

ON GESTURAL MEANING IN ACTS OF EXPRESSION

Sunnie D. Kidd

In this presentation the focus is on what Maurice Merleau-Ponty calls the gestural meaning of the word in language and speech as it is an expression of the lived body. The lived body is, for Merleau-Ponty, “incarnate significance”¹ meaning that it is through this living body that a dialectical relationship emerges between persons and the world, between thought and perception, between the founding and the founded. It is this *Fundierung*, this dialectical movement, which provides the basis for Merleau-Ponty’s reference to the ambiguity of existence.

Merleau-Ponty discusses language and the peculiar power of speech as being essential and necessary layers of meaning which emerges through and is given expression by experiences of the lived body. This layer of gestural meaning as a zone of vitality, a pre-predicative, pre-objective layer of meaning is lived before we have an explicit knowledge of its meaning. Yet this is the ground for an eventual emergence of objective knowledge, of conceptual or intellectual understanding. This is the dialectical founding/founded process, expression coming into being.

The gestural meaning of words, says Merleau-Ponty, arises in this zone of vitality. It is described as the “first attempts at language in the emotional gesticulation whereby man superimposes on the given world the world according to man.”² The emotional gesticulation, the existential, the gestural meanings of words which are the first expressions of language, inhabit the very words which phonemic structures coordinate. These phonemic structures, as they institute a rhythm, come to express a musical nature in each language, inhabiting the word with meaning. This is a universal aspect of each language, making total translation of any language an impossibility. It is then, these emotional, existential or gestural meanings which first come to expression in language and imprint the perceived world with a human structure. Projective consciousness is interfused with this emotional gesticulation of the phonemic structure which seems for Merleau-Ponty to provide an incubating ground for eventual transformation and transfiguration of vital impulses, the natural powers of the body, into the domain of the subject’s intentional arc, being projected into the emotional, cultural and intellectual world of signification. As it appears, it is this pre-predicative, pre-objective zone of vitality which roots us in the perceived world and yet is carried forward into every form of human action, conceptual or intellectual function, to ethical truths. A transfiguration of the body and its desirous impulses takes place at the gestural level of meaning in the speaking subject, extracting the emotional essences of the word which inhabits it, instituting the condition for the possibility of the body to express

its meanings in a figurative sense which emerges in acts of expression and finally, rooting thought in perception. In the same way that the body is for Merleau-Ponty incarnate significance, language becomes “incarnate logic.”³

By looking at the gestural meanings that inhabit our words as a first attempt at language, as a deep and primitive layer of meaning, Merleau-Ponty reveals the body as an essentially expressive space:

The body is our general medium for having a world... At all levels it performs the same function which is to endow the instantaneous expressions of spontaneity with ‘a little renewable action and independent existence.’⁴

With an emphasis upon the lived body as a field of expression, as an incubating ground for the emergence of a personal world, the spontaneous wave of vitality which flows through the body clamors for expression, gathering up already-existing, previously enacted essences of sedimented meaning which have gone to make up for it an existentially supporting, yet primordial space of silence, as it tears from this space a named experience, projecting into existence a new or original word. This original kind of speech allows expression of an existential significance of the lived, the emotional, the gestural meaning of the word which is immediately and directly perceived prior to intellectual knowing. Although, in its institution, the *parole originaire* establishes a new way of knowing the world, the gestural meaning continues to inhabit the word, even as it falls into disuse, even though it may lose its power of expressiveness. The ebb and flow of personal life, the wave of intended signification which wells up in expression, opens upon a plentitude of being, instituting a field of understanding and at the same time achieving a recovery of the world.

Merleau-Ponty describes this function both at the level of the lived body and at the first layer of language, at the level of gestural meaning of the word, as a power inherent in the body, as an attitude which expresses one’s orientation to-the-world as “I am able to.”⁵ The “I am able to” of the body and of speech opens up the expressive space of the body, a spontaneous grasping of polymorphous possibilities of meaning, drawing out, appropriating and conveying the meanings of the world. The body’s power for spontaneity opens it to intermittent waves of personal existence, rooting in perception an overflowing abundance of intended significations. For Merleau-Ponty, one must describe the expressive operation in order to comprehend the peculiar power of speech.

Merleau-Ponty points out that this instituting process establishes and conveys the meanings of the world for us in its inalienable presence and inexhaustible richness. In a very real sense, our emotional or perhaps we should say our desire nature, personalizes and makes available through its

transfiguration, the taking up of a position, throwing the person into a situation, living out that experience from our own perspective. Through the lived body, spontaneous acts project intended significations into and through an already-existing world structure which has been built up from the sediment of previous acts of expression, a structure against which expression stands out and yet from which it has sprung. This dialectical relationship comes to clarity in the process of communication by establishing not only a personal world which bears an emblem of a personally-held attitude but by instituting an interpersonal world as well as the other comprehends the intended meaning which inhabits the expression. For Merleau-Ponty:

...the human body is defined in terms of its property of appropriating, in an indefinite series of discontinuous acts, significant cores which transcend and transfigure its natural powers.⁶

The gestural meaning that inhabits our words in speech establishes an immediately perceived layer of meaning and rests beneath conceptual knowledge. It is the beginning of expression as it brings into existence that which the gesture intends. The lived body cannot be understood without the power of speech being included as an essential characteristic of what Merleau-Ponty calls an original intentionality. This power of speech is an, “irrational power which creates meanings and conveys them. Speech is merely one particular case of it.”⁷

This gestural meaning, the immediately grasped rhythm of expression, first stamps expressive acts with a recognizable style. Merleau-Ponty points out that in this way all perception is stylized, is existentially-structured and as such, all thought must consequently be stylized or stamped in its expression with an emblem of existential significance, all being rooted in the body as the vehicle for our intended significations.

