at total meaning. Hence, Merleau-Ponty says that the so called clarity is the disappearance of all clarity, and clarity as such is not at the beginning of language, like a golden age, but at the end of its effort.[84] It is clear that language (speech) is an effort to clarify what a subject perceives; it is an intellectual effort that sheds light on the perceived reality. It is therefore an exercise of trial and error whose accuracy is teleological. Merleau-Ponty underlines that speech implies a struggle when he avers that expression is never absolute and the expressed is never completely expressed.[85] The reason for this is that language is existential; it is alive, dynamic and always in search for the meaning of reality.

IV. EXISTENTIAL DIMENSION OF LANGUAGE

I introduce this section by quoting Mondin who has an insight about the existential dimension of language. Mondin asserts that "Language is so very important not only for the descriptive and communicative functions, but also for its expressive, existential function. In effect, beyond describing objects and communicating sentiments and ideas, language serves to testify to others and to ourselves the fact of our existence."[86] He will further say, "Therefore, the word expresses my existence to myself and to others."[87] Moreover, language reflects what a person is or what he is going through, as he writes:

> From the language which a person adopts one can easily infer whether he finds himself faced with a peasant, a sailor, a merchant, a lawyer, a politician, a supervisor, etc. The same person varies his language according to circumstances and according to his own psychological dispositions. When we are angry, we take on a particular tone of voice and a certain type of language, which is totally different from what we use when we pray or when we tell jokes.[88]

4.1 The Body as Condition for Communication

The body which is central for the perception of the world is also central in communication. Without my body, I can perceive neither my fellow subjects nor the world. Merleau-Ponty expresses this as follows: "It is through my body that I understand other people, just as it is through my body that I perceive 'things'."[89] Referring to *Le visible et l'invisible*, Edie states that Merleau-Ponty "attempts to show that the human body, as a system of structured possibilities for future action, which are realized in the 'objectification' and in the very 'discovery' of perceptual objects, is 'structured like language'."[90] Furthermore, the *I* that speaks is installed in his body and in his language, not as in a prison, but on the contrary as in an apparatus which magically transports it into the perspectives of the other.[91] Indeed, speech puts me in relation with another subject: by speech, I am in the presence of another myself (*un autre moi-même*).[92] In the experience of dialogue, the speech of the other touches the meanings within me, and my speeches touch the meanings within him. There is an encroachment upon each other between the other and me (*nous empiétons l'un sur l'autre*) inasmuch as we belong to the same cultural world, and mostly to the same language, and since my acts of expression and those of the other belong to the same institution.[93] If I want to communicate with the other, I must first dispose a language which nominates things which are visible for him and for me.[94] Speech is not mere noise or letters, but

---

[83] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Philosophe et la Sociologie," 1179.

[84] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1511.

[85] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1465.

[86] Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 137.

[87] Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 138.

[88] Mondin, *Philosophical Anthropology*, 138.

[89] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 216.

[90] James M. Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (July 1975): 396, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/227743/pdf.

[91] My body is crucial in communication: first, because it is thanks to my body that the other sees and knows me and vice-versa; second, it is by my body that I articulate things. Would a bodiless person — a pure spirit — exist, he would be unknown to the embodied spirits and he would be incapable to make a speech. Indeed, the souls of the dead, though immortal (and therefore alive), remain invisible and silent.

[92] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1450-1451.

[93] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1533.

[94] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1451-1452.

an organized set of words which target an object. Like Husserl, Merleau-Ponty supports the view according to which to speak is not at all to translate a thought into words, but to target a certain object by speech.[95]

Furthermore, the body is important in language since it assures communication among subjects. Indeed, the experience of the other seems to be taught to me by the spontaneity of my body. Everything seems to show that my body was teaching me what my consciousness could not teach me, since the body recovers (*reprend*) on its own account the contacts of the other, makes with them a kind of deep relationship without which I can never have the notion of the other as other. Thus, my body is no longer only an object to which my consciousness is externally related, but a means for me to know that there are other animated bodies; that would mean that its own bond to my consciousness is more essential, an interior bonding (*lien*).[96]

The body is not merely a biological thing; it is rather that by which I transcend towards others and towards the world. This, Merleau-Ponty expresses as follows: "The use a man is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity. It is no more natural, and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table 'a table'."[97] All my knowledge and all my speech are therefore determined by my body. Due to this functioning of the body, I look at language as something existential. Speech is indeed existential since all the possibilities of language are already given in the structure of the human body.[98] It is by speech that the body acquires its status since it is a speaking body.[99] To say that the body is a speaking body is to say that it is the body that articulates or even gesticulates words. About gesticulation, Edie writes that Merleau-Ponty "sees — a thesis he never retracted nor ever needed to retract — that *words* have a 'gestural' function and are, indeed, *like* gestures in that they express a meaning which is not objectifiable or expressed without their physical 'incarnation' in bodily acts."[100] This reminds of the importance Merleau-Ponty gives to the body in perception and in the whole process of knowledge; the body is central. To affirm this, he writes: "It is the body which points out, and which speaks;"[101] and there is nothing else which can achieve that.

