Speaking and Semiology

Approaches to Semiotics

22

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Speaking and Semiology

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's
Phenomenological Theory of
Existential Communication

with a new preface

by
Richard L. Lanigan

Second Edition

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With Gratitude To
DR. THOMAS J. PACE
Friend, Professor, and Colleague

Preface to the Second Edition

Almost twenty years ago in 1972, this volume apeared with the then radical suggestion that phenomenology and semiology had much in common as philosophical and human science approaches to the study of human comportment, especially discourse. The conjunction of influence as between phenomenology and semiotics was confirmed some seven years later with the widely acclaimed analytic synthesis of contemporary French thought that Vincent Descombes offers in his *Le Même et L'Autre* (an insightful title in the French tradition of the aphorism translated into English with embarrassing naïveté as *Modern French Philosophy*). Descombes' book sets the problematic and thematic context for the interdisciplinary discussion of "Semiotics and Phenomenology" that I took up as the editor of a special four number issue of the journal *Semiotica* (Vol. 41, 1982). More recently, the argument has been made with additional insight by a fellow American (USA) scholar and colleague, Hugh J. Silverman, in his *Inscriptions: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism* (1987).

It is within this context of a philosophy of the human sciences that my own research on semiotic phenomenology is an affirmative phenomenological hypothesis in the spirit of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's own philosophical writing. The hypothesis is that philosophy is phenomenology, and, that phenomenology is a rigorous human science in the mode of *Communicology: the study of human discourse*. Communicology joins with other disciplinary modes and perspectives on the study of the human being, such as Archaeology where one recalls the theme of participation in the work of Lucien Lévy-Bruhl and Franz Boas, the theme of symbolic comportment in Psychology and Sociology where the work of William James and George Herbert Mead comes to mind, and in Linguistics and Communication Science where Roman Jakobson still guides our thought on the theme of the flesh, both *in proprium* and

in communis. And indeed, the work of Merleau-Ponty continues to stand as a paradigm case of this hypothesis on the conjunction of philosophy and the human sciences in the form of phenomenology and semiology.

As I have said elsewhere, let us also remember that the introduction of phenomenology into the English speaking world began with the scholarly interest of communicologists, the persons whose semiotic concern is speech and meaning in the lived-world. It was, after all, C. K. Ogden and I. A. Richards who in 1923 first announced phenomenology in their classic work *The Meaning of Meaning: A Study of the Influence of Language upon Thought and the Science of Symbolism*. This volume is its famous "Appendix D: Some Moderns" lists as the first modern, the first person of the contemporary scene, one Edmund Husserl. Ogden and Richards go on to report a very brief précis of Husserl's *Logische Untersuchungen* and *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*. This appendix entry is abstracted from the syllabus for the course of lectures on the "Phenomenological Method and Phenomenological Philosophy" that Husserl gave on June 6th, 8th, 9th, and 12th, 1922 at University College, London. The lecture announcement is reproduced in Spiegelberg's *The Phenomenological Movement* at page 135 and the lectures themselves appear in English translation for the first time in the inaugural issue (Vol. 1, No. 1, January 1970) of *JBSP: The Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*. Ogden and Richards quote Husserl's own programmatic words: a series of lectures to explicate "a transcendental sociological phenomenology having reference to a manifest multiplicity of conscious subjects communicating with one another".

And we should recall, as does Herbert Spiegelberg in his monumental *The Phenomenological Movement: A Historical Introduction*, that Wilbur Marshall Urban in his 1929 *The Intelligible World: Metaphysics and Value* was the first person to introduce the American (USA) discussion of Alexius Meinong's *Gegenstandtheorie* in comparison to Husserl's logic. But as Spiegelberg fails to note, it is Urban's *Language and Reality: The Philosophy of Language and the Principles of Symbolism* published in 1939 that provides American readers with the first systematic discussion of the *Logical Investigations* and their bearing on the emerging human science of symbolism (communication). Chapter IV on "The Phenomenology of Linguistic Meaning: The Primary Functions of Language" is especially important. Thus, the favorable presentation of Husserl's phenomenology of communication comes some four years

before the more frequently remembered Harvard University Press publication of *The Foundation of Phenomenology* by Marvin Farber in 1943.

