“Speaking Speech” and Personal Identity

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Abstract

We often link personal identity to one’s speech (la parole), referring to both the content and the nonverbal dimension. One of my first ways of access to the other is grasping the “texture” of his or her (re)enactment of language (where his or her body plays a central part). But how are we to think about language in order to retain its “texture” and not concentrate only on the abstract meaning of a word, a phrase or someone’s speech? A phenomenology of language opens such a path by returning to the incarnate speech of the subject. This paper follows Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of speech as expression and attempts to research the relation between what he calls “speaking speech” (la parole parlante) and one’s profound identity.

Keywords: language, speech, expression, Merleau-Ponty, Borges, personal identity, phenomenology.

My proposal in the present paper is to think the rise and outlining of personal identity from the phenomenon of speech (parole). Methodologically, as it is already manifest, I am assuming the phenomenological perspective on language. I shall begin by making a few historical and terminological remarks on what such a perspective presupposes.

Firstly, taking a phenomenological “stance” regarding language does not lead (anymore) to considering language from a “general” point of view, by focusing on universal and atemporal signifying structures, but,

1 Some translations in the following text (from French and Romanian) belong to the author.
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on the contrary, such a stance replaces the focus on what I’ve called *speech* (*parole* following the saussurean terminology). In other words, a phenomenology of language has to come back “to spoken language, to my contact with the language I speak” (Merleau-Ponty 1953, 86). This is the definition that Henrik Pos proposes during the first international congress dedicated to phenomenology, that took place in 1951 in Bruxelles and this is also the definition that Merleau-Ponty maintains. Perhaps it is worth to mention in passing that we can find a sign of such (re)orientation towards language as it is spoken in Husserl’s late writings. Here language seizes to be an object (of the universal and atemporal constituting consciousness) and the empirical dialects are “scrambled” or unclear realizations of an essential structure (traceable through the eidetic process). Instead, language becomes “an original manner to aim certain objects”, “a body of thought”, “an operation through which otherwise private thoughts gain an intersubjective value and, in the end, an ideal existence”; in the sense that they enter the “cultural circuit”, they become “deposits” as Merleau-Ponty would say (84-5).

Therefore, “philosophical thinking that reflects on language would be from now the beneficiary of language, enveloped and situated in it.”(85). In other words, in the phenomenological key, philosophical thought has to moderate the theoretical and therefore exterior attitude towards language, has to stop following the dream according to which an “universal language” is the one where it would find its accomplishment, as if the latter would be superior to the “natural” ones, filled with history and equivocal. Even taking this into consideration, I don’t think we can find here a plead for the abandonment of any philosophy of language that would follow the path of concept and formalization, but one against an hierarchy between these formal studies and “natural” speech (a movement that analytical philosophy has made in the past century, beginning with the writings of the so-called Wittgenstein “two”).

I. Speech and the Relation between Thought and Language

*Returning to spoken language* firstly means to reconsider the relation between thought and language: more precisely, it implies leaving the
(otherwise fictional) position of “pure” thinking, unsituated or “inner”, “outside the world and outside of words” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 188) as Merleau-Ponty describes it, a thinking that would mysteriously be located “behind” our words. Philosophy has been holding such a claim as it has generally been concentrated on the concept, not the word itself. This focus is not wrong in itself or hard to legitimate, it is only unilateral and therefore incomplete. What it lacks is the actual experience of speech, as it is lived by the speaking subject (le sujet parlant). A phenomenology of language returns precisely to this experience.

Making a step further, it would be necessary to understand more clearly why it is that a return to spoken language leads to a reconsideration of the thought-language relation and how would such reconsideration look like - what other relation does thought have to language if it is no longer to be located “behind” it?

