

Merleau-Ponty's Encounter with Saussure's Linguistics: Misreading, Reinterpretation or Prolongation?¹

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Abstract: *The prevailing judgement of Merleau-Ponty's encounter with Saussure's linguistics is that, although important for the evolution of his philosophy of language, it was based on a mistaken or at least highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Saussure's ideas. Significantly, the rendering of Saussure that has been common both in Merleau-Ponty scholarship and in linguistics hinges on the structuralist development of the Genevan linguist's ideas. This article argues that another reading of Saussure, in the light of certain passages of the Course of General Linguistics forgotten by the structuralists, and of the manuscripts related to the published works, shows to the contrary that Merleau-Ponty's account was sustainable. An understanding of Saussure's ideas that does not flinch from their paradoxical features can elucidate the French phenomenologist's views on language and expression. Moreover, the "linguistic turn" in Merleau-Ponty's philosophical development, identified by James Edie for example, does not seem to have been so clear-cut as has previously been believed; the influence of Saussure's thought had certainly begun before he wrote Phenomenology of Perception.*

Abstract français :

« La rencontre de Merleau-Ponty avec la linguistique saussurienne : lecture fautive, réinterprétation ou prolongement ? »

Inspirée de la linguistique Saussurienne, la philosophie du langage de Merleau-Ponty a souvent été considérée comme une interprétation erronée des idées de Ferdinand de Saussure ou tout du moins comme une traduction singulière de son œuvre. On remarque cependant que la relecture critique du linguiste genevois, qu'elle soit effectuée à partir de l'œuvre merleau-pontienne ou, plus généralement, dans le champ de la linguistique, repose en grande partie sur les modes d'analyse structuralistes. À la lumière de certains passages du *Cours de linguistique générale* négligés par les structuralistes, et des manuscrits qui se rapportent aux œuvres publiées, cet article

défendra l'idée que l'interprétation de la pensée saussurienne par Merleau-Ponty reste à bien des égards pertinente, pour autant qu'elle ne recule pas devant les traits paradoxaux résultant de la pensée saussurienne. Un questionnement de la pensée de Saussure ne reculant pas devant ses traits paradoxaux peut contribuer à accroître notre compréhension des notions de langage et d'expression chez le phénoménologue français. Dans ce cadre, le « tournant linguistique » merleau-pontien, décrit par James Edie, ne paraît pas aussi net que l'on l'a soutenu auparavant : l'influence de la pensée de Saussure s'est certainement faite sentir avant l'écriture de *Phénoménologie de la perception*.

The influence of Ferdinand de Saussure's thought on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later philosophy is well known, in particular when it comes to its focus on language. According to James Edie, for example, it was through reading Saussure in the latter half of the 1940s that Merleau-Ponty came to take language as "the privileged model of the whole of our experience of meaning"² and in the opinion of Shuichi Kaganoi, it was "the encounter with Saussure's linguistic theory that provoked Merleau-Ponty to slip out of [the framework of the theory of the body] and accomplish 'the passage from the perceptual meaning to the language meaning'".³ As Thomas P. Hohler argues, he thereby came to question his previously so fundamental principle of the primacy of perception,⁴ and foreshadowed his last philosophy, where the language system became the model for the ontological interpretation of being.⁵

James Schmidt talks about Merleau-Ponty's "pioneering role" when it came to the reception of Saussure's ideas in France:⁶ it is, in general, believed that he gave several courses on Saussure's linguistics at the end of the 1940s and the beginning of the 1950s.⁷ The first explicit reference to Saussure by Merleau-Ponty occurs in "The Metaphysical in Man", first published in 1947.⁸ Besides the lecture notes from the course on *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*,⁹ it is particularly in the essays from 1951–52,¹⁰ as well as in the manuscripts from the same period,¹¹ that Saussure's views on language are discussed in more detail. This is why Saussure's ideas have been considered as the impetus behind the so-called "linguistic turn" in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. According to Edie, from 1949 onward Merleau-Ponty's "expression of discipleship to Saussure is total".¹²

Nevertheless, the peculiar character of Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the Swiss linguist is also an idea that is generally accepted. Maurice Lagueux speaks of a "deviation" in Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Saussure,¹³ Paul Ricœur judges Merleau-Ponty's philosophy to "exclude any contact with the *science* of language", notably that of Saussure,¹⁴ and Gary Brent Madison suggests that Merleau-Ponty confused Saussure's ideas with those of H.J. Pos and of Walther von Wartburg.¹⁵ Moreover, according to Edie, Merleau-Ponty "interprets Saussure very much to his own purposes",¹⁶ Schmidt speaks of the "idiosyncracies" of Merleau-Ponty's exposition of Saussure and has "Reading (and misreading) Saussure" as a section title,¹⁷ and, finally, Kaganoi asserts that Merleau-Ponty uses most of the linguist's notions "against Saussure's intentions".¹⁸

Thus, although Saussure is said to have functioned as a "catalyst"¹⁹ for the transformation or "disruption"²⁰ of Merleau-Ponty's thought, Merleau-Ponty's reading was "curious"²¹, even "perverse"²², and full of misunderstandings. According to Schmidt "even his admirers admit that the things he purported to find in Saussure are simply not there to be found".²³ At best, it seems that Merleau-Ponty "reinterpreted"²⁴ or "transformed" Saussure.²⁵

Nevertheless, read in the light of more recent interpretations of Saussure's linguistics,²⁶ which take the numerous manuscript sources into account,²⁷ Merleau-Ponty's reading does not seem to be entirely in contradiction with "Saussure and his initial definitions".²⁸ Of course, there is no evidence that Merleau-Ponty read anything other by Saussure than the *Cours de linguistique générale*. But it seems perfectly admissible to use sources unknown to Merleau-Ponty in order to throw light upon his interpretation, especially given the highly unfinished character of Saussure's work.²⁹

"Misreading" Saussure?

Now, what are the main points of Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of Saussure to which commentators have raised objections?

Firstly, Merleau-Ponty claims at an early stage that Saussure's linguistics legitimates "the perspective of the speaking subject who lives his language [*langue*] (and perhaps modifies it)".³⁰ It accomplishes a "*return to living spoken language*

[langue]”³¹ that can be compared to the position of language in Husserl’s later thinking, and even be designated as “a phenomenology of speech [*parole*]”.³² This seems to contradict Saussure’s clearly stated opinion that linguistics should deal not with speech, but with the language system, *la langue*: “One should not confuse the linguistics of speech with linguistics properly so called, which has the language system as its sole object of study.”³³

Related to this point is Merleau-Ponty’s allegation that “Saussure [...] made a distinction between a synchronic linguistics of speech and a diachronic linguistics of language [*langue*]”³⁴, which seems to deny the twofold division of linguistics by Saussure, where firstly, the study of language, *la langue*, is separated from that of speech, *la parole*, and, secondly, the former is in its turn divided into diachronic and synchronic linguistics.