However, the body is limited or finite. Henceforth, language or speech, which is made possible by the body, is also limited. Therefore language, by which knowledge is expressed, cannot claim to bring forth the absolute truth about reality. In the same perspective, the philosopher cannot give an absolute expression. Merleau-Ponty states that the main feature of expression is that a subject only approaches it.[102] Language is therefore this unique apparatus which, like my body, gives me more than what I put in it, either when I learn about my thought as I speak or when I listen to others. When I listen or when I read, words do not always touch in me significations which are already present, but have an extraordinary power to bring cracks in my private universe and through these cracks, other thoughts irrupt.[103] Indeed, what I speak comes from the heart of my being to put me in relation with myself and with others.

4.2 Language as Manifestation of Being

Merleau-Ponty clearly says that "Speech is the surplus of our existence over natural being."[104] When I speak, I reveal my existence, I reveal something more than what my natural being can do inasmuch as language is creative. Language is our life and the life of mute things which it expresses.[105] Words are not only conceptual, but create a world we live in:

---

[95] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Les Sciences de l'Homme et la Phénoménologie," 1250. (« Déjà dans la *Logique Formelle et Transcendantale* publiée de son vivant, Husserl indique très expressément que parler ce n'est pas du tout *traduire une pensée en paroles*, c'est *viser un certain objet* par la parole. »)

[96] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Les Sciences de l'Homme et la Phénoménologie," 1251.

[97] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 220.

[98] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1779.

[99] Speech is the work of the body and it is related to ideas. The latter are constituted by a subject, and speech is nothing more than the expression of ideas. Generally, the formation of ideas is attributed to the mind which is believed to be the spiritual correlative of human brain, but the latter is actually part of the body. Through the senses, the body communicates information from the world to its interior part to be worked on so as to be transformed into a knowledge that is exteriorized by speech. A man without brain can neither think nor give a speech.

[100] James M. Edie, "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (July 1975): 394, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/227743/pdf.

[101] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 230.

[102] Cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "L'Homme et l'Adversité," in *Œuvres*, ed. Claude Lefort (Paris : Gallimard, 2010), 1386. (« Le propre de l'expression est de n'être jamais qu'approché. »)

[103] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "L'Homme et l'Adversité," 1388-1389.

[104] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 229.

[105] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1752.

The process of expression, when it is successful, does not merely leave for the reader and the writer himself a kind of reminder, it brings the meaning into existence as a thing at the very heart of the text, it brings it to life in an organism of words, establishing it in the writer or the reader as a new sense organ, opening a new field or a new dimension to our experience.[106]

From the moment a person speaks, "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*."[107] To understand this, it is good to bear in mind that, for Merleau-Ponty, the perceived being, thought and speech are one. Hence, what a subject things about is being; what he expresses is thought; if speech is detached from being and thought, it is empty and meaningless. Henceforth, Merleau-Ponty says that the most pregnant words of philosophy are not necessarily those which contain (*renferment*) what they say, but those which most energetically open to being.[108] I can put this differently and aver that the content of language is being: the speaking subject expresses being and the audience is open to being through speech. Merleau-Ponty simply says that language does not speak in void, since it speaks of being and of the world.[109] Language is the expression of what I experience and this is precisely being: originally speaking, my experience is the experience of being which I articulate in language.[110] All in all, language is not a masque on being but rather the most valid witness to being and therefore, philosophy is nothing else but language.[111] Philosophy as a reflection on being has no meaning if it remains at the level of an unexpressed thought. However, though it may reach the highest level of accuracy, language cannot express being as it really is since it is limited. One of the reasons why language remains a mechanism that always seeks for more truth is temporality.

