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UNCANNY ERRORS, PRODUCTIVE CONTRESENS. MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROPRIATION OF FERDINAND DE SAUSSURE'S GENERAL LINGUISTICS

Merleau-Ponty's writings include a substantial body of work devoted to a phenomenological description of language. Even though this corpus is of undisputed scholarly interest, it has received relatively limited attention in the literature, perhaps due to the still dominant view that phenomenology is a program limited to a study of pre-discursive experience, and that an individual subject serves as constituting source point of the origin of meaning. Insofar as it is hard to imagine how a study of language would fit into a program that privileges pre-discursive experience as its immediate field of work, the various developments within phenomenology which take language as a starting point of inquiry may seem like anomalous exceptions to canonical phenomenological pursuits. Correspondingly, there has been relatively little scholarly attention paid specifically to Merleau-Ponty's extensive engagement with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and its philosophical implications – including the implications for what phenomenological methods and purposes are.

Merleau-Ponty was one of the few if not the sole philosopher who identified a phenomenological dimension within Saussure's linguistics. This is a remarkable feat considering the dominant structuralist claim to Saussure's work – or at least to the official doctrine associated with Saussure and laid out in the posthumous redaction of the student lecture notes from the 1907-11 course in general linguistics Saussure taught at the University of Geneva by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye (published as *The Course in General Linguistics*). The official doctrine comprises the familiar oppositional pairings: the signifier and the signified, synchrony and diachrony, language as a structured system of signs (*la langue*) and speaking activity (*la parole*). These oppositional pairings have been so tightly associated with both classical Saussureanism and the French tradition of structuralism that it is usual in the scholarship to conceive of structuralism as a direct offshoot of Saussure's general linguistics. This conception pervades the main established historical and philosophical definitions of structuralism in the proper sense, with Saussure routinely figured as the Founding Father of the structural school of thought in philosophy and the human sciences.[1] However, the official doctrine is largely a posthumous projection of the two editors of the *Course* who imposed a dogmatic vision of general linguistics as a deductive system composed of axiom-like statements about language (*la langue*) in order to promote their own conception of general linguistics as a science; the editors effectively suppressed the philosophical,

critical-reflective dimension of Saussure's general linguistics as developed in the original source materials,[2] since it did not fit the mold of objective science.[3] The editors actively usurped the status of Saussure's direct disciples in order to assume the role of heir apparent and rightful executor of Saussure's intellectual legacy, but they did not attend a single lecture on general linguistics taught by Saussure, and they discredited the students who did, effectively undermining alternative publication attempts of materials from the lectures, notably by Regard and Meillet.[4] In sum, the link between Saussurean linguistics and the structuralist doctrine is not as tight as is usually assumed; not only is the notion that Saussure founded structuralism a retroactive projection (as foundational myths invariably are), it is also, in the specific case of the structuralist claim to Saussurean linguistics, an intellectual illusion enabled by the ghostwriting of a book under Saussure's own name, and by the book's uncritical reception as the official word.

The oppositional pairings: the signifier and the signified, synchrony and diachrony, language as a structured system of signs (*la langue*) and speaking activity (*la parole*) have been regarded as the hallmark of structural activity in philosophy and the human sciences (Barthes, *Critical Essays,* 1972, p. 213). Importantly, they are not construed as neutral distinctions but rather as violent hierarchies, with the signifier, synchrony, and structured system positioned above speaking activity, diachrony, and speech. The former are elevated to the status of scientific objects in the proper sense and regarded in terms of a closed and autonomous system whose inner workings must be studied independently of any and all contingent realizations of signifying activity in particular linguistic (and other meaning-making) practices by concrete individuals at specific points in time. The structuralist privilege attached to an 'internal' system of signs as opposed to its 'external' manifestations leads directly to an estrangement between structure-based and phenomenological approaches to language, considering that the former render all references to speaking subjectivity and lived experience epiphenomenal and non-scientific, while the latter assume them as the enabling ground of signification. One cannot – or so it seems at the first sight – enter the palace of structural linguistics without checking one's phenomenological hat at the door. The long-lived, institutionalized antagonism between the structuralist (and post-structuralist) and the phenomenological approaches has cemented the view that the two are mutually exclusive. There are many ways to soften this perceived antagonism; one way is historical: the very foundations of structuralism, that is, Saussure's general linguistics, when examined in light of the authentic source materials, is teaming with references to phenomenological terms and principles (see conclusion for development). Strange as it may seem, Saussure's linguistics may have been shaped by its presumed opposite: the philosophical tradition of phenomenology.

