

## MERLEAU-PONTY ON LANGUAGE AND MEANING

### I

In his *Phenomenology of Perception* Maurice Merleau-Ponty outlined a theory of language and meaning which goes diametrically against the commonly accepted view in this respect. We generally think that our language expresses a thought which already exists in our mind before it is so expressed. We thus make a distinction between language and its meaning, sign and its significance. But Merleau-Ponty, in keeping with his theory of *conscience incarnée*, has emphasised the bodily character of thought and held accordingly that it cannot exist independently of language\* or some such sign in which it is expressed. To him, thought means thought embodied in an expression, whether it is articulated or not. And it is to this view on the part of Merleau-Ponty that the title of the present paper refers.

### II

Merleau-Ponty begins his discussion on language with an attack upon the two positions taken up respectively by 'empiricism' and 'intellectualism' in this regard. Neither of these two positions, he claimed, has been able to give a satisfactory explanation of language and meaning. The empiricists, emphasising as they do the physiological substructures of linguistic expression, identify language with verbal images. But then the case of a 'speaking subject'<sup>1</sup> would remain inexplicable, for this view denies that speech is an action which manifests the internal possibilities of a subject. The subject will then speak the way the lamp becomes incandescent; because, in speaking, he will be undergoing a flux of words set in motion by certain innervations without any intention on his part to speak. And this apart, the verbal image theory is flatly contradicted by a very common psychological phenomenon, namely, that of aphasia. In such a case as this what is lacking on the part of the patient is not a certain stock of verbal images but a way of using them. For, the aphasic patient cannot speak gratuitously although he can when demanded by a concrete situation. Behind every word, then, there is discernible an attitude or

a function of speech that conditions it. The empirical theory thus breaks down on the difference between the word as an instrument and the word as disinterested denomination. Intellectualists, on the other hand, regard language as an empty envelope or a mere external clothing of some internal thought. "The word", as Merleau-Ponty said, "is only the external sign of internal recognition which could take place without it and to which it makes no contribution."<sup>2</sup> But here again, as in the case of empiricists, there is no "speaking subject", but only a thinking one. Both the views, though apparently different, are however one in holding that the word *has* no significance,<sup>3</sup> for in both the cases the word becomes something distinct from its meaning. In one case the word, as a verbal image, is merely a psychic or physiological phenomenon roused by some stimuli or states of mind according to the laws of neurology or that of association; in another it is an external adventitious sign of a thought which is distinct from it. Hence, "the conception of verbal behaviour, as a use of acquisition of either 'image', or 'thought' type overlooks the fact that there is a concerted subject speaking, that expression is essentially an activity and that, most of all, the *word* itself has *meaning*".<sup>4</sup>

### III

Against this contention that the word has no significance, Merleau-Ponty places his own theory of language and meaning by adding a very cryptic counterclaim, namely, that *the word has a meaning*<sup>5</sup>. What this means is that while the empiricist and the intellectualist alike make a distinction between the physical word (*lemot*) and its meaning, Merleau-Ponty wants to abolish this distinction. Our language, according to him, does not express a thought already possessed; rather, thought is inextricably bound up with language such that there will be no thought or no meaning whatsoever if there is no language or speech or some such device used in speech. He, however, admits that at first sight the opposite view seems to be true because thought has a universal and external value whereas language is only historical and changing in character. But he suggests that if we look deep into the matter the so-called universality and eternity of thought would disappear. Merleau-Ponty has offered several arguments to substantiate his position. If our speech translates a readymade thought or a thought which is internally complete, why, he asks, thought tends towards expres-

sion as to its own completion. A thought is not complete until it is expressed. Why, again, does the most familiar thing appear indeterminate so long as we cannot remember its name? This is simply due, says Merleau-Ponty, to the fact that thought does not and cannot exist apart from linguistic or any such symbols. Then again, our thought is found to remain vague and shadowy so long as the verbal expression of it remains vague and imperfect. Anyone who cannot formulate his thought very clearly is supposed to be lacking in a perfect understanding of the problem concerned. Further, to know something is to be able to express it in words. A person cannot, in fact, be said to know something if he is unable to express it verbally. Merleau-Ponty turns also to the pre-scientific thinking to show that the word is not an empty container of an already accomplished thought but is itself a power that puts the matter expressed into existence. This primitive consciousness remains so much forceful in certain cases that the mere mention of word seems to bring about the thing spoken of. Thus the cab drivers dislike to hear their passengers mention punctured tubes as if the very term would give rise to the puncture itself.<sup>6</sup>