What the first phenomenological efforts of Merleau-Ponty brought to light following this return is the expressive nature of speech. Briefly, spoken language is expression. Not of “thoughts” or “ideal meanings” that float outside speech and precede it. Thinking itself is expressive. To picture this we might think of a writer that is about to begin a book – he does not know in advance what he will be writing all the way to the end of his work. Borges, for example, confesses that before writing a story all that he sees (! not thinks) are a beginning and an end, what will tie them will only afterwards reveal itself. Or we could think about our own experience, where we often find ourselves wanting to say something without knowing exactly what that is – after making an effort towards expressing ourselves we usually feel at ease and gain a clearer perspective on things. We clarify our minds as we speak and take distance from ourselves. Usually, we think while speaking and speak while thinking. As it is, „speech is not the “sign” of thought, if by this we understand a phenomenon that announces another as smoke announces fire. Speech and thought would only admit of this external relation if they were both thematically given; in fact, they are enveloped in each other; sense is caught in speech, and speech is the external existence of sense. We can no more admit, as is ordinarily done, that speech is a simple means of solidifying thought, or again, that it is the envelope or the clothing of thought.” (187).
The arguments that Merleau-Ponty offers regarding the envelopment between speaking and thinking come from both the attentive observations made on the “normal” experience of expressing oneself and from taking into consideration certain speech pathologies. Following this last path it becomes manifest, for example, that there are cases in which patients “can read a text “expressively”, despite not understanding it” – a scenario that for the author points out that “speech or words carry a primary layer of signification that adheres to them and that gives the thought as a style, as an affective value, or as an existential mimicry, rather than as a conceptual statement.”(188). In other words, the meaning of a word or of a phrase irradiates towards us from its sonority as such and not only from knowing the linguistic conventions that a dictionary certifies it.

This “first layer of signification” is adherent to words in the sense that it depends on their corporality. Once we modify this corporality, the meaning of our uttered words and propositions will also change. For example, if we say “luna” instead of “moon” we can already hear a difference concerning what we might call the “emotional” or the “full” meaning of the word – following two of Merleau-Ponty’s expressions. Also, the same idea expressed by different choices of syntax, by different modulations and hesitations in voice bears full meanings that are also different. A simple pause between “I” and “love you” is enough to give a vulnerable or insecure colour to a confession.

One of the consequences of the expressive nature and implicit corporality of our spoken language is that neither isolated words, nor the utterances of a speaking subject can be formalized beyond any shortage. As a result, (i) poetry is not translatable, rigorously speaking (nor is prose, or journals, or any word from a certain language). Also, it is not an accident that on many occasions, in our experience in communicating with others, (ii) we often consider that it is as important to “read between the lines” as it is to follow what the other is saying explicitly – sometimes it is precisely “between” that we can find the true meaning of his words (a hidden proposal, a warning, an implicit interest). In the following section I will insist on these two ideas.
II. The Moon, Foreign Languages and the “Weight” of the Signifier

Borges believed that “each word is a poetical creation” (Borges 2010, 275) – “Let us think of something yellow, bright, changing, sometimes it’s on the sky, being circular, other times it’s shaped like a bow, sometimes it increases and decreases. Somebody – but we will never know his name -, our ancestor, our common ancestor, gave it the name “moon”, different in different languages and sometimes happily picked, other times not quite. I would say that the Greek word Selene is too complex for the moon, that the English term moon has something mild, something that binds the voice to adopt a slowness that fits the moon, resembles her, because it is almost round and begins with a letter close to the one it ends with. The Spanish word luna, this beautiful word that we inherited from Latin, this beautiful word common with Italian, consists in two syllables, in two parts, which is, maybe, too much. We have lua in Portuguese, that seems less inspired; and lune in French that contains an idea of mystery.” (274).

The differences in meaning seized so accurately here by Borges would be irrelevant for an intellectualist conception on language, for which the latter is only envelopment for thought – the concept of moon is the same in all languages mentioned above, but the moon gazed at as „selēnē“ and the moon gazed at as “luna” are not the same... We could say in passing that in his dialogue Cratylos, Plato investigates indirectly which of all these onoma is “right” for the thing moon, which one imitates it better; but I will not develop here on the dialogue’s evolution regarding the idea of imitating the thing “through voice (phonē)” or “through letters and syllables”. It is significative to see only that for Plato also the word itself, similar or unsimilar to the thing, adequate or conventionally used, offers an indication, an elucidation (delōo, endeiknumi) of the thing itself and therefore transmits something, bears a meaning of its own.