While Husserl was the focus of early work on the phenomenology of communication, it is Maurice Merleau-Ponty who figures in the contemporary American discussion. We may recall that Georges Gusdorf's *La Parole* was one of the early works chosen for translation into English in the Northwestern University Press series "Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy". It is a work that highlights the many threads of the phenomenology of communication that have their grounding in Merleau-Ponty, Husserl, and Roman Jakobson (the first communicologist to study with Husserl as Elmar Holenstein notes in his several publications). Merleau-Ponty again receives focused attention in the two Duquesne University Press volumes by Remy C. Kwant, *Phenomenology of Language* in 1965 and *Phenomenology of Expression* in 1969.

During past years, I have had occasion to join the ongoing reflection on human discourse initiated by Merleau-Ponty. This is to say, I wrote several papers that are both a context and an interconnection for the book-length discussions that appeared as (1) *Speaking and Semiology: Maurice Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Theory of Existential Communication* (Mouton 1972) where I compare the emergence of semiology in phenomenology and phenomenalism, (2) as *Speech Act Phenomenology* (Nijhoff 1977) where I compare and critique the Austin and Searle model of the analytic philosophy of language with a phenomenology of communication, and (3) as *Semiotic Phenomenology of Rhetoric: Eidetic Practice in Henry Grattan's Discourse on Tolerance* (Center for Advanced Research in Phenomenology and University Press of America 1984) where I suggest the emergence of semiotic phenomenology in the work of Merleau-Ponty and Michel Foucault. The best of these occasional papers written over the years are collected in the volume *Phenomenology of Communication: Merleau-Ponty's Thematics in Communicology and Semiology* (Duquesne UP 1988). In addition, I have just completed a volume which takes up Merleau-Ponty's problematics of discourse as outlined in *Speaking and Semiology* and explicates the parallel thematics of discourse as they emerge one generation later in the work of Michel Foucault, one-time student of Merleau-Ponty. This new volume is *The Human Science of Communicology: A Phenomenology of Discourse in Foucault and Merleau-Ponty* (Duquesne UP, 1991). It is a work which purports to locate the flesh of discourse as the mediation of desire and power (Foucault), that is, freedom and terror (Merleau-

Ponty). Or, if I may borrow the philosophical aphorism of *Le Même et L'Autre*, the *Self* envelopes the *Other* as both the *Same* and *Different*. Speaking is a phenomenology of existence which envelopes semiology as human Being.

In *Speaking and Semiology*, as in all of my publications, I advance the theory and methodology of a semiotic phenomenology. In *philosophy as theory*, I suggest that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology explicated as a phenomenological description [D], reduction [R], and interpretation [I] is a reflective (symbolic change), reversible (temporal change), and reflexive (spatial change) ontology in which Description entails D-R-I, Reduction entails D-R-I, and Interpretation entails D-R-I. As a methodology in the human sciences, this phenomenology has three analytic procedures: (1) Description: Thematizing the Interpretation of the Reduction of the Description of the Sign. (2) Reduction: Abstracting the Interpretation of the Reduction of the Description of the Signifier. (3) Interpretation: Explicating the Interpretation of the Reduction of the Description of the Signified.

Let me note that the text has not been revised since the fundamental points being argued are based in the traditional French method of *réduction de texte* and *explication de texte*. Accordingly, the book continues to represent a fundamental presentation of Merleau-Ponty's thought about the conjunction of phenomenology and semiology as a critique of phenomenalism in the tradition of Anglo-American analytic philosophy. The discovered argument in favor of a semiotic phenomenology as presented in *Speaking and Semiology* can be elaborated, as I have done in subsequent books on Merleau-Ponty, but not reinvented.

By way of closing this short preface, I should like to acknowledge all my colleagues in the Merleau-Ponty Circle for the engaging and fruitful diaglogue that continues to contribute to my ever increasing understanding and appreciation of Merleau-Ponty's thought. It also seems to be an appropriate time to note the influence of the many doctoral students whose dialogue in my Merleau-Ponty seminar has been occasioned by an annual reading of the *Phenomenology of Perception* for the past seventeen years! Last, I note with pleasure that one of those dialogues led to my marriage to Guo Rui-hong from the People's Republic of China.