A third difficulty is the idea that Saussure “challenged the rigid distinction between sign and signification that seems imperative when one merely considers instituted language [*langue*], but becomes muddled in speech”.³⁵ Against Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation it is maintained that Saussure, rather than challenging this distinction, presents it “as one of the foundations of his analysis”.³⁶ A fourth and related problem is Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of Saussure’s notion of arbitrariness, as “only apparent”, whereas in Schmidt’s view, for example,³⁷ in reality, the arbitrariness of the sign was “the first principle” of Saussure’s linguistics.³⁸

A fifth issue, interconnected with the second one, would be that Merleau-Ponty historicizes Saussure’s project, in declaring that he “could indeed have sketched a new philosophy of history”³⁹, in spite of the fact that the linguist, in Schmidt’s words, “conceived his entire project in isolation from history”.⁴⁰ Finally, we have Ricœur’s contention that Merleau-Ponty “misses the structural fact as such”, and, hence, any dialogue with modern linguistics:⁴¹ an important reason for what Ricœur sees as the “partial failure of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of language”.⁴²

With regard to the first two points mentioned above – the claim that Saussure formulated a linguistics, or even a phenomenology, of speech, and that he distinguished between such a synchronic linguistics of speech and a diachronic linguistics of language – there is no doubt that Merleau-Ponty, at least terminologically, is misusing Saussure’s

notions. In the latter's well-known definition of language (*langage*) as, on the one hand, the faculty of language, and on the other hand, language (*langue*) plus speech (*parole*), it is clearly only *la langue* that is the focus of Saussure's analysis, either in a diachronic or a synchronic way.⁴³ Moreover, if speech could be related to any of these forms of study, it would seem to be the diachronic one, as Saussure writes that "everything that is diachronic in language [*langue*] is only so through speech".⁴⁴

Yet, as is clear from his lectures on the acquisition of language from 1950, Merleau-Ponty is perfectly familiar with Saussure's understanding of the distinction.⁴⁵ It seems, then, that Merleau-Ponty's talk of a "synchronic linguistics of speech" two years later cannot simply be dismissed as "obviously an error", as for example Ricœur believes,⁴⁶ but seems rather to be "his own intentional reinterpretation of Saussure", as Kaganoi writes.⁴⁷

Following Lagueux, Schmidt links this "misreading" of Saussure to the third point mentioned above: Merleau-Ponty's "idiosyncratic interpretation"⁴⁸ of his notion of the sign, or in other words, the claim that Saussure "challenged the rigid distinction between sign and signification".⁴⁹ In the text quoted, the résumé of Merleau-Ponty's 1953–54 course at the Collège de France, this "challenge" is related to the aspect of Saussure's theory that was for him most fundamental, namely the idea that meaning is "diacritical, oppositive, and negative".⁵⁰ I quote the full text:

He challenged the rigid distinction between sign and signification that seems imperative when one merely considers instituted language, but becomes muddled in speech. Here, sound and meaning are not simply associated. The famous definition of the sign as "diacritical, oppositive, and negative" means that language [*la langue*] is present to the speaking subject as a system of spreads [*écarts*] between signs and between significations, that speech operates in one gesture the differentiation in these two orders, and finally that one cannot apply the distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* to significations that are not closed and to signs that only exist in their relation to one another.⁵¹

In Lagueux's interpretation, Merleau-Ponty has the distinction between the signifier and the signified in mind here. Saussure, as we know, defined the sign as a union of an acoustic image or signifier (*signifiant*) and a concept or signified (*signifié*), neither of which is determined in a positive way, but only negatively, in their difference with all the other signifiers and signifieds in the linguistic system.

In what way, then, could the distinction between signifier and signified be said to have been *challenged* by Saussure? Again following Lagueux, Schmidt affirms that Saussure was rather “*introducing* a distinction, within the sign itself”.⁵² Moreover, it is not at the level of speech, *parole*, that the differentiation takes place in Saussure, but at the level of the linguistic system, *la langue*.

Hence, not only does Merleau-Ponty place speech at the centre of the Saussurean theory, whereas in reality it was the language system that should be “the integral and concrete object of linguistics”.⁵³ He also shifts the focus, according to Smith, first “from the already existing *system* of differentiations to an *act* which fuses together sound and meaning”, and then “from the plane of ideas to the plane of perception”,⁵⁴ or, in other words, from the structural level to the semantic one that Saussure is said to have excluded.

The other misunderstandings are believed to follow from this change of focus: the act of speech rather than the language system is thought by Merleau-Ponty to be the object of synchronic linguistics. Moreover, his understanding of the relation between signifier and signified is, as opposed to Saussure’s, seen as non-arbitrary, even symbolic. Also the allegation that a “new philosophy of history”⁵⁵ might be based on Saussure’s ideas is, in Schmidt’s interpretation, a consequence of this displacement.⁵⁶

“Language Is Not a Nomenclature”

However, it seems that the overall point of the quoted passage is a quite Saussurean one. Merleau-Ponty sees the linguist as calling into question the dichotomy between thing and consciousness: it is precisely because signs are defined diacritically that the “rigid distinction” between sign and signification is challenged: “one cannot apply the distinction between *res extensa* and *res cogitans* to significations that are not closed and to signs that only exist in their relation to one another”.⁵⁷

The discussion in *Consciousness* further clarifies this point (my emphases):

[L]anguage [...] is *not a set of signs corresponding to a set of ideas*, but rather it is a unique whole [*ensemble*], in which each word takes its signification through the others as a mass that is progressively differentiating itself...⁵⁸

Language is *neither thing nor mind* [esprit], it is immanent and transcendent at the same time, and its status is yet to be found.⁵⁹

[L]anguage puts up an invincible resistance to all efforts that seek to convert it into an *object*. But apparently it is not to be confused with *mind* either: it *resists the distinction sign–signified*.⁶⁰

Indeed, a language [*langue*] is *not a nomenclature, a sum of signs attached to the same number of significations*; words are interdependent systems of power with respect to one another. Nowhere can one confront *a word and its signification*.⁶¹

Language [*la langue*] in its functioning transcends *the habitual distinction of pure meaning [sens] and pure sign*.⁶²

It appears from the quotations above that Merleau-Ponty does *not*, as Lagueux and Schmidt believe, refer to the contrast between signifier and signified when he claims that Saussure challenged the distinction between sign and signification. Rather, he is talking about the traditional dichotomy between consciousness and things, applied to language, or, in other words, the “nomenclaturism” that Saussure criticizes: “the conception of language as an inventory of names for things”.⁶³

In fact, the radical novelty of Saussure’s ideas consisted in the rejection of the idea that the universal structures of thought could be identified independently of the language they are formulated in, or, in other words, the assumption that language is a translation or representation of thought, with its origin in the general grammars of the 17th century.⁶⁴

In effect, if Saussure is “*introducing* a distinction, within the sign itself”, as Schmidt claims,⁶⁵ it is only to show that the bond between them is indissoluble: if we retain only one of them, the linguistic entity vanishes: “instead of a concrete object we are faced with a mere abstraction”.⁶⁶ According to Saussure, the units of *la langue* are constituted “between two amorphous masses”, thought and sound.⁶⁷ The articulation of these levels cannot be separated from one another, and they are therefore compared to the two sides of a sheet of paper,⁶⁸ or to the duality of a chemical compound, such as water: “Water is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen; taken separately neither element has any of the properties of water.”⁶⁹

The distinction between signifier and signified is linked to Saussure's first principle of general linguistics: the arbitrariness of the sign. The choice that connects a given slice of sound to a given slice of thought, in the "shapeless and confused" masses of sound and thought, is completely arbitrary.⁷⁰