The experience we have when approaching a foreign language speaks of the same meaningful corporality of the signifier, the word composed out of vowels and consonants: “when we study a language, when we are forced to see words up close, we feel them as being beautiful or not. While studying a language you see the words through a magnifying glass, you believe that one word is ugly, another beautiful, and another
ungraceful. This does not happen with our mother tongue, where words don’t seem to us isolated from discourse.” (276). This simple, but very philosophical remark, made by Borges, brings us suddenly in front of the following question: how is it possible that when we approach an altogether foreign language we however “feel” a signification coming from it? And what does “foreign” mean here? We can say that, for us, the language in question is still lacking its connections with the references outside it. We hear words but do not know what they mean, towards what do they “point” to. We are like prisoners inside that “foreign” language. As such, we are completely alert to something that we will afterwards forget: the sonority, the matter itself of the word. Heidegger saw beautifully in Being and time that we never hear “pure” sounds that we afterwards invest with a certain signification, but what we directly hear is “the wind”, “the car” etc. A similar thing occurs in our contact with a foreign language – the words say something to us, they are not “pure” and meaningless and by virtue of this certain something we judge them aesthetically. We cannot yet bring them together in a discourse, in the structure of “something as something”, as we do not know what they mean, but we already have at hand “a first layer of signification” – the one adherent to the signifier.

Returning to the main course of this paper, we were saying that in speech (both regarding isolated words and somebody’s utterances) the signifier is not irrelevant to the signified. This particularity brings speech close to music – here too the sounds are not separable from the meaning, rather they are the signification:

> During the performance, the sounds are not merely the “signs” of the sonata; rather, the sonata is there through them and it descends into them. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 188)

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3 “On the basis of this existentially primary potentiality for hearing, something like hearkening becomes possible. Hearkening is itself phenomenally more primordial than what the psychologist ‘initially’ defines as hearing, the sensing of tones and the perception of sounds. Hearkening, too, has the mode of being of a hearing that understands. ‘Initially’ we never hear noises and complexes of sounds, but the creaking wagon, the motorcycle. We hear the column on the march, the north wind, the woodpecker tapping, the crackling fire.” (Heidegger 2010, 158).
Regarding the speech we can observe that the signifier (the word itself with its vowels and consonants and someone’s expression, with all the nonverbal aspects of it) has a meaning contribution, brings something to the conceptual or ideal signification of the uttered words. When we approach a philosophical or literary text, Merleau-Ponty remarks, before understanding “the ideas” sustained in it, we firstly understand or perceive a certain style of thinking – Spinozist, criticist, phenomenological etc. What we “perceive” here is precisely the signification immanent in speech. By having such signification, any spoken utterance is like a gesture – both of them contain their meaning, they do not re-present it:

Speech is a genuine gesture and, just like all gestures, speech too contains its own sense. This is what makes communication possible. In order for me to understand the other person’s words, I must “already know” his vocabulary and his syntax. But that does not mean that the words act by arousing “representations” in me, which could be associated with them and which, when taken together, could eventually reproduce in me the speaker’s original “representation.” I do not primarily communicate with “representations” or with a thought, but rather with a speaking subject, with a certain style of being, and with the “world” that he aims at. Just as the meaningful intention that initiated the other person’s speech is not an explicit thought, but rather a certain lack that seeks to be fulfilled, so too is my taking up of this intention not an operation of my thought, but rather a synchronic modulation of my own existence, a transformation of my being. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 189)

The suggestion of seeing spoken language as a gesture is one of Merleau-Ponty’s main thesis and maybe amongst the most provocative

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4 “Here, then, the sense of words must ultimately be induced by the words themselves, or more precisely their conceptual signification must be formed by drawing from a gestural signification, which itself is immanent in speech. And just as, when in a foreign country, I begin to understand the sense of words by their place in a context of action and by participating in everyday life, so too a philosophical text that remains poorly understood nevertheless reveals to me at least a certain ‘style’ – whether Spinozistic, critical, or phenomenological – which is the first sketch of its sense. I begin to understand a philosophy by slipping into this thought’s particular manner of existing, by reproducing the tone or the accent of the philosopher in question.” (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 184-185).
for our common understanding. His idea implies understanding the phenomenon of communication in a different manner, without an appeal to semiotics or pure mental (re)construction of the meaning of the words coming from the other. We do not trade representations while speaking to each other. Rather, we “synchronize” our existences; we understand each other from inside. And in order to do so we had already fully consented to the “spectacle” of the other:

The sense of the gestures is not given but rather understood, which is to say taken up by an act of the spectator (…) I engage myself with my body among things, they coexist with me insofar as I am an embodied subject, and this life among things has nothing in common with the construction of scientific objects. Similarly, I do not understand the other person’s gestures through an act of intellectual interpretation; the communication between consciousnesses is not grounded upon the shared sense of their experiences, rather it grounds them in turn. The movement by which I lend myself to the spectacle must be recognized as irreducible. I join with it in a sort of blind recognition that precedes the definition or intellectual elaboration of the sense. Generation after generation “understand” and accomplish the sexual gestures, such as the caress, prior to the philosopher defining their intellectual signification (…) I understand the other person through my body, just as I perceive “things” through my body. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 190-92)