Southern Illinois University, 1991

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KEY TO FOOTNOTE ABBREVIATIONS

M. M.-P.	=	Maurice Merleau-Ponty
Structure	=	*The Structure of Behavior*
		(La structure du comportement)
Phenomenology	=	*Phenomenology of Perception*
		(Phénoménologie de la perception)
Sense	=	*Sense and Non-Sense*
		(Sens et non-sens)
Praise	=	*In Praise of Philosophy*
		(Éloge de la philosophie)
Signs	=	*Signs*
		(Signes)
Visible	=	*The Visible and the Invisible*
		(Le visible et l'invisible)
Themes	=	*Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France : 1952-1960*
		(Résumés de cours. Collège de France. 1952-1960)
Humanism	=	*Humanism and Terror : An Essay on the Communist Problem*
		(Humanisme et terreur. Essai sur le problème communiste)
Primacy	=	*The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*

INTRODUCTION

I am speaking. This principium of knowledge, indeed of existence, is the foundation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of existential communication. What is to be learned from an inquiry into the phenomenon of speaking is not an inclusive answer to the innumerable questions posed by man's being, his history, or his fellow men. Rather, the act of speaking is an on-going process of questioning in which a person develops a style of living with himself, his environment, and his neighbor.

Questions can indeed be total; but answers, in their positive significance, cannot. Like a passion that one day just ceases, destroyed by its own duration, a question burns out and is replaced by an unquestioned state of affairs.[1]

The reality of *man speaking* is an expanding problem that is a partial concern of sociology, psychology, philosophy, anthropology, and communication theory. Yet, it is a reality that is fundamentally bound by the act of "speaking" in all of its dimensions, whether personal or interpersonal. This is to say, "disclosing fundamental meaning-structures through all its many fissures, our age calls for a philosophical interpretation".[2] This judgment reflects Merleau-Ponty's basic contention that our age has become an "unquestioned state of affairs" or an age of science in which technology has reified man in an attempt to solve his problems in a world of other objects. The apparent security that science offers is not a final answer, although it is treated as such in many instances of human interaction. Life in a world so defined by science is at best an illusion of the moment for which questioning is a necessary step to progress beyond the illusion. The questioning necessarily begins outside science in philosophy.

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[1] M. M-P., *Signs* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 3-4.
[2] M. M-P., *Signs*, p. 13.

Philosophy is not science, because science believes it can soar over its objects and holds the correlation of knowledge with being as established, whereas philosophy is the set of questions wherein he who questions is himself implicated by the question.[3]

Such a point of view is not anti-science in a fanatical sense, but merely the assertion of philosophy's superiority in allowing man to question in terms of his life-world for those answers that will allow him to exist in the world of fact. In short, the basic questions of value that are vital to man's existence must be precedent to the questions of fact. Science must be considered as another means of questioning reality, not as its sole answer.[4]

The writings of Merleau-Ponty suggest that his use of phenomenology as a method allowed him to incorporate the facts of science in the realm of man's life-world or *Lebenswelt*. By his careful scrutiny of perception and the conditions for perception, he conceived a theory of signs or semiology that is applicable to man's existential presence, most notably in man's speaking. In point of fact the relation between Merleau-Ponty's concepts of semiology and speaking suggest an original definition of man's being-in-the-world. A phenomenological analysis of man speaking is thus an inquiry into man's existence in the world and the conditions of the world's presence for man. Merleau-Ponty's systematic interest in the objective and subjective nature of man speaking constitutes a unique theory of communication that is methodologically a *phenomenology* and ontologically an *existentialism*.[5]

The concern of this study is to extricate Merleau-Ponty's original conclusions from his writings with respect to semiology and speaking. The method of extrication appears most practical given the nature of Merleau-Ponty's style which is to formulate conclusions and results as "ready-made" with the question of verification left to the auditor.[6] A systematic exploration of Merleau-Ponty's work will require a general