Lastly, it is only by means of language that we can assimilate a thought which was first unknown to us. If thought were not present in the words themselves we could not appropriate to ourselves the thought of an author through a study of his works. It is also an accepted fact that the listener receives thought from speech itself. So, Merleau-Ponty concludes, "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."<sup>7</sup> Thought and language, the sense and the word, are inseparable, both "are interinvolved, the sense being held within the word, and word being the external existence of the sense."<sup>8</sup>

But does it not seem somewhat surprising to suppose that the meaning of a language remains contained within the language itself such that it cannot even have any independence over the language in which it is couched? Do we not express the same meaning in different languages? The unusual character of his position, Merleau-Ponty tells us, would no longer remain if we consider what happens in other forms of expression used by the body.

Merleau-Ponty here observes that linguistic expression is on the same level as the musical or the aesthetic expressions. The meaning of a music cannot be separated from the sounds of which it is composed; nor can the meaning of a painting be divorced from the canvas and colours.<sup>9</sup> Now if, in these cases, the meaning of an expression cannot exist apart from the materials themselves of expression, why should, he asks, the case be different in respect of linguistic expression? In fact, "it is no different, despite what may appear to be the case, with expression of thoughts in speech."<sup>10</sup>

Word is both the presence of thought in the phenomenal world and its body, Merleau-Ponty has at this point compared our speech to gesture and its meaning to the structure of the world outlined by it. "The spoken word", he says "is a genuine gesture and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its".<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Merleau-Ponty is in favour of a *gestural* theory of expression. In the gesture he sees a paradigm of what a *sign* is. The meaning expressed in and by a gesture is strictly inseparable from it because the gesture is the body of this meaning.

Here, however, one thing need be noted. We generally think that the same meaning or the same state of mind, anger, for example, can be expressed by different gestures and so the relation between a gesture and its meaning is not one of inseparability but one which is purely arbitrary. The indissoluble unity between a gesture and its meaning seems to be unfounded. Merleau-Ponty, however is not ready to accept this view regarding the relation between a gesture and its meaning. According to him, difference in the gesture institutes a parallel difference in the meaning expressed therein. "The difference", as he puts it, "of behaviour corresponds to a difference in the emotions themselves".<sup>12</sup> Different gestures can never, according to him, express the absolutely same meaning; the same gesture cannot express different meanings on different occasions either. Similar, Merleau-Ponty thinks, is the case with thought and the language in which it is expressed. One and the same thought cannot be expressed in different ways or in different languages. Neither can the same language or speech express different thoughts in different contexts. Hence the question of the translation of same thought or same meaning in different languages becomes indeed a problem. And Merleau-Ponty is led,

by the nature of his analysis, to hold that "the full meaning of a language is never translatable into another."<sup>13</sup>

The eternal and universal character of thought, its independence over language or speech, Merleau-Ponty categorically points out, stems from our failure to distinguish between the two primary dimensions of speech or language. These two dimensions of speech are what he calls *parole parlante* and *parole parlée*, the 'speaking word' and the 'spoken word' respectively. The spoken word or the second order expression is one which, after coming into existence, becomes the general possession of linguistic community.

In this sense word or speech is an institution which has been established through repeated use by the different members of linguistic group. This secondary expression which is used generation after generation by different individuals must, however, have some origin. The 'spoken word', before being a common possession, must have been spoken for the first time. Thus the secondary expression or the 'spoken word' refers back to the 'speaking word' or the authentic speech which formulates somethings for the first time. This 'speaking word' is the original speech which brings meaning into existence<sup>14</sup> and makes the word say what has not been said before. As an example of this originating speech, Merleau-Ponty cites the case of the child uttering its first word, of the lover revealing his first feelings, of the 'first man who spoke' or of the writer and philosopher who reawaken primordial experience anterior to all traditions".<sup>15</sup> It is in this level of original speech where man superimposes on the given world the world according to man, that the true character of speech and language is revealed. Language once constituted sheds its obscurity gradually through social communication and thus becomes quite obvious to us. The meaning of this constituted expression can be endlessly reiterated and that too, by any one of a linguistic community. In this way there arises in us the impression that the expressed meaning has an eternal character, which, however, will appear as a contingent fact if we look back to its origin. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "it loses sight of itself as a contingent fact and takes to resting upon itself; this is what provides us with the ideal of thought without words; whereas the idea of music without sounds is ridiculous."<sup>16</sup> Thus it is obvious that 'speaking word' or 'the