4.3 Temporality

Before any analysis, it is good to consider the connection of this theme with the theme of perception. For Merleau-Ponty, thought has a history; I should ask myself about the genesis of my thought and will realize that it results from my contact with reality.[112] The historicity of thought is very important inasmuch as it shows its genesis which is nothing but contact with the perceived reality. In his perspective, any thought which would spring up without that contact would not be trustful for it would have originated from mere psychic operations of the subject, a kind of immanent *Cogito*. Merleau-Ponty rejects such a *Cogito* and says that any thought whose roots would be immanent to the subject would be pointless for reflecting mere imagination. Such a mentalist thought is erroneous since it is not based on reality.[113]

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty connects speech with temporality and shows that the power of language is neither in the future of intellection towards which it is going, nor in the mythical past where it would have originated, but entirely in the present.[114] Speech is therefore affected by temporality which is a self overcoming process. This implies that speech results from subjectivity or simply from the life of the subject. Henceforth, the reason why speech does not present reality as it is, is that thought is existential, though its way of existing is different from the way an object exists: "There are two senses, and two only, of the word 'exist': one exists as a thing or else one exists as a consciousness."[115] A human being is both body and consciousness and therefore reflects both senses. It is as body and consciousness that he speaks so as to communicate with his fellow human beings.

V. LANGUAGE AS A STRUGGLE TO EXPRESS THE MYSTERY OF REALITY

At first glance, one can give a negative critique to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language because it equates being, thought and speech. The question addressed to him would be, what among the three is fundamental? Being is certainly fundamental and therefore, in the absence of being, the other two elements are unimaginable. If being is the foundation of thought, then its absence would imply that thought would be void or inexistent. In the same line, speech would be empty if its foundation is not there. This remark however is inadequate because, for Merleau-Ponty, the triad being-thought-speech is in a relation of simultaneity and, according to Edie, that simultaneity is logical not temporal.

---

[106] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 212.
[107] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 228.
[108] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1730.
[109] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1725.
[110] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1533-1534.
[111] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1752.
[112] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1647.
[113] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Le Visible et l'Invisible," 1647.
[114] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1469.
[115] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 230.

The philosophy of Merleau-Ponty shows that perceiving and thinking are the same, and that thinking and expressing are also the same. In other words, I think as I perceive and I speak as I think; by thinking, I speak even without pronouncing words because thinking is the interior speech and expression is the exteriorization of thought. These three elements are therefore simultaneous. In order to understand Merleau-Ponty, it is good to consider, not the traditional triad being-reason-language, but perception-thought-speech. This new triad brings a big difference since perception is not the equivalent of being; being is rather the object of perception. It is clear that being is prior to perception in time since it must be there before I perceive it. However, its being there has no meaning for the subject who is ignorant of it inasmuch as he remains unaware of its value. From the time a subject perceives being, he automatically becomes engaged in thought and speech about it. If thought and speech do not spring up with perception, then there is no perception at all: a subject that seems to see a thing with absent mind does not see at all.

Furthermore, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language shows that language is limited to the extent that it has no absolute power of expression. He has unambiguously equated thought and speech by showing that they are the same, but he says elsewhere that "la langue est toute hasard et toute raison,"[116] which can be translated as language is entirely a trial (*chance*) and entirely reason. I have already showed that he says that speech about a thing is not that thing. Moreover, he avers that the world is expressed through language that has no plan: when someone prepares a speech, he does not know exactly what he will say or write. Most of the times, a good speech is that which has been corrected several times either mentally or on paper. An orator does not have a fixed structure of his speech since he is free to modify it even at the very moment of its presentation. The expression is not stable since the will to express is ambiguous and contains a ferment aiming at modifying it.[117] There is an interior of language, an intention of signifying which animates linguistic accidents and makes of language, at every moment, a system which is capable to break itself and to confirm itself.[118] Hence, Merleau-Ponty avers that the explication of a thing can be done infinitely since I who speak do not necessarily know better what I express than those who listen to me.[119] What do these limitations of language entail? The speaking subject expresses reality by trial and error since the object of his speech is a tremendous being.

The above problem suggests that language is not well determined. How is this related to the originator which is being? Does it have any deficiency? How do I perceive being and to what extent do I acquire its knowledge? What Merleau-Ponty implies by the scrabbling of language is that language expresses a big mystery, which is being. The subject perceives being or reality in a progressive manner and never absolutely; the knowledge he grasps from being is always partial; and therefore, the speech he pronounces about being is to be perfected by corrigibility. Reality is indeed a mystery that nobody can claim to express with exactness. Here, the importance to consider the triad perception-thought-speech and not being-thought-speech is to be given place. What the subject deals with is perception of being which has deficiencies affecting thought and speech. Brief, the subject does not grasp reality as it really is, but as he perceives and constitutes it; the spoken reality is the exteriorization of the constituted reality.