Having considered some of the ambiguities surrounding the phenomenologico-structuralist relation, I will narrow the focus to Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Saussure's general linguistics in the remainder of

the essay. I propose that Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure's linguistics as laid out in the official version of the *Course* is an unusual, if not an *uncanny*, reading, in that it identifies a phenomenological dimension within Saussure's linguistics, which the authentic sources of Saussure's linguistics corroborate – even though the latter were beyond the philosopher's own power to know. Merleau-Ponty's unorthodox reading of a foundational text for structuralism as being broadly compatible with the tradition of phenomenology has been dismissed as an *error* (Ricoeur, 1967) and a *contresens* (Mounin, 1968), but perhaps such deviant appropriations of foundational texts are the ones to cherish the most, since they effectively dismantle the received dogmas and official doctrines stuffing the cabinets of canonical philosophy – and if the philosophers themselves do not dismantle their dogmas and doctrines, and do not rock their cabinets periodically, then who will?

Merleau-Ponty's reception of the *Course* is unique in its high tolerance for the complexity if not the paradox of general linguistics, where the distinguished levels of language as system and speech turn out to be reciprocally interwoven and mutually conditioning rather than hierarchically layered and mutually opposed. Unlike the later structuralist readers of the *Course* whose hermeneutic strategies are put in the service of deriving a scientific program for the human sciences from general linguistics and biased in favor of an unexamined notion of scientific objectivity, Merleau-Ponty maintains the ambiguous conjuncture of the objective and the subjective in language, in accordance with the precepts of phenomenology. He may, in accordance with the later structuralist readers of the *Course*, regard general linguistics as foundational for the human sciences and philosophy – but without sacrificing philosophical reflection for the sake of scientific success in the process. His approach thus demonstrates that a philosophically complex reading of the *Course* is indeed possible – albeit it remains exceptionally rare and has been largely eclipsed by the dominant structuralist reception.

Merleau-Ponty was in fact concerned with language even before his exposure to Saussure in the late 1940s, as evidenced by "The Body as Expression, and Speech" chapter from the *Phenomenology of Perception (*1945), where a gestural theory of meaning and expression is laid out as basis for understanding language. It is the encounter with Saussure, however, that inaugurated an over a decade-long engagement with linguistics. One can identify therefore a veritable "linguistic" phase within his overall philosophical trajectory, albeit with a decidedly non-structuralist emphasis on language as living speech.

Merleau-Ponty's engagement with linguistics can be dated back to the 1947-48 Course at University of Lyon on "Language and Communication" (unpublished; summarized in Silverman's *Inscriptions*), followed by the 1949-50 Course at the University of Paris on "Consciousness and the Acquisition of Language" (published under the same title). Between 1950 and 1952 Merleau-Ponty worked on a book-long project dealing with linguistic and literary experience, tentatively titled *The Prose of the World* (unfinished and published posthumously). He authored a series of essays dealing to some extent with the

problem of language, notably the 1951 'Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man' (in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*) and 'The Philosopher and Sociology' (in *Signs*), the 1952: 'Phenomenology of Language' & 'Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence' (also in *Signs*), the 1953 "An Unpublished Text by M. Merleau-Ponty: a Prospectus of his Work" (a prospectus presented as part of his candidacy to the College de France, published in *Primacy of Perception*) and *In Praise of Philosophy* (an inaugural address to the College de France, published under the same title). From 1953 to 1954 he gave the lecture series on "The Sensible World and the World of Expression," "Studies in the Literary Use of Language," and "The Problem of Speech" at the College de France (summarized in *The Themes from the Lectures at the College de France*); the 1959 essay "From Mauss to Claude Levi-Strauss" (in *Signs*) also belongs to the "linguistic" phase.

Like Saussure before him, Merleau-Ponty did not complete a book-long treatise dealing with language. His major work dealing with philosophy of language, *The Prose of the World*, remains unfinished. It was half–completed when Merleau-Ponty applied to the College de France, yet apparently he lost interest in the project around 1952-53, and abandoned it in 1959 (see C. Lefort's Preface to *Prose of the World*). His other essays and lectures dealing with language were never unified into a coherent body of work. As in Saussure's case, this may be a testimony to the difficulty of the task at hand, rather than a mere failure, and one finds plentiful resources for a phenomenology of language within the extant texts.