In the first instance the act of understanding does not function through concordant “representations” or through interpretation, but through a sort of a repetition in myself of the signification immanent in the other’s speech; in other words, through a “synchronic modulation of my own existence, a transformation of my being”. When I understand a text, for example, both in me as reader and in the writer a new “sense organ” will have been created, a new “field” will have opened in us (188). All these “metaphors” simply point out to the fact that understanding happens from the inside and not from the exterior, through “representations”. The meaning of my spoken words, of my self-expression is not the sum of all the expressive values of the elements that composed it, but rather all these “signs” send also towards an always “suspended” signification, which is never properly contained in words but in the “texture” of our linguistic gesture, in the modulations of my voice, in the choice of words and their order etc. Any expression therefore appears to me as a trace (trace), I can never grab the “thinking that inhabits speaking” (even
though this formulation is imprecise given the simultaneity of the two “processes”), at least not without any residuum.

Resuming, up to this point we saw that (i) speech as expression does not have its meaning outside, it is not preceded by thought and that (ii) there exists an immanent signification in the act of speaking – a certain “weight” of the signifier (whether we are referring to the sonority of an isolated word, or to the entire corporality that accompanies the expressions of a speaking subject). But we have not “descended” all the way so to speak; our observations are still incomplete – we have not yet arrived in the vicinity of the intentionality “behind” speech, of that first “meaningful intention”. In other words, we have not yet reached the very being of speaking. Further steps are therefore still required.

III. The Intentionality of Speech. “Speaking Speech” and “Spoken Speech”

For Merleau-Ponty spoken language is therefore expression. But such an understanding contradicts both the naturalist or physiologist and the intellectualist conceptions on the nature of language itself (both reduce the latter to something else – physiological processes or thinking). As mentioned above, one of the arguments that Merleau-Ponty presents (in the Phenomenology of perception) for these conceptions’ failure to catch the specificity of language comes from different studies made on speech pathologies – the Schneider case, for example. This is the case of a patient for whom nothing concerning the physiology corresponding to speaking or the intellect is affected but whose language is however altered – “We will have the opportunity to see this essential power of speech in cases in which neither thought nor motricity are perceptibly affected, and yet in which the “life” of language is altered.” (201). More precisely, Schneider speaks only when questioned and if he had previously prepared his answer. Phrases which are only possible and false statements seem meaningless to him: he “never feels the need to speak, his experience never tends toward speech, it never raises a question, and it never ceases to have this sort of evidence and
self-sufficiency of the real that stifles all interrogation, all reference to the possible, all wonder, and all improvisation.” (202). (We could say he is a sort of a Borgesian Funes, locked in the present and the concrete).

The phenomenological or philosophical interpretation that Merleau-Ponty brings out from taking into consideration this pathological case in which a person doesn’t prove an autonomous intention to speak takes us closer to the essence of spoken language:

By contrast, we catch sight of the essence of normal language: the intention to speak can only be found in an open experience: it appears, as boiling appears in a liquid, when, in the thickness of being, empty zones are constituted and move outward. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 202)

In other words, it looks like what Schneider misses is the “open experience” of the world that would have triggered the intention to speak out and that would have characterized him as “ek-sistence”.

But let us stop for a moment on the cited passage. Merleau-Ponty uses here a striking image (analogy?) – that of the boiling liquid. How can we interpret it in order to better seize the phenomenon of speech? I believe that, according to this image, the intentionality behind language is disclosed as being fired by the occurrence (spontaneous as all occurrence or appearance) of a certain discontinuity – marked by those “empty zones” (zones de vide) constituted “in the thickness” or density of natural being (we could note in passing that this thickness seems to come precisely from the “open experience” of the world). Therefore, the phenomenon of speech hides a beautiful double paradox: on one side, it rises out of a form of density and depth but as void and, on the other hand, although it springs from void and depth it takes an ec-cressive manifestation and is oriented towards the exterior, therefore the surface.