[3] M. M-P., *Visible* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968), p. 27.
[4] See Walter Fales, "Phenomenology of Questions", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* IV (September, 1943), pp. 60-75.
[5] An accurate explication of M. M-P's phenomenology and his existentialism occurs respectively in James Daly, "Merleau-Ponty's Concept of Phenomenology", *Philosophical Studies* XVI (1967), pp. 137-164, and Raymond Bayer, "Merleau-Ponty's Existentialism", *University of Buffalo Studies* (Monographs) XIX, no. 3 (1951), pp. 95-104. Cf., M. M-P., "La Philosophie de l'existence", *Dialogue* V, no. 3 (December, 1966), pp. 307-322.
[6] The efficacy of this procedure has been demonstrated by Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement*, 2nd ed. (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1965), II, 559.

consideration of the scope and meaning of existential communication followed by a detailed examination of semiology and speaking. The union between the semiology and speaking will become apparent in the explication of the "lived-body experience" which in turn suggests the direction of Merleau-Ponty's ontological speculations when he died.

The primary source material for the present inquiry is drawn from the various copyrighted translations of Merleau-Ponty's treatises and articles. Because these translations are readily available, often from more than one translator, for comparison with the original French and represent a faithful rendering of Merleau-Ponty's thought, they have been used in deference to the French editions. Where doubt and the possibility of ambiguity occur, the English is parenthetically followed by the French usage. The one exception to these guidelines will be discussed momentarily.

As an author, teacher, and sometime editor-in-chief and political director of *Les Temps Modernes,* Merleau-Ponty was prolific in his composition of books and articles. Hence, it may be helpful to briefly sketch the development of his writing from the first published book to the volume he was working on when he died. A detailed listing of his work appears in the bibliography of this study.

His first published book, *La Structure de comportement* in 1942,[7] is a detailed analysis of the traditional approaches to psychology with a methodical examination and critique of Behaviorism, Gestalt Psychology, Realism, Naturalism, and Idealism. Three years later, in 1945, his second work, *Phénoménologie de la perception,*[8] was published. This is a landmark volume in the history of phenomenology as it was the first French work to appear with "phenomenology" in the title, indicating a specific philosophic use of the method. The volume is respectively devoted to sections on "traditional prejudices and the return to phenomena; the body; the world as perceived; Being-for-itself, and Being-in-the-world". This book is considered to be Merleau-Ponty's major treatise and contribution to philosophy. It is necessary to note at this point that the Colin Smith translation is used in the present study, but where necessary, obvious errors have been corrected.

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[7] *The Structure of Behavior,* trans. Alden L. Fisher, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963); New French Ed. preceded by "A Philosophy of Ambiguity" by Alphonse de Waehlens, (Paris: 1949).
[8] *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1962).

In most cases only a word or short phrase is in question, hence the bulk of the Smith translation is still utilized *as corrected.*[9]

No major treatise was to follow for some time, although Merleau-Ponty collected a number of his essays and journal articles which progressively resulted in the publication of *Humanisme et terreur,*[10] *Les Adventures de la dialectique,*[11] and *L'Œil et l'esprit.*[12] Selections from all three works have appeared in translation under the title *The Primacy of Perception.*[13] Next came *Éloge de la philosophie*[14] which is a short volume containing Merleau-Ponty's inaugural address given on January 15, 1953, when he entered the Collège de France. Minor themes were expressed in short essays of introduction in *Les Philosophes célèbres,* which he edited in 1956.[15] Continuing his thematic writing style, he published two more collections of essays drawn from various journal pieces which appeared under the respective titles, *Signes* (in 1960)[16] and *Sens et non-sens* (in 1961).[17]

Finally, the volume *Le Visible et l'invisible* was published posthumously in 1964.[18] It was to be Merleau-Ponty's second, major work and final statement of his philosophy as it had progressed from the statement in *Phenomenology of Perception.* When he died he had completed approximately one hundred sixty-two pages of text devoted to Part I — "the visible". He also left about one hundred twenty pages of working notes that were to be used in writing the remaining two parts of the book — "nature" and "logos". In point of fact, this last section on *logos* was to have been the statement of Merleau-Ponty's theory of communication in its ontological status. The posthumous publication of a fragment[19] and working notes entitled