authentic speech' is the place where meaning comes into existence through speech such that meaning cannot be divorced from speech, nor can speech from meaning. Speech at this level is not an expression of meaning already accomplished, because it is the source of that meaning; it is because of constituted speech, which we silently recall to ourselves that we believe in a thought which exists for itself and prior to expression. But "this supposed silence is alive with words, this inner life is an inner language."<sup>17</sup>

#### IV

We are now, I think, in a position to consider whether Merleau-Ponty's view on language is at all justifiable. His exposition is not very clear and he shifts his position freely from *les mots* to *les paroles* without caring much for his reader. But here I shall touch only upon the principal aspects of his theory without going into these intricate details.

We have seen from our discussion above that Merleau-Ponty regards speech as a gesture and ultimately bases his theory upon the character of speech as a *parole parlante*. The question before us is whether speech has all the characteristics of gestures. It is indeed true that the meaning of gesture which is nothing other than the world outlined by it, cannot be divorced from the gesture itself and if language or speech be a gesture, its meaning cannot likewise be separated from it. But, one can legitimately ask, is speech really a gesture? It seems at first sight, however, that speech and gesture have very different characters. Thus an emotion, e.g. anger, is conspicuous in the gesture itself but the meaning of language is not so directly manifest in the language. As a matter of fact, communications through gestures are much easier than those through language. This is because gestures are natural signs, and language is a conventional and arbitrary sign of thought. The existence of a number of languages lends plausibility to this view.

Merleau-Ponty here invokes the genetic perspective of language to show that language is equally natural. He holds that all conventions are later developments which presuppose an original system of expression. Thus if we look at the "first attempts at language in the emotional gesticulation" of man, we shall leave behind us all conventions, viz. the phonological laws, the rules of

syntax and the like, and arrive at an original system of expression where language does not seem arbitrary. In this realm of original speech it would not appear entirely arbitrary to call night by the word 'nuit' if we use *lumière* for light. Merleau-Ponty, however, admits, that if we consider the second-order expression and not the authentic or original speech, the verbal form does appear arbitrary. But here too the form in question would not look arbitrary if the emotional aspect of any language, or what he calls its '*gestural sense*', be taken into consideration. From this standpoint, he said, different languages are but different ways of singing the world.

Again, the supposed natural character of gesture is not natural either. Thus the Japanese, for example, smiles in anger. Hence "it is no more natural and no less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call table a table".<sup>18</sup>

But still the case does not stand because there is at least one more obvious difference between speech and gesture that defies solution. And Merleau-Ponty is constrained to admit this, namely, that whereas we can speak about speeches, there is no gesture about gestures or painting about painting. As he puts it, "the fact remains that the expressive process in the case of speech can be indefinitely reiterated, that it is possible to speak about speeches whereas it is impossible to paint about painting, . . ."<sup>19</sup>

This means that language can be used to mean its referents as also to speak of itself, but gesture or painting can refer only to the world it delineates but never to itself. In other words, the celebrated use-mention distinction is applicable only to language or speech but not to gesture. But then can we identify language with gesture? And we have already seen that, according to Merleau-Ponty, same language cannot be used to express different thoughts. If this is right, then Merleau-Ponty cannot consistently maintain that speech can be taken to refer to itself and also to indicate the world meant by it. The use-mention distinction cannot thus be accommodated within the framework of his theory of language.