But what kind of a speaking is the one coming from void and oriented towards the exterior? Ordinary we move inside a world where language and communication go without… saying. We are not surprised

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The French term “l’épaisseur” can be translated by “thickness”, “density”, “depth” or “opacity” – as in L’épaisseur du brouillard, “the density of the mist”.
by either of them: neither by the occurrence that there is something like speaking, nor by the fact that we understand each other by communicating:

We live in a world where speech is already instituted. We possess in ourselves already formed significations for all of these banal words [paroles]. They only give rise in us to second-order thoughts, which are in turn translated into other words that require no genuine effort of expression from us, and that will demand no effort of comprehension from our listeners. Thus, language and the comprehension of language seem self-evident. (…) It is, however, clear that constituted speech, such as it plays out in everyday life, assumes that the decisive step of expression has been accomplished. Our view of man will remain superficial so long as we do not return to this origin, so long as we do not rediscover the primordial silence beneath the noise of words, and so long as we do not describe the gesture that breaks this silence. Speech is a gesture, and its signification is a world. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 189-190)

I believe we can easily understand these dense observations of Merleau-Ponty: we move within a world of “well known” and dull meanings; we explain words using other words; we take for granted that which made these sense acquisitions possible, including the history of our own language but especially its perpetual origin. This origin is an act of expression, i.e. a gesture. The analysis of this act has already revealed a certain weaving between signified and signifier but hasn’t yet clarified what it is that triggers it in the beginning. We have not yet described the opening gesture of speaking that breaks with silence; we have not yet “descended” all the way. What rests inside this gesture is on the one hand the very origin thus essence of language and the inner look of any moment when a human being truly expresses something – the first words of a child or the pages where a writer tries to follow with the aid of pen and paper what he saw only vaguely in the first instance.

In the passage cited above we could discern two kinds of speaking: one gestural, expressive and the other constituted, instituted. Merleau-Ponty attests this same distinction using the notions of speaking speech (la parole parlante) and spoken speech (la parole parlée):

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6 To be sure, the act of expression presupposes both a moment of pasivity (a boiling, a rise) and a moment of activity (the grounding of that first originall meaningful intention within the body of the language we inherited).
In the former, the meaningful intention is in a nascent state. Here existence is polarized into a certain “sense” that cannot be defined by any natural object; existence seeks to meet up with itself beyond being, and this is why it creates speech as the empirical support of its own non-being. Speech is the excess of our existence beyond natural being. But the act of expression constitutes a linguistic and cultural world, it makes that which stretched beyond fall back into being. This results in spoken speech, which enjoys the use of available significations like that of an acquired fortune. From these acquisitions, other authentic acts of expression – those of the writer, the artist, and the philosopher – become possible. This ever-recreated opening in the fullness of being is what conditions the first speech of the child and the speech of the writer, the construction of the word and the construction of concepts. Such is the function revealed through language, which reiterates itself, depends upon itself, or that like a wave gathers itself together and steadies itself in order to once again throw itself beyond itself. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 202-03)

In this passage cited ad extenso we again find the resemblance between the act of speech and the boiling of a liquid: the meaningful initial intention is like an “empty zone” (zone de vide), one of discontinuity, that tries to reach out in the open, “beyond being”, beyond the natural object itself and beyond what we naturally have at hand (Merleau-Ponty insists in the previous passage upon the relation between being and “natural”).

The initial meaningful intention, missing words into which to deploy itself, creates them out of an overfull of sense or meaning. The latter cannot be caught in some natural object, cannot be expressed neither by pointing with the finger or imitating, nor by speaking the words of others. It is more than them. Speaking is an excess of our existence upon the natural being (and afterwards upon the already available significations). A double ex-cess to be more precise: firstly that of the meaningful intention that aims at a sense that exceeds its object, and secondly one belonging to the act of expression as such. Merleau-Ponty also uses another word for this excess – “miracle”. The idea of transcendence is evidently already on the tip of our tongue. What else could that mysterious first meaningful intention of the first man ever to speak, of the child who pronounces a first word or of the writer who sits down almost ignorant at his writing table be if not an act of self-
transcendence? “[L]ike a wave gathers itself together and steadies itself in order to once again throw itself beyond itself.”