This, however, is one of the points at which Saussure's ideas have been most often misunderstood, and Merleau-Ponty's interpreters are no exception. Edie, Schmidt, and to some extent Lagueux, intimate that Merleau-Ponty forced his old conception of the relation between sign and meaning as non-arbitrary onto Saussure's theory.⁷¹ According to Edie and Schmidt, there is in Merleau-Ponty a "symbolic" understanding, lingering from *Phenomenology of Perception*,⁷² of the relation between signifier and signified⁷³ that is diametrically opposed to Saussure's intentions.⁷⁴ The principle of the arbitrariness of the sign, writes Schmidt,

... means – if nothing else – that there is no resemblance, no analogy, no natural bond between signifier and signified. The sole reason for preferring the sound "kat" to any other possible series of sounds [...] as a way of signifying small, carnivorous mammals who shed hair on furniture is that it is an established convention among speakers of English to use the sound-image "kat" to signify the concept "cat".⁷⁵

However, this passage is a typical illustration of the nomenclatural conception of language that Saussure endeavoured to overcome! The idea of a sound that is distinguishable independently of its meaning, conventionally linked to a likewise identifiable concept – "small, carnivorous mammals who shed hair on furniture" – is *not* reconcilable with the notion of the arbitrariness of the sign and the differential character of meaning. In Saussure's view, meaning "is created with the formation of the sign itself".⁷⁶

When it comes to Merleau-Ponty's point of view in *Phenomenology*, both Edie and Schmidt make reference to a passage where Merleau-Ponty suggests that there might be a dimension of language that is not arbitrary. Schmidt draws the conclusion that the "arbitrary relation between signifier and signified is thus only apparent"⁷⁷ in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language.

Yet, nowhere in this text does Merleau-Ponty contend that "the signifier does indeed bear a certain resemblance to what it signifies", as Schmidt claims.⁷⁸ His

proposal is that, if we took not only the conceptual but also the “emotional” meaning into account, we would find that the unities of language extract and “literally express [the] emotional essence” of things.⁷⁹

Nevertheless, the expressive representation in question is not a function of a resemblance between word and object, but of the language as a systematic whole. Merleau-Ponty asks us to perform a thought experiment where “the mechanical laws of phonetics, the influences of other languages, the rationalization of grammarians” and so on are disregarded in order for us to imagine, at the origin of each language, “a somewhat restricted system of expression, [...] such that, for example, it would not be arbitrary to call light ‘light’ if we call night ‘night’”.⁸⁰

This passage is cited by Schmidt, but again he interrupts the quotation in a way that alters its meaning: the full stop is put after “it would not be arbitrary”.⁸¹ However, what is “not arbitrary” is not the original system of expression in relation to the world, but to use the word “light” for light, *if* we use the word “night” for night. This is an early hint at the notion of the diacritical character of meaning that will be developed by Merleau-Ponty at the beginning of the 50s.⁸²

A similar idea is apparent in Merleau-Ponty’s course from the academic year 1950–51, on “The Child’s Relations With Others”. “Saussure has shown that nothing is fortuitous in language: it is a totality in which the use of each sign is related to the use of all the others; in this sense signs are not conventional.”⁸³ Thus, when Merleau-Ponty is speaking about “conventional signs”, he seems to have in mind a version of the nomenclaturist view: the idea that the community, by convention, has decided to use a certain word to refer to a certain concept, designable independently of language.

This interpretation is corroborated in the remainder of the long paragraph of *Phenomenology* quoted above. Here, Merleau-Ponty writes, “Thus, there are, strictly speaking, no conventional signs, the simple notation of a thought that is pure and clear for itself”.⁸⁴ Furthermore, this view is in agreement with Saussure himself, who does not consider language as “a simple convention”.⁸⁵ Saussure’s emphasis on the arbitrariness of the sign is not simply a statement about the conventional nature of language: obviously, a conventional view is entirely compatible with the conception of

language as a nomenclature. Saussure's thesis is more *radical* than that; in fact, the sign is, in its very root, arbitrary.⁸⁶

The Social Nature of Language

For the reason that signs are arbitrary, language must be a social institution according to Saussure; it is only collective usage that can establish the unity between signifier and signified. Thus, the system of language is tied, through the principle of arbitrariness, to the social community.⁸⁷ However, this is not a convention in the usual sense, i. e., an agreement between parties. Saussure is (also in *Course*) unequivocal on this point:

If the signifier may seem to be freely chosen in relation to the idea it represents, it is, on the other hand, not free, but imposed, from the point of view of the linguistic community who makes use of it. The social mass is not consulted, and the signifier chosen by language [*langue*] could not be replaced by another."⁸⁸

Now, how is this fundamental aspect of Saussure's theory to be reconciled with Merleau-Ponty's assertion that Saussure performed a "return to the speaking subject" comparable to that of phenomenology,⁸⁹ in that he "inaugurated [...] a linguistics of speech",⁹⁰ where it is speech that "operates, in one gesture" the differentiation in the orders of signs and significations?⁹¹ Why did Merleau-Ponty displace the fundamental methodological opposition between a diachronic and a synchronic study of *la langue* to concern in the one case *langue*, in the other *parole*?

The point of Saussure's distinction was, first of all, to determine "the integral and concrete object" of linguistics,⁹² namely, language as a system, in contrast to the focus of the so-called "general linguistics" of his time, on language in its historical development.⁹³ Only from the point of view of the language system could the differential character of signs be understood.

In order to distinguish this object, it, *la langue*, had to be separated from the other aspect of language as a whole, *langage*, namely speech, *parole*: the particular, momentary act of the individual, which depends on the social language system.

In the *Course*, Saussure characterizes the *langue-parole* distinction in terms of a separation between what is "essential" and what is "accessory and more or less

accidental”,⁹⁴ and he compares their relation to that between a symphony and its performance: a symphony has “a reality that is independent of the way in which it is performed; the mistakes that musicians may make in playing it in no way compromise that reality”.⁹⁵ For this reason, these two aspects of language must be studied separately, if the confusion, all too common in linguistics, is to be avoided. Language as the totality including both the system and the individual acts is, claims Saussure, “unknowable”.⁹⁶

In the light of these remarks, can Merleau-Ponty’s assertion be defended, that “Saussure’s linguistics legitimates [...] the perspective of the speaking subject who lives his language [*langue*]”?⁹⁷ If the language system is to be studied only in separation from individual acts of speech, themselves comparable to the particular performances of a symphony that they cannot affect in any way, must we not conclude that Merleau-Ponty projected his own phenomenology of perception onto Saussure’s ideas, and that the influence the Swiss linguist exerted on his later thought was quite rudimentary?

Parole, however, has two sides in Saussure’s definition: on the one hand it is a material event, the employment of the faculties of language, such as phonation.⁹⁸ On the other hand it is a meaningful, or “semiotic”, one: it is the use of *langue* to express and communicate a personal thought. It is only for want of a better English expression that “speech” is commonly used as a translation of *parole*. They are not really equivalent: *parole* in French can refer also to written language and often translates as “word”, “words”, or “saying”.