Merleau-Ponty regards a phenomenological approach to language as a much-needed remedy for the crisis engendered by the existing scientific or observational approach. The scientific approach is directed toward an already established or instituted language, for example, a body of written texts studied in philology, or a sub-understood system of phonological, morphological, and syntactic relations subjected to structural analysis. It therefore regards language solely "in the past" (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, p. 104), and as an aggregate of externally related elements without intrinsic unity. To adopt an exclusively empirical study of language means then to "pulverize [it] into a sum of fortuitously united facts" (Ibid, p. 39), and therefore to miss the pre-existent unity of language as a communicative medium shared by a community of users. The crisis engendered within an un-reflected empirical study by such inevitable fragmentation of language into atomic facts can be rectified by integrating a phenomenological approach into linguistics. Here language gets recovered as a circumscribed field of subjective expression and intersubjective communication. In Merleau-Ponty's words:

> Taking language as a *fait accompli* – as the residue of past acts of signification and the record of already acquired meanings – the scientist inevitably misses the peculiar clarity of speaking, the fecundity of expression. From the phenomenological point of view (that is, for the speaking subject who makes use of his language as a means of communicating with a living community), a language regains its unity. It

is no longer the result of a chaotic past of independent linguistic facts but a system all of whose elements cooperate in a single attempt to express which is turned toward the present or the future and thus governed by a present logic. (ibid, p. 85)

The phenomenologist adopts the speech situation as an inalienable ground of any empirically sound inquiry into language – including a study of languages from the past:

> to know what language is, it is necessary first of all to speak. It no longer suffices to reflect on the languages lying before … in historical documents of the past. It is necessary to take them over, to live with them, to speak them. It is only by making contact with the speaking subject that I can get a sense of what other languages are and can move around in them. (Merleau-Ponty, "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," in *Primacy of Perception*, 1964, p. 83).

The recourse to speech or lived language would then amount to *methodical subjectivism*, an internal take on language even within its historical dimension, and history would emerge less as a sequence of external events derived from dusty documents than as a co-existence of the contemporary speaker with the extinct subjectivities, an intimate co-presence to a system of expression, including all other presents too (Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of World*, 1973, p. 25). Diachrony is but a sequence of synchronic arrangements.

> When I discover that the social is not simply an object but to begin with my situation, and when I awaken within myself the consciousness of this social-which-is-mine, then my whole synchrony becomes present to me, through that synchrony I become capable of really thinking about the whole past as the synchrony it has been in its time, and all the convergent and discordant action of the historical community is effectively given to me in my living present. (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, p. 112)

The phenomenological turn to the speaking community, situated in time, provides a remedy to the crisis within a solely objective linguistic science and needs to be injected into the empirical study of language; Merleau-Ponty regards the set of phenomenological methods as a useful and workable scientific program rather than a self-standing and self-sufficient reflective inquiry. Phenomenology is not an alternative to science, but a guide for how to reform the science from a purely objective model to a subjective and objective one. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty locates such a phenomenological reform within "certain linguistic investigations" which "anticipate Husserl's own" (ibid, p. 105) and notes that "certain linguists …. without knowing it tread upon the ground of phenomenology" (Ibid). The linguists treading upon phenomenological grounds feature prominently Ferdinand de Saussure, whose general linguistics is taken up in Merleau-Ponty's 1953 Course at the College de France on the problem of speech (*Themes from the Lectures at the College de France*). Receiving general linguistics in a decidedly non-structuralist manner, Merleau-Ponty states that Saussure adopted "speech as his central

theme" in the *Course* (Merleau-Ponty, *Themes from*…, 1970, p. 19); Merleau-Ponty's own course would have sought "to illustrate and extend the Saussurean conception of speech as a positive and dominating function" (ibid, p. 20).