[9] "For purposes of neither teaching nor research can this translation [Smith's] alone be relied upon". Aron Gurwitsch, "Review: *Phenomenology of Perception*", *Philosophical Review* LXXIII (July, 1964), pp. 417-422, quotation, p. 422.
[10] Trans. John O'Neill, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
[11] Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1955.
[12] Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1964.
[13] James M. Edie (ed.) (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
[14] *In Praise of Philosophy,* trans. John Wild and James Edie (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1963).
[15] Paris: L. Mazenod, 1956.
[16] Trans. Richard C. McCleary (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
[17] Trans. H.L. and P.A. Dreyfus (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
[18] Claude Lefort (ed.), trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1964).
[19] "Pages d'Introduction à la Prose du Monde", Introductory Note by Claude Lefort, *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* LXXII, no. 2 (April-June, 1967), pp. 139-153.

La Prose du Monde[20] indicate that Merleau-Ponty had begun work on the problem of communication in the 1950's but apparently abandoned the theme of these notes until his projected writing in *The Visible and the Invisible* supplied the new ontological theme for his philosophy of communication.

Another posthumous work, *Résumés de cours. Collège de France. 1952-1960,*[21] contains Merleau-Ponty's synopsis of lectures which he delivered at the college. This collection of "themes" as they originally appeared in the annual resumes is a concise summary of his philosophic development during his tenure at the college.

Although his topical writings range over psychology, socio-anthropology, politics, film, and philosophy, Merleau-Ponty hypostatized communication (speaking) as the foundation of each area of knowledge insofar as speaking is the vehicle of creation and preservation of knowledge in each. This central thesis can be seen in a careful reading of almost any of his essays and is unquestionably present in his books.

While the primary task of this study is to extricate Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological theory of existential communication, reference to other theorists is made where they explain Merleau-Ponty by means of agreement or disagreement.

By extricating Merleau-Ponty's theory of communication one finds in his writings a specific theory of semiology which forms the base of a theory of perception and a theory of expression. The dialectical operation of perception and expression form an explanation for thought and action at the personal, interpersonal, and social levels of human involvement. Merleau-Ponty's communication theory is a pioneering effort to combine the best methodology of psychology and philosophy, in his view, to explain man's unique character as *homo loquens.* In Merleau-Ponty's work one can see the genesis of methodology that is compromising of both *phenomenology* and *structuralism* which are the major approaches to the study of *homo loquens.*[22] Thus, it is not of minor importance to note that Merleau-Ponty's major works have the titles : *Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception.*

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[20]   Ed. Claude Lefort, Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969. Trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).
[21]   *Themes from the Lectures at the Collège de France, 1952-1960,* trans. John O'Neill (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970).
[22]   M. M-P., *Themes,* pp. 124-131, esp. p. 126 on "a philosophy of structure".

I

EXISTENTIAL COMMUNICATION AS PHENOMENOLOGY

1. EXISTENTIAL COMMUNICATION

Communication as a personal experience is, if I may borrow a phrase from R.D. Laing, "that estranged integration we call sanity".[1] The process of communication is normally viewed as a situation in which one person passes on information to a second person with varying degrees of reaction from the latter. Theorists often seize the analogue of the physical sciences to explain this process and human communication becomes just another example of how "information" or "data" is transmitted from one locale to another. The more efficient this process is, the more communication is "effective". The major shortcoming of this approach to communication is that it relegates *meaning* to the physical input or output of the human organism. This is to say, what I mean is only existent in the physical system of transmission. The words I speak or the sentence that I write is my meaning — there is little, and more often no, concern for the *person* who has uttered his ideas. Following the present line of analysis, personal existence can be measured and quantified as a physical object. The presumption here is that man's aesthetic and ethical actions are mere labels or judgments to be placed upon his adherence to or deviation from an agreed upon norm of conduct. In point of fact, what is normal and abnormal is an operational approach to what a person communicates and the sum of a man's utterances come to constitute his history wherein one makes the lightning judgment: "I understand (or don't understand) what he *means*".

In an attempt to bridge the apparent antinomy posed by the fact that man has what is generally called his subjective self and his objective self, or "mind" and "body" if you prefer, R.B. MacLeod has suggested an approach wherein the behavioristic man might be under-

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[1] R.D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1967), p. 44.