Now, the point of the comparison with the symphony was to show the independent character of the system and hence of the study of that system. Just as the electrical devices used in transmitting the Morse code are not essential to the code itself, the vocal organs are secondary in relation to the linguistic system. Hence, it is clear that the physiology of speech cannot be part of the linguistics of *la langue*.⁹⁹

Nevertheless *parole* cannot, according to Saussure’s own definition, be reduced to the performance of a piece of music that is independent of its particular executions. This analogy only excluded the *physiological* side of *parole* from linguistic study. But what about the act of speech as a bearer of meaning? Saussure is not completely clear on this point. In *Course*, it is stated that “what applies to phonation will apply also to all other parts of speech”,¹⁰⁰ but this has no equivalence in the manuscripts, where Saussure only

speaks about phonation, and concludes that “the best way to judge value of the part [of *langage*] *parole* is to look at it from the point of view of *langue*”.¹⁰¹

This is clearly a methodological choice: it is not a statement about the ontological dependency of speech on the language system. On the contrary, as much as *parole* is determined by *la langue*, which is social, speech is also needed for the establishment and the evolution of the language system: “historically, speech always takes precedence”.¹⁰² Moreover, as we have seen, in distinction to the symphony, the language system is not the deed of an individual: it is essentially a social phenomenon. Saussure states, “The community is necessary to establish values that have no other rationale than usage and general agreement; the individual alone is incapable of fixing a single one.”¹⁰³

Furthermore, Saussure’s notion of *langue* – and as a consequence, the distinction between *langue* and *parole* – is far from self-evident. We know that it is an arbitrarily constituted, socially instituted system of signs, themselves the union of an acoustic image and a concept, defined only in their difference from one another. Apart from these general characteristics, the language system is mostly defined in negative terms,¹⁰⁴ and, as Normand points out, to speak in French of *la langue*, without qualification, is fairly unusual.¹⁰⁵

Thus, if speech is not the object of Saussurean linguistics, the study of it can nevertheless throw light upon the science of language. Moreover, Saussure makes a distinction between “linguistics of language system” and “linguistics of speech” as two separate disciplines that must not be confused.¹⁰⁶ It is therefore not true that “*parole* cannot be studied” according to Saussure, as Schmidt claims.¹⁰⁷ After all, it is only speech that is directly observable, whereas *langue*, the “social product”,¹⁰⁸ is a theoretical postulate or hypothesis:¹⁰⁹ it is

... a treasure deposited through the practice of speech in the members of the same community, a grammatical system existing potentially in every brain, or more exactly in the brains of a group of individuals; for language [*la langue*] is never complete in a single individual, it exists perfectly only in the collectivity [...]¹¹⁰

The sign is thus a “deposit”,¹¹¹ an “imprint” in the brain:

Language [*langue*] exists in the community in the form of an amount of imprints deposited in every brain [...]. Thus it is something that is in each of them, but that is none the less common to all and beyond reach of the will of the possessors.¹¹²

A Phenomenology of Speech?

Then, *why* was it so important for Saussure to distinguish the language system from speech? After all, synchronic linguistics “has only one perspective, which is that of the speaking subjects, and its whole method consists of gathering evidence from them”.¹¹³ Saussure’s “reversal”¹¹⁴ in the history of linguistics consisted precisely in this methodological change of approach where the *praxis* of language provided the point of departure. The speaking subject does not necessarily know anything about the history of his language, “he is faced with a state”.¹¹⁵

The point of synchronic linguistics, then, is to describe what the speaker does without reflecting upon the language he is using. When Saussure writes: “the linguist who wishes to understand this state [of the language system that the speaking subject is confronted with] must make a clean sweep of everything that produced it and ignore diachrony”,¹¹⁶ one is reminded of the phenomenological stance. So why was it still not the *acts* of language that the Saussurean linguist should study, but the language system stored in the brains of the individuals in the linguistic collectivity?

For one thing, if the language system is constituted of signs that are determined in a negative way, only by their difference from one another, it seems clear that the individual acts of speech are positive choices of, for example, a certain pronunciation of an element of the language system, or of a certain order of elements. Hence, we must look beyond the speech act in order to get hold of the system.

In Merleau-Ponty’s reformulation of Saussure’s general framework, the term *parole* became separated in two: on the one hand what he sometimes calls *parole parlante*, or speaking speech, corresponding to the active usage of the language system with a view to expressing something new, and hence to transforming it, and on the other hand, *parole parlée*, spoken speech, the system constituted through the former activity, and at the same time presupposed by it. The speaking subject is, for Merleau-Ponty, inherently a social and a cultural one whose language has a historical depth. He did not

have to make such a rigid choice either between the individual and the social perspective, or between the historical and the systemic one.

Saussure's methodological separation of *langue* from *parole* was important in a context where, firstly, linguistics was mainly historical, and not focused on the usage of language by speaking subjects, and, secondly, where meaning was seen as preformed, ideal entities in the mind or soul of individuals, and language a translation of these thoughts in words. Obviously, Merleau-Ponty does not perceive the same necessity to detach the individual subject and his speech from the language system; instead, he goes directly to the question of *parole* as carrier of meaning.

Thus, when Merleau-Ponty speaks about a "phenomenology of speech", he does not have a solitary subject in mind, constituting linguistic meaning solely from the profundity of his transcendental subjectivity. The whole point of his reference to Saussure is, on the contrary, to "overcome the alternative between language [*langue*] as thing and language as the production of speaking subjects".¹¹⁷ From "the perspective of the speaking subject" it appears that language is at the same time something that the subject is "submitted" to¹¹⁸ and that she can modify, something that lives only in the possibility of its modification.

Ricœur and the Structuralist Reading

In fact, the reading of Saussure that has become predominant, also among Merleau-Ponty scholars, bears the stamp of the structuralists' development of his ideas, where *la langue* is considered as a closed system, ontologically separated from *parole* and from history.

Ricœur's criticism of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language in general, and of his interpretation of Saussure in particular, is representative of this approach.¹¹⁹ He claims that in making phenomenology into "a theory of generalized language", Merleau-Ponty "radicalized the question of language in a way that excludes dialogue with modern linguistics". This is also an explanation for the "partial failure" of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language.¹²⁰

In Merleau-Ponty, Ricœur claims, and “contrary to Saussure and his initial definitions”,¹²¹ the system is established in the present moment of speech. In this way, the objective viewpoint, linguistics, is put back into the subject, with its notions of sedimentation and *habitus*. Hence, “the structural fact as such is missed”, in Ricœur’s view, and thus also the challenge that structuralism poses to the traditional philosophy of the subject.¹²² The autonomy of language is abandoned and at the same time the dialogue with linguistics as an objective science.

The problem with Merleau-Ponty’s employment of linguistics, according to Ricœur, is that he skips the study of language proper, and goes directly to the subject and its use of language. In Ricœur’s view, we can only understand the linguistic character of speech through an analysis of the language system: rather than looking for the linguistic element in the extension of the gesture, the latter can appear as signifying only “as the semantic realization [*effectuation*] of the semiological order”.¹²³ According to Ricœur, the system must come first, in order for speech to be signifying, although it is true that “outside the semantic function in which they are actualized, semiological systems lose all intelligibility”.¹²⁴

Ricœur’s arguments for the necessity of studying the language system independently of the acts of speech in which they are realized, as well as his conception of such a system, appear more clearly in his essays on structuralism and hermeneutics, written at about the same time.¹²⁵ The linguistic system, or *langue*, is here described as “a corpus already constituted, finished, closed, and, in that sense, dead”, where one can “establish inventories of elements and units”, which can be placed “in relations of opposition, preferably binary opposition”, and where “an algebra or combinatory system of these elements and opposed pairs” can be established.¹²⁶ Moreover, this sort of inventory can only be made if the language system is strictly separated from the usage of language, from discourse or *parole*.¹²⁷

The idea that a linguistic system is characterized by *closure*, is, in Ricœur’s view, one of the “axioms” of structural analysis. If language is to be an object of empirical science,¹²⁸ the system, *la langue*, must be separated not only from linguistic acts, or *parole*, but also from history; synchronic linguistics, the study of a given state of the system, is therefore primary. In his analysis, the definition of the sign as determined, on

the one hand, by its difference from all the other signs of the system, and on the other as an internal difference between signifying and signified, is a logical consequence of these presuppositions.