In order to understand the essence of speech it is necessary to understand, i.e. to be able to stop in the proximity of this meaningful intention, of this “empty zone” that suddenly appears in the midst of our natural being. Somehow, man speaks because he cannot remain silent any longer. But what does this mean, isn’t it a commonplace? Perhaps not. The meaningful intention “(…) is not an explicit thought, but rather a certain lack that seeks to be fulfilled” (189). Or: “The meaningful intention in me (…) isn’t in the moment, and even if it has to be productive afterwards in terms of ‘thoughts’ – but a determined void (vide déterminé) to be filled by words (à combler par de mots) –, the excess of what I want to say on what is or has been already said.” (Merleau-Ponty 1953, 95). Let us again remember those moments when we want to say something, but do not know exactly what it is. After expressing ourselves our own words end up by surprising us. When we truly express something, everything springs from a vague or “confused” intention (if we measure it in relation to thought), from a silent and unthought “area”. Speech comes from “lack” and silence.

This fact of the “empty” intention that suddenly triggers speech has three linked consequences (95-96):

1) Merleau-Ponty insists in referring to the “area” (zone) where it originates as being “void” and “lacunar”. I believe that a closer text analysis would show that these words point to the fact that this “area” cannot be given thematically as it does not have what we would call “a content”. The signification that animates my speech and that I wish to express cannot be themed or represented as such – it animates speech just as the world animates the body, implicitly7. The signification of my speech or of the other’s circulates and magnetizes our expressions but it is never wholly contained in them. It remains only a pole towards which all of my expressive efforts converge.

7 I will not develop here on the relation between corporeal intentionality and speech, as this would mean to extensively approach corporeal intentionality as such.
Which means that 2) these expressions are irreparably incomplete (93) [even if as native speakers of a mother tongue we never sense this incompleteness: “The man I love” is for an English person an expression just as complete as „l’homme que j’aime“ is for a French one. Each of them under-stands something in their expressions, they say more than what they say by their mere allegiance to the structure of a language (langue) (95)]. The fundamental characteristic of expression is precisely the “excess of the signifier upon the signified” and therefore the incompleteness of the expression (one that we otherwise comprehend perfectly, as it is not incomplete in the sense that it hardens our communication, but in the sense that the very nature of the signifier renders the excess of the signified possible).

3) But, if the signified is not themed before speech, it is because the signified is actually its result:

To express, for the speaking subject, is to become aware; he doesn’t express only for the others, he expresses in order to know himself that which he aims for. (96)

For us, the speaking subjects, the act of expression is not a secondary operation which we would not use except in order to communicate our thoughts to another, it is rather the taking into possession, the acquiring of significations that would otherwise be present to us only in a vague and mute manner. In other words, expression leads to an elucidation of our own thinking, to its discovery, to anchoring of a new signification in the depth of our being. This signification gets incarnated by the handling of already available meaning, it is the work of “I can”, and not of “I think”. All three considerations (the signification that cannot be given thematically, the ever incomplete expression and the signified result of speech and not its antecedent) can be systematized in the following expression: we always simultaneously say more and less than what we actually say (“more” because we discover ourselves and “less” because the (self)discovery is always reiterated – just like the hermeneutic
circle in which Dasein goes deeper in itself as it is understanding that has itself as its concern$^8$).

Further, once triggered, the meaningful intention at the beginning vague and void “gives itself a body”, it auto-objectifies itself (if we may use this expression) by passing through the medium of the language and culture into which I, the speaking subject situate myself and whose inheritor I am:

The meaningful intention gives itself a body and knows itself by searching for an equivalent$^9$ in the system of already available significations that represent the language I speak and the aggregate of writings and culture whose inheritor I am. (Merleau-Ponty 1953, 97)

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$^8$ “The ‘circle’ in understanding belongs to the structure of meaning, and this phenomenon is rooted in the existential constitution of Dasein, that is, in interpretive understanding. Beings which, as being-in-the-world, are concerned about their being itself have an ontological structure of the circle. However, if we note that the ‘circle’ belongs ontologically to a kind of being of objective presence (subsistence), we shall in general have to avoid characterizing something like Dasein ontologically in terms of this phenomenon.” (Heidegger 2010, 148-149).