On Merleau-Ponty's reading, Saussure's semiology is a science founded on speaking subjectivity: the subject must transcend the signs toward their signification in speaking; they only hold it in abeyance (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, p. 88). Similarly, the very definition of the sign as composed of two inseparable signifying and signified facets can only be offered from the perspective of living speech, rather than as an objective property of the sign itself; in Merleau-Ponty's terms, while "the rigid distinction between sign and signification …. seemed evident when one considered instituted language alone," it "breaks down in speech where sound and meaning are not simply associated" (ibid, p. 18). The structuralist view that the signified is transcendent to the semiological system would then be guilty of bias in favor of the instituted language alone and disregards the possibility of linguistic expression where speech, like gesture, is saturated with meaning. In agreement with the student lecture notes on general linguistics, the thesis of absolute arbitrariness of the sign gets relativized as soon as the sign rejoins its immediate milieu of signifying practice and ceases to be viewed formally, within a logical set of operations. As a result, language ceases to appear as a formal, closed and static system – language must be spoken, and there is contingency in *its* logic (ibid, p. 88). Instead of a distinction between the deep structural level and the surface phenomenon of speech, there is a crisscrossing or a chiasm between expression and language-system: "Already in Saussure [CLG] … speech is far from being a simple effect [of language], it modifies and sustains language just as much as it is conveyed through it" (ibid, p. 19). Speech can therefore rewrite the code of language, and its actions feed back into the source.

The turn to language as a signifying practice recovers the essential unity of language which a purely historical (and external) approach must miss:

> Saussure shows admirably that if words and language in general, considered over time – or, as he says, diachronically – offer an example of virtually every semantic slippage, it cannot be the history of the word or language which determines its present meaning…Whatever the hazards and confusions in the path of the French language …. it is still a fact that we speak and carry on dialogue, that the historical chaos of language is caught up in our determination to express ourselves and to understand those who are members of our linguistic community. (Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 1973, p. 22-3)

Merleau-Ponty thus locates a core of reason or *logos* at work within language insofar as it facilitates communication and mutual understanding within a speech community. It is this reason that binds language together from within – but its logic is tainted with contingency; accidents and exceptions are always possible and become amassed in its net without yet leading to pure chaos ("a new conception of the being of language, which is now logos in contingency" (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, p. 88). "Saussure has the great

merit of having taken the step which liberates history from historicism and makes a new conception of reason possible. …The mutations in every signifying apparatus, however unexpected they may seem when taken singly, are integral with those of all the others, and that is what makes the whole remain a means of communication" (Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 1973, p. 23). Saussure would then have identified a pact of reason within language – a basic trust in this medium of world- and self-disclosure, an ongoing contract with one another that no amount of deceit has undone; as speakers, we are the custodians of this commonwealth and our *Mitsein* maintains its unity, however elusive and fragile.

Merleau-Ponty both locates a phenomenological orientation within Saussure's linguistic works *and* finds an echo of Saussure's emphasis on living speech within Husserl's writings, notably the *Ideen* and *Krisis*. Husserl's work would be a subsequent iteration of Saussure's earlier turn to living speech and subjectivity: "Husserl does not say it… but it is hard not to think of Saussure when Husserl insists that we return from language as object to the spoken word." (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, p. 105/6). Husserl would be "approximating the task which Saussure had set before himself: to return to the speaking subject in its linguistic context – which for Husserl is a fullness and for Saussure a system of differences." (Silverman, *Inscriptions*, 1997, p. 160). Merleau-Ponty thus complicates the received view of Saussure and Husserl as foundational figures for the two opposed schools of thought: structuralism and phenomenology; the reader can instead envisage a phenomenology predating its presumed foundation, since outlined in Saussure's and then echoed in Husserl's work; the reader is also made to realize that the foundation of structuralism is fractured at best and strangely contaminated by its presumed opposite.

The phenomenological orientation shared by Husserl and Saussure can be fleshed out under the heading of "evidence and difference" (to adopt the distinction from the "Differenz und Evidenz" article by Simone Roggenbuck, 1997). Both Husserl and Saussure seek after the essences and suspend reference to a natural scientific approach to the phenomena under investigation. While Husserl adopts the possibility of direct access to the essences via the evidence of intuition, Saussure opts for an indirect access, mediated by the differential character of the semiological system. Saussure thus lets language itself guide the phenomenological method, and the possibility of attaining the essential meaning of language is subjected to the diacritical principle governing any linguistic meaning. It is the logos of language that dictates the methods of linguistic phenomenology, as the task of phenomenology would consist in heeding to what language itself is saying about *itself*, following *its* lead. Phenomenology of language reverses therefore into language *as* (and *of*) phenomenology, language as a site of signifying donation, already instituted and thus predating subjective intention, and yet necessarily enacted and revealed to a speaking/listening subject, and therefore not subjectless. This phenomenological notion of language undercuts the transcendental/structuralist divide between the signifying subject and the semiological system; the system