Since *innovation* takes place in speech, it is incomprehensible from the structural point of view, Ricœur claims. Change can only be understood once it has been incorporated into the system, as a comparison between different systems. This is where philosophy or hermeneutics comes into play, but not as an alternative opposed to structural analysis: according to Ricœur, the two levels of understanding are both needed. In other words, the model of language as a closed system of signs is necessary in order both to ensure the scientific character of the analysis, to rescue us from psychologism,¹²⁹ and to point at the place where philosophy must enter the picture.

This might be an accurate characterization of certain versions of structuralism, but is it a correct interpretation of Saussure's ideas? Ricœur, to be sure, is making use of Louis Hjelmslev's analysis, but allegedly only for the reason that he seems to better have theorized Saussure's presuppositions.¹³⁰ Moreover, the point of Ricœur's investigations is to show the insufficiency of the structural approach. In order to become a science, linguistics excludes the very essence of language: to produce novel utterances, and therewith to *say* something to someone. In the end, the language system and the linguistic act must be considered in tandem.

Yet, was it necessary to separate them so strictly in the first place? Is there another version of Saussurean "structuralism" that does not do "violence to linguistic experience"?¹³¹ Is it even possible to understand the creativity of language from within Saussure's own system?

Language Is a River

We saw that, according to Saussure, in linguistics the study of *parole* must be separated from *langue*: if the language system is constituted of signs that are determined only in opposition to one another, the individual acts of speech are, on the contrary, positive choices of elements from the language system. Therefore, they cannot be the objects of the same discipline.

On the other hand, language can, in his view, be studied only from the perspective of the speaking subjects, and it is merely through their activity that the language system exists and evolves. The language system is accessible only through *parole*. Therefore, linguistic evidence must be gathered from individual linguistic acts, even though the language system is not observable in them in an empirical sense. It seems difficult, then, to grant Ricœur's interpretation of *langue* versus *parole* as opposed in a dichotomous way to one another.

The Canadian linguist Paul J. Thibault has argued against the many misunderstandings of Saussure's ideas, claiming that they depend to a large extent on a confusion of the *methodological* distinctions that the Genevan linguist makes, in order to define the object of general linguistics in his sense (i.e., independently of historical considerations), with ontological claims.¹³² This holds for the distinction between diachrony and synchrony, as well as for that between *langue* and *parole*: "Saussure clarifies at the outset that the distinction between *langue* and *parole* is one between two 'objects of study', and not between two independently existing realities".¹³³

As a result, the structuralist version of the linguistic system – where, as Ricœur writes, "the postulate of the closed system of signs [...] summarizes and commands all the others"¹³⁴ – is precisely a hypostatization of what Saussure describes as "the projection of a body on a plane" or a horizontal section of the stem of a plant.¹³⁵ No more than a projection of a three-dimensional body has an ontological status of its own, is the language system an autonomous entity; it is an object of study in the cross-section of the totality of language that synchronic linguistics focuses on. As Saussure writes, "the system is only ever momentary",¹³⁶ while, "[t]he river of language [*langue*] flows continuously."¹³⁷ Hence, the idea of a state of the language system "can only be approximate".¹³⁸ But if language is flowing, it cannot at the cross-section form a closed system. Rather, Merleau-Ponty's notion of open or fluent significations seems more accurate here.

As we saw, Merleau-Ponty reformulated Saussure's distinction between speech and language system into one between speaking speech and spoken speech. In his own words, he "extended" Saussure's notion of *parole*,¹³⁹ in order to understand the creative function of language. In stressing the productivity of language, he also drew attention to

its processual character, as when he writes: “According to Saussure, language [*la langue*] is a system of signs in the process of differentiating one from the other.”¹⁴⁰

For Merleau-Ponty, expression is always something more than simply repeating an expression that has already been formulated. On the other hand, we can never express from out of nowhere. “Authentic” expression is to take up an already constituted meaning and transform it – this is true whether we talk about verbal expression, or about “tacit” forms of expression, such as painting or bodily expression.

Of course, not all expression is authentic in this strong sense; rather, our life is to a large extent pervaded by cliché, or “spoken speech”. The point is that expression must take place within the tension of these two aspects of language: spoken language and speaking language. The effort to understand this productivity of language and expression runs through Merleau-Ponty’s whole work, and cannot be summarized here. However, it is clear that it means something more than just constructing, from a limited number of elements, an unlimited number of phrases, as is common in contemporary analytic philosophy and linguistics. In his view, authentic expression *transforms* the given elements or forms.

Conclusion

Did Saussure’s ideas occasion a “linguistic turn” in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking? It is certainly the case that issue of language has a crucial role to play in his later philosophy, and that the Swiss linguist’s name occurs more frequently than in the earlier texts.

However, Merleau-Ponty was certainly familiar with some Saussurean ideas at an early stage, such as the distinction between *langue* and *parole* and the emphasis on synchronic rather than diachronic study of *langue*. It seems that Merleau-Ponty first came in touch with Saussure through proofreading Aron Gurwitsch’s article “Psychologie du langage” in 1935.¹⁴¹ In *Phenomenology*, he alludes to Saussure when introducing the distinction between speaking and spoken speech.¹⁴² This is why Roland Barthes, “the mother figure of structuralism”¹⁴³, claimed that it was Merleau-Ponty who made “the best development of [Saussure’s] notion of *language/speech* [Lingue/Parole]”, with reference precisely to this work.¹⁴⁴

The contemporary French linguist Michel Arrivé, whose articles on Saussure do not dodge the most bewildering aspects of Saussure's writings, avows to admire the "divination" that let Merleau-Ponty "track down the underlying thoughts of the *Course*".¹⁴⁵ Taking up a formulation of Algirdas Julien Greimas he states, "the global interpretation that Merleau-Ponty gives of the *CGL* 'seems in many respects as a natural prolongation of Saussure's thought'".¹⁴⁶

In other words, although the influence of Saussure's ideas upon Merleau-Ponty's philosophy was certainly more far-reaching during the latter half of his career, it is less clear that they provoked such a profound rupture as has commonly been believed. Neither does it seem that his interpretation of Saussure was out of order, but rather that some of its paradoxical features can be traced right back to the celebrated linguist's own thought.

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¹ Below, I will give references to English translations when available, although they may be changed in order to correspond more closely to the original. Other translations are my own. I am indebted to Staffan Carlshamre and Sheila Ghose for valuable comments on this paper.

² Edie, *Speaking and Meaning: The Phenomenology of Language*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, 89. Cf. also Edie, "Foreword", in Merleau-Ponty, *Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language*, transl. Hugh J. Silverman, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 (*CAL*), xix.

³ Kaganoi, "Merleau-Ponty and Saussure: On the Turning Point of Merleau-Ponty's Thinking", in *Immersing in the Concrete: Maurice Merleau-Ponty in the Japanese Perspective*, eds. Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka and Shôichi Matsuba, Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1998, p. 152. Kaganoi quotes a passage from Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, transl. Alphonso Lingis, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968 (*VIT*), 176; *Le Visible et l'invisible*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964 (*VI*), 230.

