

Merleau-Ponty and the intertwining of bodily experience and language

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I argue that proper attention to the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty can help resolve a long-lasting problem, with continued relevance for cognitive linguistics: the complex relationship between pre-verbal consciousness and language. My argument will be based on a reconstruction of the development of his thought on this topic, from the *Phenomenology of Perception* to his final writings. I show that from an initial standpoint where language was not differentiated from gesture, Merleau-Ponty moved under the influence of Saussure to distinguish the “diacritical”, opposition-based, structure of the language system from the Gestalt-based nature of perception and bodily expression. Importantly, however, language as a system needs to be conceived as already “spoken language” (*langage parlé*), sedimented from living and expressive “speaking language” (*langage parlant*), the latter resembling modern conceptions of “linguaging”.

The dialectical relationship between the two, as well as the ultimately motivating role of non-verbal experience raises some questions, and I propose that these can be addressed by means of the *Motivation & Sedimentation Model* (e.g., Zlatev & Blomberg 2019; Devylder & Zlatev 2020; Moskaluk, Zlatev & van de Weijer 2022). This helps understand Merleau-Ponty’s key concepts of *expression* and *sublimation* and seeing the two as “intertwined” resolves the paradox of their respective primacy. Further, the analysis helps clarify the claim often main in cognitive linguistics that language is fundamentally motivated rather than arbitrary. On the one hand this is so, and there is no sharp rupture between language and bodily experience. On the other hand, language is not reducible to such experience. The latter is an important point that is often forgotten in the field.

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