is already there, and we are continually borrowing from its resources when we listen and speak. And yet the system is neither closed nor complete; it does not expulse the subject like a foreign body but lies open to new speakers and novel instances of usage and inhabitation. It lives in and through speech but is not exclusively configured by consciousness, intention, and intuition. Nor does it evacuate these subjective terms altogether. Each term gets relativized through the relation to what was thought to be excluded by it and thus gets shot with indirectness, difference, incompleteness.

This is in outline the approach of linguistic phenomenology: it occupies the ambiguous juncture of the borrowed and the self-made, the contemporary and the transgenerational, the novel and the sedimented, from which the subject speaks. This juncture is the meeting point of the two tracks running across the field of language, itself dual or even divided between "two languages": *le langage parlé* and *le langage parlant*, the sedimented language and speech, language as an institution and language "which creates itself in its expressive acts, which sweeps me on from the signs toward meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 1973, p. 10). The phenomenological orientation to speech is then already entangled within language and cannot retrieve the hypothetical standpoint of the universal and timeless constituting consciousness that Merleau-Ponty attributes to the early Husserl (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, p. 85). It would not consist in the Kantian task of determining the conditions of possibility of all and any possible languages. The philosopher rather is "the one who realizes that he is situated in language, that he *is speaking*" (ibid). Linguistic phenomenology does not seek to retrieve the "conditions without which" there is no language, and which a purely thinking subject could enumerate, before an entry into language properly so called. From the position of a speaking subject, such a return instantiates the myth of origin and a vain attempt to step outside the boundaries of experience for the sake of objectivity. But Husserl's objection to Kant retains full force, for any attempt to capture the pre-existing conditions of experience transcends the boundaries of situated experience and falls outside the province of phenomenology, whose methods are descriptive and steeped in the concrete reality of what appears. Husserl's objection applies to a study of linguistic experience (as to any other), which is a *sine qua non* situation for any practitioner of phenomenology; it therefore makes it possible to pursue the phenomenological study in a rigorous and methodical manner from within the linguistic field, without the need to recover its pre-conditions from the mythical past of pure thought. A rigorous phenomenological method retains the ambiguous position of a subject of philosophical thinking, who is both a beneficiary of language, "enveloped and situated [with]in it" (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, p. 85), *and* a source of new growth and interminable fermentation which coherently deforms the existing fabric of language without dissolving it.

Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the transformative effects that a re-focusing of study from consciousness to language has on the discipline of phenomenology as such. Whereas a phenomenology of consciousness is tied to the perspective

of constitution, it is perennially haunted by the problem of others, who appear theoretically excluded from the subjectively figured world (who would not be truly other, but serial subjects). Re-centering phenomenology in speech dissolves these problems, for the self finds itself situated in a pre-constituted world, always already with others (ibid, p. 95). Hence Merleau-Ponty concludes:

"When I speak or understand, I experience that presence of others in myself or of myself in others which is the stumbling-block of the theory of intersubjectivity, I experience that presence of what is represented which is the stumbling-block of the theory of time, and I finally understand what is meant by Husserl's enigmatic statement, 'Transcendental subjectivity is intersubjectivity.' To the extent that what I say has meaning, I am a different 'other' for myself when I am speaking; and to the extend that I understand, I no longer know who is speaking and who is listening" (ibid, p. 97). Speech introduces a shared medium which is the "solution" to the problem of others, without dissolving them; it is an ambiguous third that mediates the relation between the two; it is neither wholly my own nor the others, and that is why we inhabit it both. A phenomenology of sociality cannot therefore bypass a phenomenology of speech: speech is an evolved form of social being, and sociality comes into sharper focus when regarded through its lens.