VI. CONCLUSION

Philosophy of language is an inquiry about the origin, manifestation and value of language. The latter is related to being or reality which it expresses; it is the meaning of reality that language articulates as the subject thinks about what he perceives. The triad being-thought-language is important. The primacy given to one of these three elements determines the trend of a philosopher of language. Some give primacy to being or reality, others to thought, and others again to expression. Hence, notwithstanding the fact that philosophy of language became a separate discipline only in the 19th century, classical philosophy marked by realism advocated for the triad being-thought-language, modern idealism for the triad thought-being-language, and contemporary semanticism for the triad language-thought-being. Which trend is right? Merleau-Ponty comes up with a new approach to philosophy of language where reality, thought and speech are one. Nature and reason are together since reason is rooted in nature. These two are one and as soon as I am aware of them, I speak of them inasmuch as understanding always takes place in a language. Though the structure of perception is prior to the structure of thought, it is thought which makes manifest the structure of perception. By the notion of *Fundierung*, Merleau-Ponty avers that the three elements of the triad are simultaneous. Their relation goes even beyond to oneness since thought and speech are the same thing.

The understanding of the three simultaneous elements becomes difficult when Merleau-Ponty moves to the theme of silence. The latter explains the notion of the invisible, the silent language and context of speech

---

[116] Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1464.

[117] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1464. (« La volonté d'expression elle-même est ambiguë et renferme un ferment qui travaille à la modifier. »)

[118] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "La Prose du Monde," 1465.

[119] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, "Sur la Phénoménologie du Langage," 1196.

which both vanish for meaning to emerge. Language has to make itself forgotten after expressing something. Thought alone remains in consciousness in form of meaning or truth. The notion of silence shows very well that speech about a thing is not that thing; yet Merleau-Ponty equates the three elements of the triad. Though they are simultaneous or even the same, they seem to have some differences. Language appears as the intellectual effort to clarify the perceived reality, an exercise performed by trial and error. This would mean that philosophy is not fully in possession of truth since thought and speech cannot translate the world as it really is. Hence, it becomes impossible to arrive at total meaning. Language is not being but its manifestation. The most pregnant words of philosophy are those which open to being. Language is the most valid witness to being. Hence, philosophy is nothing else but language. Since the subject never perceives being in an absolute manner, the knowledge of being remains partial. Speech therefore has to be performed with care and corrigibility. Indeed, reality is a mystery that can never be expressed with full clarity.

The importance of this article is that it strives to clarify the philosophy of language of Merleau-Ponty. It shows how he overtakes the previous thinkers: being, thought and speech are interconnected and none can make sense without the others. Besides, language is limited because its object is an inexhaustible mystery; the subject is therefore urged to always seek the best expression of his ideas and therefore to philosophize as he speaks.

REFERENCES

Books and Articles:

[1]   Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Le Philosophe et la Sociologie." In *Œuvres*, edited by Claude Lefort, 1171-87. Paris : Gallimard, 2010.

[2]   Mondin, Battista. *Philosophical Anthropology: Man: An Impossible Project*. Rome: Urbaniana University Press. 1985.

[3]   Makumba, Maurice M. *Introduction to Philosophy*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa. 2005.

[4]   Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by C. Smith. London and New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul. 1962. PDF e-book.

[5]   Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "La Prose du Monde." In *Œuvres*, edited by Claude Lefort, 1423-1544. Paris : Gallimard, 2010.

[6]   Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Les Sciences de l'Homme et la Phénoménologie." In *Œuvres*, edited by Claude Lefort, 1203-66. Paris : Gallimard, 2010.

[7]   Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Le Visible et l'Invisible." In *Œuvres*, edited by Claude Lefort, 1629-1807. Paris : Gallimard, 2010.

[8]   Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "Sur la Phénoménologie du Langage." In *Œuvres*, edited by Claude Lefort, 1188-1202. Paris : Gallimard, 2010.

[9]   Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. "L'Homme et l'Adversité." In *Œuvres*, edited by Claude Lefort, 1377-97. Paris : Gallimard, 2010.

Internet Sources:

[10]   "Philosophy of Language." *The Basics of Philosophy*, accessed March 25, 2020. https://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_philosophy_of_language.html.

[11]   Apostolopoulos, Dimitris. "Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Language." *Rowman & Littlelield*. Accessed March 25, 2020. https://rowman.com/ISBN/9781786611994/Merleau-Ponty%E2%80%99s-Phenomenology-of-Language.

[12]   Edie, James M. "The Significance of Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Language." *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 13, no. 3 (July 1975). https://muse.jhu.edu/article/227743/pdf.