For Merleau-Ponty expression and speech is a movement toward understanding the pre-predicative, pre-objective philosophy of phenomenology, the knowledge which is said to be anterior to conceptual knowledge, the lived-through knowing of being in direct contact with the world which roots or anchors us in existence. Merleau-Ponty indicates that it is the power of speech which transfigures the gestural meanings of the expressive acts into a figurative sense clearing the way for another power, that of thought. Although speech is one of the irrational powers which creates and conveys meanings, it is a significant culmination of an intended project and through the speaking subject we are able to move into levels of meaning which seem more remote from the pre-predicative, pre-objective world, toward a conceptual, intellectual and ethical formulation of meaning via thought, although they retain their connection with the more primary layers of meaning.

Merleau-Ponty repeats time and again that the movements our knowing body takes are not of a straightforward or head-on nature but rather the body, in its fundamental attitude of being able to, enters its world of meanings in more subtle, obscure and ambiguous ways. In these series of discontinuous acts or waves of personal existence, movement of an oblique or lateral nature reveals the person as being open to and available for surprise, providing a ground for spontaneously taking up a position as one is caught in a whirl of personal meaning, following out the general flow of existence as it tends toward expression:

...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.⁸

It is the welling up of vitality which exists anterior to the explicit formulation of significance, finding a means of expression which utilizes not only the already-established repositories of previous acts of expression in the language in which one lives but through its indefinite power and original intentionality, that it polarizes existence into significance, creating through speech:

Speech is the surplus of our existence over natural being. But the act of expression constitutes a linguistic world and a cultural world, and allows that to fall back into being which was striving to outstrip it.⁹

Through expressive acts, the meaning of gesture, bodily or verbal, establishes an existential layer of communication:

Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we fail to go back to that origin, so long as we fail to find, beneath the chatter of words, the primordial silence, and as long as we do not describe the action which breaks this silence. The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world.¹⁰

In the act of expressing, the speaking subject thereby guarantees a spontaneous renewal of a human world. The vital clamors for expression and through its expression gives birth to an initiating gesture which retrieves the world and at the same time, institutes a common world through its ability to make itself understood in communication. This expressive act which frees an initiating or originative word, achieves an imperceptible reversal in commonly held meanings and reveals a situation in which speech comes to dominate the language which gave it birth. It is the ever-unfolding opening onto the plentitude of being through the natural powers of the body as it is transfigured by the original intentionalities which unveils the hidden, the

awesome, the wonder which characterizes human existence. It is through the oblique movement of the speaking subject's meanings or the use of language in literary or artistic works, which momentarily reveal an abode out of which all expression emerges through the *parole originaire* and initiates a transformation in the cultural world.

Advent,¹¹ as used by Merleau-Ponty, describes a cultural creation, a beginning into being some new way, opening a path for others, establishing and inaugurating a new meaning. Each gesture signifies beyond its own simple existence a shared and common meaning, being a vehicle for the unity of culture. It is a guarantee of succession, a dialogue between expression and what is expressed. The dialectic between expression and what is expressed stands in the same relationship as the founding/founded, it seems to be another example of this fundamental process in which we institute the world of meaning in expressive operations, both bodily and verbally, expressing our grasp of the world through our spontaneous interaction with others. The power of speech, the "I am able to" which rests in the pre-predicative, pre-objective experience of the world, demands to be included in the domain of this pre-reflective contact with the world.

For Merleau-Ponty, giving expression to the spontaneous upsurge which wells up inside me in the form of impulse or desire describes the dialectic between the sedimented/spontaneous features which characterize the intermittent nature of personal existence, making that experience my own. It is through apprehending and conveying meaning, through the expressive operations of the body as it is lived in direct contact with the world that it first establishes it for others as well, through the gestural meaning of the word. The founding has an essential function, that of retrieving or preserving that which has been expressed. It rescues a disclosure, an unveiling of spontaneous enactments of origination from sinking back into the silence, lacking a means of its own expression. Words do not reveal their own meanings but through something. For Merleau-Ponty, it is the *parole originaire*, it is the always already there, the gestural meaning projected by an originating intentionality, the "I am able to" which projects us to-the-world and which finds us just doing it before we think of it. In either case, it is expression which recedes into the background of what has been expressed, permitting us only glimpses of its nature through that which has become sedimented through previous acts of expression which are its background. It is spontaneous gesticulations of the body in bodily gesture or in its verbal gesture which lays down being and establishes a rhythm, a musical nature which cannot be sedimented, it is as Merleau-Ponty expresses it, an ability to, "sing the world's praises."¹² The body of the speaking subject is transformed and transfigured through the expressive act, giving rise to personal existence and interpersonal existence as the communication is understood by the other, thereby preserving the world as thought is founded in the power of speech.

Notes

- 1) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1976), p. 166.
- 2) *Ibid.*, p. 188.
- 3) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans., preface Richard C. McCleary (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), p. 88.
- 4) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit.*, p. 146. Merleau-Ponty uses a quote from the poet Valery to refer to the lived body as essential for experience. It is through the endowment of spontaneous expression which meaning builds up through the process of sedimentation that allows expression to come into an almost independent form of existential meaning. Out of this the cultural world emerges.
- 5) Merleau-Ponty, *Signs, op. cit.*, p. 88.
- 6) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit.*, p. 193.
- 7) *Ibid.*, p. 189.
- 8) *Ibid.*, p. 196.
- 9) *Ibid.*, p. 197.
- 10) *Ibid.*, p. 184.
- 11) Merleau-Ponty, *Signs, op. cit.*, p. 68. Advent refers to the original act of expression that alters the already-existing flow of meaning, both at the personal and the cultural level. It means that with the arrival of something new comes a shift in the existential meaning.
- 12) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit.*, p. 187.