Merleau-Ponty's claim that Saussure was treading upon the ground of phenomenology is unusual in light of the instituted association between Saussure and structuralism. Pace the *Course* and its canonical interpretation, Saussure's linguistic science would have the language system (*la langue*) as its direct and sole object; it would be distinguished from a science of speech (*la parole*), which was left undeveloped by Saussure, and focused on the phonetic evolutions of languages over time; it would view speech primarily as a psycho-physiological process and would thus share its object with the disciplines of phonology and phonetics. Only the linguistics of *la langue* could then be demarcated as a new and autonomous scientific discipline, distinct from the existing empirical sciences of phonetics, phonology, and philology. Its method would be synchronic study of a static and rule-governed system of signs. In the linguistics of *la parole*, the focus would be diachronic, covering the contingent and external (to the language system) developments of speech productions in history. The separation of the two scientific approaches would be motivated (or possibly motivate in turn) a separation into two distinct areas of study – structure and speech. Saussure would thus have laid the foundations of a structuralist approach to language as an alternative to the phenomenological focus on the signifying subject. Structuralism would be a science, that is, an objective approach unaffected by the subjective experience of language use in speech. Saussure would then be a traditionalist in terms of method but an innovator in terms of the object, the latter being neither a loosely hanging collection of empirical facts about particular languages, nor a series of written records, nor the functioning of the vocal apparatus and its products, but the systematic and rule-governed organization at the deep level which provides

the conditions of possibility for any surface phenomenon. *La langue* would serve as a condition of possibility and set of inherent principles governing any of its manifestations. Such a study seems at the opposite end from the phenomenological commitment to the primacy of speech and the inalienable standpoint of experiencing subject. Did Merleau-Ponty simply misunderstand the basic claims of Saussure's linguistic and read into it what obviously was not there?

Merleau-Ponty recognizes the primacy of the synchronic perspective in Saussure's study; on his reading, however, synchrony is bound to the subjective (albeit socially modulated) experience of speech. The two categories in Saussure's linguistics would then be "a synchronic linguistics of speech (*parole*)," and "a diachronic linguistics of language (*langue*)" (Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, 1964, p. 86), with the synchronic linguistics of speech revealing "at each moment an order, a system, a totality without which communication and linguistic community would be impossible" (Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 1973, p. 22/23).

Merleau-Ponty appears, on first sight, guilty of a double oversight in his reading of Saussure. He gives primacy to *la parole* over *la langue*, whereas the primary object of linguistic or semiological study would have been *la langue*. Secondly, he raises the possibility of a "synchronic linguistics of speech (*parole*)," distinguished from a diachronic linguistics of language (*langue*), in disregard of the oft lamented "fact" that Saussure failed to deliver a linguistics of speech, and of the usual alignment of synchrony with *la langue* and diachrony with *la parole*. Unsurprisingly then, Mounin accuses Merleau-Ponty of committing *a contresens* by refusing the usual opposition between synchrony and diachrony (Mounin, *Ferdinand de Saussure…*, 1968, p. 80). Similarly, Ricoeur charges Merleau-Ponty's unorthodox distinction between the synchronic linguistics of speech and the diachronic linguistics of language with being no more than *an error* (Ricoeur, 'The Phenomenology of Language', 1967, p. 12). Merleau-Ponty is charged with a misguided attempt to incorporate objective structures into the subjective point of view and to force the historical weight of language into the present of the spoken word. A synchronic linguistics of speech would then itself be a double misnomer, since speech, on a structuralist reading of the *Course*, is neither a properly linguistic nor a synchronic entity and *de facto* falls completely outside a scientific study of language. It is not systematic and rule-governed in the way *la langue* is and, for this very reason, it does not lend itself to a snapshot-like view in the present. Speech would then be a purely empirical and historical datum, relegated to a natural scientific study within phonetics and physiology, as well as to historical linguistics; it would not be amenable to the new semiological program devised by Saussure.

Upon closer view, Merleau-Ponty's *error* contains, albeit in an embryonic form, a more faithful response to Saussure's project than the received structuralist one. It maintains a commitment to subjectivity within a philosophically inflected study of language and does not force it into an objectivist ideology. Merleau-Ponty

gleaned this commitment from the published edition of the *Course*, but the source materials of Saussure's thought lend direct support to such a phenomenological interpretation. Saussure may not have expressly posited a "synchronic linguistics of speech," but he does accord priority to the speaking subject in linguistics and insists on the need to study language as an *act* and a *phenomenon* tied to experiencing consciousness in the manuscript sources. His emphasis on the "language acts" (*actes de langage*) approximates Merleau-Ponty's commitment to language as speech.[5] They share an emphasis on the social dimension of language, without yet reducing the speaking individual to an impersonal set of societal conventions. They emphasize a reciprocal interdependency between the daily praxis and the historically sedimented institution of language, against the more widespread view of a hierarchy of levels. Merleau-Ponty's *error* is therefore not solely uncanny in light of the recent discoveries and developments in the field of Saussurean linguistics; his *contresens* is also productive: it enacts the possibility of a robust, phenomenological study of language and diffuses the presumed antagonism between phenomenology and structuralism (and post-structuralism).