Here Merleau-Ponty again turns to the distinction between original speech and second-order expression just to restrict the scope of his assertion that language is a gesture. According to him, the use-mention distinction, though applicable to second-order speech, does not hold good in the case of original or authentic speech. Thus,

according to him, only original speech is a gesture. To show that original speech is a genuine gesture, that like gesture, the use-mention distinction does not apply to it, Merleau-Ponty marshals all the support he can in his favour by comparing original speech to such artistic expression as music, painting and the like. Painting refers to what has been painted and not to itself. Similarly, he thinks, originating speech which for the first time brings a thought into existence, means the world indicated by it, but it can never be taken to mean itself.

In the constituted speech, then, a clear distinction can be drawn between a talk about languages and a talk about their referents, but no such distinction is possible as regards original speech. The statements about languages and the statements about their referents are two very different classes of statements so far as the constituted speech is concerned. But in original speech they do not form distinct classes. Here statements about language and their rules, are not clearly distinguishable from the statements about their truths. Hence questions of truth, reference, consistency and all these will have meaning in original speech very different from that in constituted speech.<sup>20</sup>

But then, can we describe the realm of original speech by means of constituted or secondary speech which has a language pattern very different from that of original speech? A very pertinent question indeed. To describe the realm of original speech in terms of secondary speech seems indefensible and, indeed, a self-defeating enterprise because truth, meaning, validity etc. spoken of by secondary speech as pertaining to originating speech would not be what they actually are in the latter. The originating speech would then run the risk of being given a distorted look. Messrs Michael Kulman and Charles Taylor thus question Merleau-Ponty's ability to describe the realm of original speech in pre-objective language.<sup>21</sup> That Merleau-Ponty has attached great importance to this level is amply clear. He said, "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".<sup>22</sup> But how can this silence be described linguistically? If a proper description of this realm is to be given at all, it must be in terms of originary language but this, on Merleau-



Ponty's own admission, is not possible. There can be no originary speech about originary speech, it being a genuine gesture. Thus the task suggested by Merleau-Ponty in respect of language seems to be bogged down in an imbroglio.

Merleau-Ponty's theory, as we have already seen, is founded upon an inseparable unity of thought and word, meaning and the sign-vehicle, which has, however, been advocated also by Saussure. The theory takes its cue from Merleau-Ponty's distinction between original speech and secondary speech.

Beneath the level of secondary speech which renders a thought already acquired and is translatable, there remains a primitive level of meaning incarnated in the phonemic patterns, primordial melody and intonation distinctive of each language. To Merleau-Ponty this level of meaning is existentially prior to, and more fundamental than, the translatable conceptual thought. Merleau-Ponty's primary concern, in the field of language, is with this level of meaning to which, perhaps, no philosopher has paid any attention. The clearness of language stands out from this dark soil and it is here that the meaning and language are inseparable. Despite the difficulties noted above, it is true that language analysis would remain incomplete unless this primitive level of meaning, where the "use of our bodies and their natural powers of vocal gestulation for purposes that transcend them, namely, to mean, express, and understand the world as humanly comprehensible", is investigated. "Merleau-Ponty's attitude toward language is quite idiosyncratic for a philosopher" no doubt, but, as James M. Edie admits, "in this, he is extremely original."<sup>23</sup>

Bhairat Ganguly College,  
Calcutta.

—Samarikant Samanta

## NOTES

\*The term 'language' is used here in a most comprehensive sense to include words, speeches, written languages and all linguistic symbols.

1. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Trans. Colin Smith, London, Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1962 p. 174 ( Hereafter quoted as *PhP* )
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 176-77.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
4. John F. Bannan, *The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty*, Harcourt Brace and World Inc. 1967, p. 81.
5. *PhP*, p. 177.
6. R. C. Kwant, *The Penomenological Philosophy of Merleaur Ponty*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg, 1963, pp. 51-52.
7. *PhP*, p. 177.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 389, pp. 182-83.
10. *Ibid.*, p.183.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 187.
14. *Ibid.*, pp. 178, n, 389.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 179, n.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 183.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 189.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 190.
20. R. Schmitt, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. XIX, March 1966, pp. 514-15.
21. Michael Kulman and Charles Taylor, The Pre-Objective World, *Review of Metaphysics*, Vol. XII, Sept. 1958, pp. 108-32.
22. *PhP*, p. 184.
23. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language* Trans. H. J. Silverman, North Western University Press, Evanston, 1973, p. XVII.