$^9$ How precisely does this “search for an equivalent” occur since the meaningful intention is initially void (“empty”), mute? How does it know what it searches for and how does it acknowledge when it found an equivalent if it lacks any accurateness? What sort of a “search” is this? It is not the case that we have in one hand the “lack” and that I try to acquire in the other the “adequate piece” to “fill” it. I am not handling a puzzle, but rather I am handled by an inner and mute force (?) – the one to which Merleau-Ponty alludes using the analogy between the act of speech and the boiling of some liquid. Maybe the expressions “vague” and “determinate void” suggest a clue on the manner in which this re-cognition or acknowledgement happens: there exists an active meaning, even if not formulated into words. We could note in passing that the megaric paradox was similar to the one here. We can find it formulated in the dialogue Meno 80d-e: “Meno: How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know? Socrates: I know what you want to say, Meno. Do you realize what a debater’s argument you are bringing up, that a man cannot search either for what he knows or for what he does not know? He cannot search for what he knows—since he knows it, there is no need to search—nor for what he does not know, for he does not know what to look for.” (Plato 1997, 880).
Never does a writer or an artist create except by reshaping the already available in which we all act. I am another for myself when I express something clear since I discover myself through words and a syntax that precede me. But in the absence of this inheritance I would only remain the depository of a void and lacunar meaningful intention, of a lack. The rearranging of this inheritance is the mark of authentic expression (what André Malraux named „déformation cohérente“ (99), deformation that simultaneously produces a new meaning):

Being different from language, speech is this moment in which the meaningful intention still mute and while in act (tout en acte) proves to be able to incorporate itself in culture, mine and that of the other, to form me and to form him by transforming the meaning of cultural instruments. (100)

IV. Brief Conclusion

In the phenomenological perspective (mainly that of Merleau-Ponty), speech and thought are expression, corporeal and need to be understood in terms of “work in progress”. If we link personal identity to speech as the expression of an incarnated subject and to a void intention that animates it then the former will appear as implicit: (i) firstly, it will be manifest within the significations that always form a trace in somebody’s speech, like a texture of his or her linguistic gesture; (ii) it cannot be represented as such, it springs from “I can” rather than from “I think”, it is manifest in that pole that magnetizes the discourse, in that meaningful intention that is both excessive and void. Therefore, it is not a “compact”, linear identity of the sort A=A anywhere and anytime, but rather an identity that can only be fore-seen, marked by discontinuities in a kind of a perpetual back and forth between a deep, dense dimension of

10 “I understand or I believe I understand the words and the forms of French language; I have some experience of the literary and philosophical modes of expression that the given culture offers me. I express when, by using all these already speaking instruments, I make them say something they have never said before.” (99).

11 “Insofar as what I say has a meaning, I am for myself, when I speak, another ‘other’ and, insofar as I understand, I no longer know who speaks and who listens.” (107).
our natural and immersed in the world and culture being and an ascending dimension that is explosive, ex-pressive, (re)organizing.

Just as for Merleau-Ponty speech is rooted in the spontaneity of the meaningful intention and in the system of available significations I would say that personal identity is also nourished by the same two sources: one spontaneous and the other situational. Someone’s identity isn’t of course synonymous with his or her speaking, but with the sum of his or her expressivity (which on many occasions elides words – for example, in all that pertains to the manifestation of a certain corporeal style, or of moral and aesthetic choices where the mysterious bind our existing being has with nonexistent ideals becomes transparent). However, the description of the phenomenon of speech can bring to light the fact that someone’s identity must not be traced back to an area “behind” words where his or her thinking would rest clearly and lucidly coagulated, even if not yet formulated. If there is a “hard core” it is the “open experience” and not some thinking or some intellect that ordinates this experience. We are “acting” on a stage without curtain. The conception on the “human being” that Merleau-Ponty constantly confronts, following Heidegger, is of course the substantialist one (even if it is yet to investigate if such polemic doesn’t have as starting point an artifice like the “straw man”; the question of true fidelity to the criticized tradition remains opened).

Nevertheless, beyond any background polemic, the French author has truly seized facts of our experience and has indeed followed the necessary road “back to the things themselves”. Concerning speech, this road had as a task to dislocate both intellectualist and materialist preconceptions about language, in order to make way for concrete speaking. The phenomenon of such speaking, once recuperated, replaces us in the possession of certain modes of being that are proper to us (the void intentionality from which speech springs, expressivity and its fundamental incompleteness and excess, self-knowledge as dependent as it is on tradition, the corporality of words and of speech in general, our captivity in an instituted speech and, especially the mystery or “miracle” of the act of speaking itself).

Identity, therefore, appears as a self-discovery (an obvious paradoxical statement) within and throughout the language we speak; only from this
situation can we discern and express our bond with the world, our way of living it, a bond that is defining for us as incarnated subjects. Also, in closing, I would dare to add that our identity truly exists as long as we live and act within the speaking speech and not in the spoken, instituted speech. Speaking and identity are both “excesses of our existence upon our natural being” and upon cultural sediments. The signature is always found in the corner of the painting, not in its middle.

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