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NOTES:

1   Culler notes that "the term structuralism is generally used to designate work that marks its debts to structural linguistics and deploys a vocabulary drawn from the legacy of Ferdinand de Saussure…There are many writings, from Aristotle to Noam Chomsky, that share the structuralist propensity to analyze objects as the products of a combination of structural elements within a system, but if they do not display a Saussurean ancestry, they are usually not deemed structuralist" (Ibid, p. 5). Sturrock states that "The founding father of structural linguistics in Europe, and the man frequently looked on as the patron of the whole Structuralist movement, was the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure" (Sturrock, *Structuralism*, 2003, p. 26). And Dosse observes that the structuralism's (in the proper sense) "central core, its unifying center, is the model of modern linguistics and the figure of Ferdinand de Saussure, presented as its founder" (Dosse, *History of Structuralism*, 1997, p. 43).

2   For a study of the sources of the *Course*, see Godel 1957; see also the critical edition of the *Course* by Engler 1967. Some of the student lecture notes have been published (de Saussure, 1993; 1996; 1997); the recently discovered writings by Saussure himself, together with the previously known texts, have been published as *Ecrits* 2002; *Writings* 2006.

3   I discuss editorial manipulations of the source materials related to Saussure's general linguistics and the editorial production of the 'official doctrine' in detail in *Ferdinand de Saussure's Philosophy of Language. Phenomenology, Structuralism* (tentative title, book manuscript under review).

4   I discuss this process in detail in *Ferdinand de Saussure's Philosophy of Language* (Ibid).

5   Sanders comments that "As fluent speaker of German, Saussure was no doubt aware of the contemporary resonance of the term 'phenomenon' in a philosophical tradition with which he has not be usually been associated, that of Hegel and Husserl …In particular his comments about the language act (cf. today's 'speech act') and the emphasis on the speaking subject, both show us a different Saussure from the one most often associated with the *Course*" (Saussure, *Writings*, 2006, Preface XXV). Sanders perceptively adds that there are lines of research worth pursuing in this regard (Ibid); I pursue such lines of research in *Ferdinand de Saussure's Philosophy of Language* by documenting the phenomenological influences on Saussure's general linguistics, notably the work of the Polish linguist Mikolaj Kruszewski, who sought to develop 'something like a phenomenology of language"; I also make the case that Saussure's conception of general linguistics as developed in the authentic source materials is best deciphered by way of Hegel's conception of the science of consciousness. The references to consciousness and subjectivity were routinely effaced in the editorial version of the *Course* (Ibid.).

Uncanny Errors, Productive Contresens.
Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenological Appropriation
of Ferdinand de Saussure's General Linguistics

Stawarska considers the ambiguities surrounding the antagonism between the phenomenological and the structuralist traditions by pointing out that the supposed foundation of structuralism, the *Course in General Linguistics*, was ghostwritten posthumously by two editors who projected a dogmatic doctrine onto Saussure's lectures, while the authentic materials related to Saussure's linguistics are teeming with phenomenological references. She then narrows the focus to Merleau-Ponty's engagement with Saussure's linguistics and argues that it offers an unusual, if not an *uncanny*, reading of the *Course*, in that it identifies a phenomenological dimension within the text, against the grain of the dominant structuralist claim. This phenomenological dimension is corroborated by the authentic sources of Saussure's linguistics, even though the latter were beyond the philosopher's own power to know. Merleau-Ponty's unorthodox reading of the *Course* as being broadly compatible with the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology has been dismissed as an *error* (Ricoeur, 1967) and a *contresens* (Mounin, 1968), but Stawarska proposes that such deviant appropriations of foundational texts are the ones to cherish the most, since they effectively dismantle the received dogmas and official doctrines stuffing the cabinets of canonical philosophy. She argues specifically that Merleau-Ponty's contested distinction between "a synchronic linguistics of speech (*parole*)" and "a diachronic linguistics of language (*langue*)" (*Signs*, 1964, p. 86), which gives primacy to *la parole* over *la langue*, and raises the possibility of a systematic study of *la parole,* contains a more faithful response to Saussure's own project than the received structuralist view that *la langue* alone constitutes the proper object of linguistic study.