⁴ Hohler, "The Limits of Language and the Threshold of Speech: Saussure and Merleau-Ponty", *Philosophy Today*, 26:4, 1982 (287–99), 287.

⁵ In the posthumous *VIT/VI*, the late essays published in *Signs*, transl. Richard Calverton McCleary, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (*ST*); *Signes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1960 (*S*) and in "Eye and Mind", transl. Michael B. Smith, in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting*, ed. Galen A. Johnson, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1993; *L'Œil et l'esprit*, Paris: Gallimard, 1964.

⁶ Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Between Phenomenology and Structuralism*, London: Macmillan, 1985, 2, 168.

⁷ The courses in question were “Langage et communication” at Lyon University in 1947–48, “Saussure” – claimed to be held at the École Normale Supérieure in 1948–49 – and “La Conscience et l’acquisition du langage” at Sorbonne 1949–50: the latter is published in *CAL; Merleau-Ponty à la Sorbonne. Résumés de cours (1949–1952)*, ed. Jacques Prunair, Grenoble: Cynara, 1988 (*MPS*). These courses are mentioned in the bibliography of Alexandre Métraux, appendix to Xavier Tilliette, *Merleau-Ponty ou la mesure de l’homme*, Paris: Seghers, 1970, 179, and described briefly in Silverman’s preface to *CAL*, xxxvi–vii. Edie also refers to them (215–16) as well as Stephen Watson, “Merleau-Ponty’s Involvement with Saussure”, *Continental Philosophy in America*, eds. Hugh J. Silverman, John Sallis and Thomas M. Seebohm, Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983, 212.

⁸ In *Sense and Non-Sense*, transl. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964 (*SNST*); *Sens et non-sens*, Paris: Nagel, 1948/1966 (*SNS*).

⁹ The notes were taken by students, validated by Merleau-Ponty himself and then published in the journal *Bulletin du Groupe d’études de psychologie de l’Université de Paris*. They are republished in *CAL; MPS*.

¹⁰ “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”, “On the Phenomenology of Language” and “The Philosopher and Sociology”, in *ST; S*.

¹¹ Edited by Claude Lefort and published in *The Prose of the World*, transl. John O’Neill, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973 (*PW*); *La Prose du monde*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969 (*PM*) and *Themes From the Lectures at the Collège de France 1952–1960*, transl. John O’Neill, 1970 (*TL*); *Résumés de cours. Collège de France 1952–1960*, Paris: Gallimard, 1968 (*RC*).

¹² Edie, “Foreword”, xix. The same point is made in Edie, *Speaking*, 89.

¹³ Lagueux, “Merleau-Ponty et la linguistique de Saussure”, *Dialogue*, 4:3, 1965 (351–64), 357.

¹⁴ Ricœur, “New Developments in Phenomenology in France: The Phenomenology of Language”, *Social Research*, 34:1, 1967 (1–30), 11; cf. Ricœur, *The Conflict of Interpretations: Essays in Hermeneutics*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1974, 247; *Le Conflit des interprétations. Essais d’herméneutique*, Paris: Seuil, 1969, 244.

¹⁵ Madison, *The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty: A Search for the Limits of Consciousness*, Athens: Ohio University Press, 1981, 322f.

¹⁶ Edie, *Speaking*, 107.

¹⁷ Schmidt, 105, 168.

¹⁸ Kaganoi, 155.

¹⁹ Watson, 58.

²⁰ Luce Fontaine-de Visscher, *Phénomène ou structure? Essai sur le langage chez Merleau-Ponty*, Brussels: Facultés universitaires Saint-Louis, 1974, 18.

²¹ Madison, 322.

²² Schmidt, 107.

²³ *Ibid.*, 1. Schmidt’s further discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s putative misunderstandings occurs on 105–111.

²⁴ Lagueux, 358. See also Kaganoi, 156.

²⁵ According to Mauro Carbone, for example, Merleau-Ponty “sometimes distorts, or, more often, transforms, the theses of Saussure, in order to reveal the thickness of the being of language”: *La Visibilité de l’invisible. Merleau-Ponty entre Cézanne et Proust*, Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 2001, 72. Cf. also Carbone, “La dicibilité du monde. La période intermédiaire de la pensée de Merleau-Ponty à partir de Saussure”, in François Heidsieck (ed.), *Merleau-Ponty. Le Philosophe et son langage*, Grenoble: Recherches sur la philosophie et le langage, 1993.

²⁶ These include Christian Puech, “Merleau-Ponty. La langue, le sujet et l’institué: La linguistique dans la philosophie”, *Langages* 19:77, 1985 (21–32), “Saussure and Structural Linguistics in Europe”, in Carol Sanders (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Saussure*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004, and “L’émergence de la notion de ‘discours’ en France et les destins du saussurisme”, *Langages*, 39:159, 2005 (93–110); Raymond Tallis, *Not Saussure: A Critique of Post-Saussurean Literary Theory*, Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988/1995; Paul J. Thibault, *Re-reading Saussure: The Dynamics of Signs in Social Life*, London: Routledge, 1997; Simon Bouquet, *Introduction à la lecture de Saussure*, Paris: Payot, 1997 and Bouquet (ed.), *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Paris: Herne, 2003; Claudine Normand, *Saussure*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2000; C. Sanders, *Cambridge Companion*, 2004; André-Jean Pétroff, *Saussure. La langue, l’ordre et le désordre*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2004; Michel Arrivé, *À la recherche de Ferdinand de Saussure*, Paris: P.U.F., 2007. It is, however, to be noted that Tullio De Mauro’s rich commentary to *Cours de linguistique générale* from 1967 (translated into French in 1972) is essentially in accord with these “post-structural” interpretations.

²⁷ Robert Godel, *Les sources manuscrites du cours de linguistique générale de F. de Saussure*, Geneva: Droz, 1957, *Cours de linguistique générale*, vol. I and vol II, critical ed. Rudolf Engler, Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1968 (*CLG/E.I*) and 1974 (*CLG/E.II*), as well as Saussure, *Writings in general linguistics*, transl. C. Sanders and Matthew Pires, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; *Écrits de linguistique générale*, eds. S. Bouquet and R. Engler, Paris: Gallimard, 2002.

²⁸ Ricœur, “New Developments”, 11.

²⁹ The *Cours* is an adaptation by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye from 1916, of students’ lecture notes from Saussure’s three courses on general linguistics at the University of Geneva in 1907–11. Critical ed. De Mauro, Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1967/1972 (*CLG*); *Course in General Linguistics*, transl. Wade Baskin, New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959 (*CGL*). Especially when it comes to the ordering of the different subjects the book is not a very faithful rendering of the courses. See De Mauro’s introduction to *CLG*, p. v, and Engler, “The Making of the *Cours de linguistique générale*”, in Sanders 2004, esp. 55.

³⁰ *SNST* 87; *SNS* 152.

³¹ *CAL* 97; *MPS* 82 (emphasis in text).

³² *MPS* 417. Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception: And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. J. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 84; *Parcours deux. 1951–1961*, ed. Jacques Prunair, Lagrasse: Verdier, 2000 (*P2*), 112.

³³ *CGL* 19–20; *CLG* 38–9: “il ne faudra pas confondre [une linguistique de la parole] avec la linguistique proprement dite, celle dont la langue est l’unique objet”. On this quotation, see below, footnote 106.