Erreurs étranges et contresens productifs.
L'appropriation phénoménologique merleau-pontienne
de la linguistique générale de Saussure

L'auteure aborde l'étude des ambiguïtés qui entourent l'antagonisme entre les traditions phénoménologique et structuraliste en soulignant le fait que la fondation supposée du structuralisme dans le *Cours de linguistique générale* a en fait été posée, et écrite à titre de posthume, par deux éditeurs qui ont projeté une doctrine dogmatique sur le contenu des cours de Saussure eux-mêmes, alors que le matériel authentique ayant trait à la linguistique saussurienne est riche en références phénoménologiques. En se concentrant ensuite sur l'explication de Merleau-Ponty avec la doctrine de Saussure, l'auteure montre qu'elle relève d'une lecture inhabituelle, si ce n'est étrange, du *Cours* en ce qu'elle pointe la dimension phénoménologique de ce texte, à rebours de l'interprétation structuraliste dominante. Cette dimension phénoménologique se trouve corroborée par l'examen des sources authentiques de la linguistique saussurienne que, pour sa part, le philosophe français ne pouvait pas connaître. L'interprétation hétérodoxe du *Cours* par Merleau-Ponty, qui le rapproche pour une large part de la tradition phénoménologique husserlienne, s'est vue écartée comme *erreur* (Ricoeur, 1967) et comme *contresens* (Mounin, 1968). L'auteure avance cependant que de telles appropriations déviantes des textes fondamentaux sont précisément celles que nous devons privilégier car elles défont les dogmes reçus et les doctrines officielles qui

encombrent la philosophie canonique. Elle montre en particulier que la distinction contestée que Merleau-Ponty a opérée entre "linguistique synchronique de la parole" et "linguistique diachronique de la langue", qui accorde une supériorité à la *parole* par rapport à la *langue* et qui ouvre la possibilité d'une analyse systématique de la *parole*, témoigne de davantage de fidélité au projet propre de Saussure que la thèse structuraliste usuelle selon laquelle *seule la langue* est l'objet propre de la linguistique.

Errori perturbanti, produttivi controsensi.
L'appropriazione fenomenologica merleaupontyana
della linguistica generale saussuriana

Stawarska riflette sulle ambiguità che circondano l'antagonismo tra la tradizione fenomenologica e la tradizione strutturalista a partire dalla considerazione che il presunto fondamento del pensiero strutturalista, il *Corso di linguistica generale*, sia un testo redatto dopo la morte di Saussure da due curatori che proiettarono sulle lezioni saussuriane una dottrina dogmatica, mentre i materiali originari da cui nasceva l'elaborazione saussuriana brulicano di fatto di spunti fenomenologici. Stawarska si concentra poi sul confronto che Merleau-Ponty condusse con la linguistica di Saussure, affermando che essa offre una lettura inusuale, se non addirittura perturbante, del *Corso*, nella misura in cui identifica all'interno del testo una dimensione fenomenologica che va a collidere con la sua interpretazione strutturalista, allora dominante. La presenza di tale dimensione fenomenologica è peraltro corroborata dalle fonti stesse della linguistica saussuriana, al di là del fatto che queste ultime non poterono essere note al filosofo francese. L'eterodossa lettura merleaupontyana del *Corso*, ampiamente compatibile con la tradizione della fenomenologia husserliana, è stata liquidata come un "errore" (Ricoeur, 1967) o come un "controsenso" (Mounin, 1968). Stawarska afferma invece che simili riappropriazioni di testi fondativi vanno accolte come eventi particolarmente felici, dato che dismettono i dogmi tramandati e le dottrine ufficiali di cui sono ingombre le filosofie tradizionali. In particolare Stawarska sostiene che la contestatissima distinzione merleaupontyana tra "linguistica sincronica della parola" e "linguistica diacronica della lingua" (*Segni*, 1964), che consente al filosofo di attribuire un privilegio alla *parole* rispetto alla *langue*, risponde al progetto saussuriano in maniera molto più fedele della prospettiva tradizionalmente strutturalista secondo cui la sola *langue* costituirebbe l'oggetto proprio della linguistica.