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- ³⁴ *ST* 86; *S* 107: the quote is from a paper given in Brussels 1951. Cf. also *PW* 23; *PM* 33f.
- ³⁵ *TL* 19; *RC* 33.
- ³⁶ Lagueux, 356.
- ³⁷ Schmidt, 116.
- ³⁸ *CGL* 67; *CLG* 100.
- ³⁹ *In Praise of Philosophy*, transl. John Wild and J. Edie, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1963 (*IPP*), 55; *Éloge de la philosophie et autres essais*, Paris: Gallimard, 1953/1960 (*EP*), 56.
- ⁴⁰ Schmidt, 107.
- ⁴¹ Ricœur, *Conflict*, 249; *Conflit*, 245; cf. Ricœur, “New Developments”, 11f.
- ⁴² Ricœur *Conflict*, 247; *Conflit*, 244.
- ⁴³ See *CGL* 9, 98; *CLG* 25, 139.
- ⁴⁴ *CGL* 98; *CLG* 138.
- ⁴⁵ He writes, for example, in *CAL*, 100: “From the diachronic point of view, language [*la langue*] is considered in the succession of time, according to a longitudinal slice, and appears to us as a series of fortuitous events. [...] From the synchronic point of view, that is, considered in its totality at a moment of its becoming, language [*la langue*] appears as tending toward a certain order, as forming a system.” *MPS* 84–5 (italics in orig.). Kaganoi has noticed this circumstance, 156, although he claims that Merleau-Ponty “came to correctly understand Saussure” in spite of the fact that the course just quoted was held two years before the paper cited earlier (see above, footnote 36).
- ⁴⁶ Ricœur, “New Developments”, 12.
- ⁴⁷ Kaganoi, 156. For him, Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation is biased by his reading of Pos, and implies a refusal of the objective study of language (see 156–7).
- ⁴⁸ Schmidt, 108.
- ⁴⁹ *TL* 19; *RC* 33.
- ⁵⁰ In spite of the quotation marks in Merleau-Ponty’s text, this is not a citation from Saussure, who never used the term “diacritical”.
- ⁵¹ *TL* 19–20; *RC* 33–4.
- ⁵² Schmidt, 108 (his emphasis). Lagueux discusses this point on 356f.
- ⁵³ *CGL* 7; *CLG* 23.
- ⁵⁴ Schmidt, 109.
- ⁵⁵ *IPP* 55; *EP* 56, quoted above.
- ⁵⁶ Schmidt, 102f.
- ⁵⁷ Interestingly, in his discussion of this passage, Schmidt ends his quote just before this sentence, and therefore misses Merleau-Ponty’s whole point: see 108.
- ⁵⁸ *CAL* 5; *MPS* 11.
- ⁵⁹ *CAL* 6; *MPS* 11.
- ⁶⁰ *CAL* 7; *MPS* 11–12.
- ⁶¹ *CAL* 98; *MPS* 83 (“Nulle part on ne peut confronter *un* mot et sa signification”: emphasis in original).
- ⁶² *CAL* 99; *MPS* 83.
- ⁶³ John E. Joseph, “The Linguistic Sign”, in Sanders, 63. See also *CGL* 65; *CLG* 97.

⁶⁴ On this point see e.g. Normand, *Saussure*, 36f. and Oswald Ducrot, “Grammaires générales”, in *Nouveau dictionnaire encyclopédique des sciences du langage*, eds. O. Ducrot and Jean-Marie Schaeffer, Paris: Seuil, 1972/1995, 18f.

⁶⁵ Schmidt, 108.

⁶⁶ *CGL* 102–103; *CLG* 144.

⁶⁷ *CGL* 112; *CLG* 156.

⁶⁸ *CGL* 113; *CLG* 157.

⁶⁹ *CGL* 103; *CLG* 145.

⁷⁰ *CGL* 113; *CLG* 157.

⁷¹ Edie, on his part, dismisses Saussure’s whole argument, and declares the “wild chemical analogy” cited above to be “clearly false”: *Speaking*, 78.

⁷² Transl. Donald A. Landes, London: Routledge, 2012 (*PPT*); *Phénoménologie de la perception*, Paris: Gallimard, 1945 (*PP*).

⁷³ According to Edie, *Speaking*, 110, Merleau-Ponty’s view is that “the meaning of a word and its sound could not be completely arbitrary”, both before reading Saussure and after.

⁷⁴ Allegedly, Schmidt applies the terminology of Roland Barthes, who calls the relation between signifier and signified “symbolic”, in the essay “The Imagination of the Sign” from 1962. However, Barthes does clearly not mean that the two aspects of the sign are related through resemblance or analogy: “we encounter [the symbolic relation] not only in symbols but also in signs (which are, approximately speaking, purely conventional symbols)”, in *Critical Essays*, transl. Richard Howard, Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972, 205; *Œuvres complètes II. 1962–1967*, Paris: Seuil, 2002, 460.

In fact, the *maître* himself, in other texts than the *CLG*, often uses the term “symbol” in order to speak of the sign or sometimes of what he later came to call signifier, e.g. in *Writings*, 145, where he also uses the qualifier “independent symbol”; *Écrits*, 209. Cf. also Arrivé, 47, 89.

⁷⁵ Schmidt, 109–10.

⁷⁶ In Joseph’s words, *op. cit.*, 63.

⁷⁷ Schmidt, 116.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *PPT* 193; *PP* 218.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Without indication, by the way: see Schmidt, 116. To be precise, Schmidt quotes Colin Smith’s translation: “such as would not make it entirely arbitrary”; the qualifier “entirely”, however, has no equivalent in the French original.

⁸² Cf. the following remark from *CAL* 80: “That which makes the word ‘sun’ designate the sun is not the resemblance between the word and the thing [...], but the relationship between the word ‘sun’ and the totality of all English words, it is the manner in which it differentiates itself from them.” *MPS* 68.

⁸³ *MPS* 555.

⁸⁴ *PPT* 194; *PP* 219.

⁸⁵ *CGL* 78; *CLG* 113. Cf. *CLG/E.II* 1130 B: “Theoretically, we may postulate a first act of agreement (of convention). But this fact must not betray us: it has never happened again.”

⁸⁶ Cf. De Mauro’s commentary to *CLG* 442.

⁸⁷ According to Normand it is in the connection between the principle of arbitrariness and the social character of language that the most important novelty of Saussure's ideas is to be found, "and also the one most difficult to recognize": *Saussure*, 127.

⁸⁸ *CGL* 71; *CLG* 104.

⁸⁹ *P2* 112. Cf. *Primacy of Perception*, 84; *MPS* 417.

⁹⁰ *PW* 22; *PM* 33.

⁹¹ *TL* 19–20; *RC* 33–4.

⁹² *CGL* 7; *CLG* 23.

⁹³ According to Normand, the common assumption governing the science of linguistics in Saussure's time was that "nothing serious could be said about language" in any other way than from the historical perspective: "System, Arbitrariness, Value", in Sanders, 92. Saussure himself made important contributions to comparative linguistics, notably with his *Mémoire sur le système primitif des voyelles en indo-européen*, from 1879. For a discussion of the novelty of this work, see Anna Morpurgo Davies, "Saussure and Indo-European Linguistics", also in Sanders, 2004.

⁹⁴ *CGL* 14; *CLG* 30.

⁹⁵ *CGL* 18; *CLG* 36.

⁹⁶ *CGL* 19; *CLG* 38.

⁹⁷ *SNST* 87; *SNS* 152.

⁹⁸ *CLG/E.I* 247 B: "Usage des facultés en général en vue du langage (phonation, etc.)." Cf. *CGL* 14; *CLG* 31.

⁹⁹ *CLG/E.I* 329 B: "Il y a une étude qui ne rentre pas dans la linguistique: c'est la *physiologie de la parole* [...]" (emphasis in text).

¹⁰⁰ *CGL* 18; *CLG* 37.

¹⁰¹ *CLG/E.I* 339 B: "... meilleur moyen pour juger valeur de partie [du langage] *parole* est de se placer dans **langue** comme point de départ" (emphasis and bold type in text).

¹⁰² *CGL* 19; *CLG* 37.

¹⁰³ *CGL* 113; *CLG* 157.

¹⁰⁴ See W. Terrence Gordon, "*Langue and parole*", in Sanders, 78–9.

¹⁰⁵ Normand, "System", 89. It is even, according to Normand, "a matter of controversy [...] whether the general term *la langue* refers to anything at all", *ibid.*, 90. She also claims that most linguists today reject the *langue-parole* distinction, in *Saussure*, 117, 125.

¹⁰⁶ *CGL* 17; *CLG* 36: "linguistique de la langue et linguistique de la parole". The qualification of the former as "the linguistics properly so called", *CGL* 20; *CLG* 38–39, is an addition by the editors (see *CLG/E.I* 368 B).

¹⁰⁷ Schmidt, 107, where he supposedly quotes Saussure: "Indeed, Saussure went so far as to argue: 'Taken as a whole, *parole* cannot be studied.'" The footnote refers to *CGL* 19, where it is said: "Taken as a whole speech cannot be studied". This, however, is a rendering of the original "Le tout global du *langage* est inconnaissable", *CLG* 38 (my emphasis), and the reason is that *parole* and *langue* cannot be the objects of the same study or science. The stance of Schmidt has been fairly common, however, and Arrivé writes, in reference not to Schmidt but to the Italian-French scholarly context, that this position "is absolutely refuted by the *CGL*": Arrivé, 40.

¹⁰⁸ *CGL* 13; *CLG* 30.

¹⁰⁹ Saussure writes: “the concrete entities of language [*la langue*] are not directly observable”, *CGL* 110; *CLG* 153. On the language system as a postulate, see Normand, “System”, 91f.

¹¹⁰ *CGL* 18–19; *CLG* 30.

¹¹¹ *CLG/E.I* 352 B–E.

¹¹² *CGL* 19; *CLG* 38.

¹¹³ *CGL* 90; *CLG* 128. The same point is remade on *CGL* 212; *CLG* 291.

¹¹⁴ Normand, *Saussure*, 39.

¹¹⁵ *CGL* 81; *CLG* 117.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ *SNST* 87; *SNS* 153.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.* The expression “astreint à” implicates the idea of being forced or compelled to do something.

¹¹⁹ It first appears in the essay from 1967, quoted above, two years later reintegrated into “The Question of the Subject: The Challenge of Semiology”, published in Ricœur, *Conflict*; *Conflit*.

¹²⁰ Ricœur, *Conflict*, 247; *Conflit*, 243–4.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 248; 244.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 249; 245.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 253; 249.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ “Structure and Hermeneutics”, “The problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem”, and “Structure, Word, Event”, all collected in Ricœur, *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 79; 80.

¹²⁷ Ricœur writes: “Structuralism leads to thinking in an antinomic way about the relation between language and discourse”, *ibid.*

¹²⁸ An “empirical science” is described in the following way by Ricœur: “empirical [...] designates not solely the role and primacy of observation but also the subordination of inductive operations to deduction and calculus”, *Conflict*, 81; *Conflit*, 82.

¹²⁹ The general idea that the subject is the bearer of meaning, cf. *ibid.*, 85, 246; 86, 242.

¹³⁰ Ricœur: Saussure “stated them in a language that often remained considerably behind the new conceptualization that he introduced”, *ibid.* 81; 81–2.

¹³¹ Ricœur, *ibid.* 85; 85.

¹³² Ricœur shows a similar confusion when he takes the example of a dictionary, necessarily limited in extent, to prove that the lexicon of a language is finite, *ibid.*, 82; 83. Thibault, on his part, does not mention Ricœur’s reading.

¹³³ Thibault, 9. In fact, a similar point was already made by De Mauro, in his comments to *CLG* 453. See also *CLG* 420f., where De Mauro calls the relation between *langue* and *parole* “dialectical”. Nevertheless, commentators have persisted in understanding Saussure’s fundamental distinctions in a dichotomous way. David Holdcroft’s interpretation, *Saussure: Signs, System, and Arbitrariness*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991, discussed in Thibault, 113f., is a typical example of this position.

¹³⁴ *Conflict*, 250–1; *Conflit*, 247.

¹³⁵ *CGL* 87f.; *CLG* 124–125. To my knowledge, there is only one place at which Saussure seemingly speaks about language as a closed system and it is at *CGL* 99; *CLG* 139: “every idiom makes up a closed system”. This, however, is an addition by the editors and has no equivalence whatsoever in the manuscripts.

¹³⁶ *CGL* 88; *CLG* 126.

¹³⁷ *CGL* 140; *CLG* 193. Cf. also *CGL* 199 where he speaks of “the instability of language [*langue*]”; *CLG* 272.

¹³⁸ *CGL* 102; *CLG* 143.

¹³⁹ *TL* 20; *RC* 34.

¹⁴⁰ *CAL* 29; *MPS* 28. Cf. *CAL* 5; *MPS* 11, quoted above.

¹⁴¹ *Revue philosophique de la France et de l'Étranger* 120:11–12 (399–439), 1935. A brief discussion of Saussure’s distinctions occurs here, in relation to the linguistics of Joseph Vendryès: 402 and esp. 427f.

¹⁴² *PPT* 202: “By taking up a famous distinction...” *PP* 229.

¹⁴³ François Dosse, *Histoire du structuralisme, I: Le champ du signe, 1945–1966*, Paris: La Découverte, 1992, 94.

¹⁴⁴ Barthes, *Elements of Semiology*, transl. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith, New York: Hill and Wang, 1967/1994, 24; “Éléments de sémiologie” (1964), in *L’Aventure sémiologique*, Paris: Seuil, 1985, 28.

¹⁴⁵ Arrivé, 194.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 193–4. Greimas’ statement comes from “L’actualité du Saussurisme” (1956), in Greimas, *La Mode en 1830*, Paris: P.U.F., 2000, 373.

Abstract: *The prevailing judgement of Merleau-Ponty’s encounter with Saussure’s linguistics is that, although important for the evolution of his philosophy of language, it was based on a mistaken or at least highly idiosyncratic interpretation of Saussure’s ideas. Significantly, the rendering of Saussure that has been common both in Merleau-Ponty scholarship and in linguistics has been based on the structuralist development of the Genevan linguist’s ideas. This article argues that another reading of Saussure, in the light of certain passages of the Course of General Linguistics forgotten by the structuralists, and of the manuscripts related to the published works, shows to the contrary that Merleau-Ponty’s account was sustainable. An understanding of Saussure’s ideas that does not flinch from their paradoxical features can throw light upon the French phenomenologist’s views on language and expression. Moreover, the “linguistic turn” in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical development, identified by James Edie for example, does not seem to have been so clear-cut as has previously been believed; the influence of Saussure’s thought had certainly begun before he wrote Phenomenology of Perception.*