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Gesturing in Language: Merleau-Ponty and Mukařovský at the Phenomenological Limits of Structuralism

This study aims to corroborate Merleau-Ponty's interpretations of fundamental ideas from Saussure's linguistics by linking them to works that were independently elaborated by Jan Mukařovský, Czech structuralist aesthetician and literary theorist. I provide a comparative analysis of the two authors' theories of language and their interpretations of thought as fundamentally determined by language. On this basis, I investigate how they conceive linguistic innovation and its translation into changes in the constituted language and other social codes and institutions. I explain how they elaborate on Saussure's idea of language as a system of oppositions by interpreting cultural innovation as a systematic variation of pre-established social norms and, similarly, linguistic innovation as gesturing within language. Connectedly, I show how Mukařovský's works help clarify Merleau-Ponty's focus on the gestural dimension of language. By discussing the two thinkers' arguments in favour of linguistic innovation, I explore what could be called phenomenological limits of structuralism.

Keywords: phenomenology; structuralism; Merleau-Ponty; Mukařovský; language; cultural innovation

1. Introduction

On the traditional view, phenomenology is a discipline concentrating on descriptions of first-person experiences and a subject's meaning-giving acts. In contrast, structuralism supposedly reflects how all meaningful experiences are shaped by self-contained and impersonal symbolic systems. However, this opposing view has also been challenged. Building on the latter approach, this study aims to improve the understanding of how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy integrates and develops important thoughts that were eventually exploited by structuralists.[1] Specifically, I intend to corroborate Merleau-Ponty's interpretations of several fundamental ideas from Saussure's linguistics by elucidating their convergence with works of Jan Mukařovský, structuralist aesthetician and literary theorist.[2]

"Phenomenologist" Merleau-Ponty was open to thoughts of "structuralists" such as Lévi-Strauss.[3] Accordingly, numerous Merleau-Ponty scholars have analysed the relation of his ideas to structuralism while relying on the traditional view of structure as

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[1] Some commentators explore the convergences between phenomenology and structuralism even in relation to Husserl's original project, see Aurora, 'The Early Husserl Between Structuralism and Transcendental Philosophy'.

[2] For an overview of Mukařovský's life and works, see Sládek, 'Mukařovský's Structuralism and Semiotics'; Steiner, 'Jan Mukařovský's Structural Aesthetics'.

[3] See in particular Merleau-Ponty, 'From Mauss to Claude Lévi-Strauss'.

an impersonal constraint opposed to personal expressive acts.[4] Beyond that, commentators have thoroughly discussed how Merleau-Ponty influenced the works of Lacan, Foucault, and Derrida.[5] More recently, Merleau-Ponty scholars who explore these convergences readily claim that Merleau-Ponty's reading of Saussure, specifically, allowed him to "achieve a fruitful appropriation of structuralism within phenomenology".[6] However, the exact nature of the resulting theory remains under-explored. Further clarification is needed, especially regarding how Merleau-Ponty integrates a phenomenological emphasis on individual (innovative) linguistic acts into a structural interpretation of language and how the latter plays a positive role in his philosophy. I argue that by synthesising the conceptual framework linked to the Husserlian idea of "institution" (*Stiftung*) with Saussure's thoughts on language development, Merleau-Ponty succeeds in outlining a theory in which individual acts of subjects and trans-personal systems of meaning constitution are conceived of in a balanced way and as reciprocal factors.

Moreover, recent publications of Saussure's writings beyond the 1916 edition of *Course in General Linguistics* demonstrate a different philosophy than what is known as "structuralism". For example, Beata Stawarska's re-reading of Saussure's linguistics invites us to consider it as a contribution to phenomenological philosophy.[7] Stawarska even briefly outlines reasons for considering Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach congruent with emphases on speech practice and language change in Saussure's manuscripts.[8] I believe that it is possible to support and develop Stawarska's approach by considering Mukařovský's work. Along with his close friend Roman Jakobson, Mukařovský was among the founders of the structuralist Prague Linguistic Circle in 1926.[9] Yet, the Prague Circle's reception of Saussure's writings differed significantly from that of the Geneva Circle, which included the two editors of Saussure's *Course*.[10] Interestingly, the Prague Circle read and appreciated Husserl's writings.[11] In 1935, Husserl also visited the Circle to lecture on "The Phenomenology of Language", on an invitation from his pupil, phenomenologist Jan Patočka, himself a member of the Circle from 1933. Stawarska even argues that the markedly different reception of structuralism within the Prague Circle "*depended* on its alliance with phenomenology"[12].

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[4] E.g., Schmidt, *Maurice Merleau-Ponty.*

[5] See, for example, Duportail, *Les institutions du monde de la vie. Merleau-Ponty et Lacan*; Bimbenet, *Après Merleau-Ponty: études sur la fécondité d'une pensée*, 15-104; Alloa, 'Writing, Embodiment, Deferral: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on The Origin of Geometry'.

[6] Kee, 'Phenomenology and Ontology', 18; similarly, Andén, 'Language and Tradition', 189; See also Foultier, 'Merleau-Ponty's Encounter'; Stawarska, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language*, 181-93; Stawarska, *Saussure's Linguistics*, 117-24.

[7] Stawarska, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language*; *Saussure's Linguistics*.

[8] Stawarska, *Saussure's Linguistics*, 117-24; referring to Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*.

[9]   Merleau-Ponty did not know Mukařovský's writings, but he read some linguistic works by Jakobson and Trubetzkoy, Mukařovský's colleagues from the Prague Circle. Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, 14-20; *Themes*, 20-21; *Le problème de la parole*, 92-96. See Leistle's study '"Polyfunctionality," "Structural Dominant" and "Poetic Function"' for an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's early philosophy of language in relation to Jakobson's key terms.

[10] Stawarska, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language*, 243-44, explains that the Prague Circle put "a marked emphasis on a necessary dialectical integration between synchrony and diachrony... as well as the system and the subject." For an overview of Mukařovský's position within the Prague Circle, see Sládek, *Metamorphoses*, 34-63.

[11] See Stawarska, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language*, 177; quoting Jakobson, *Selected Writings*, 713-4.

[12] Stawarska, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language*, 244 (emphasis added). I note that Stawarska does not directly discuss Mukařovský's works.

There is some evidence that Mukařovský's theoretical position was influenced by phenomenology,[13] and one can argue that he integrated it better as his work evolved. In his first generally theoretical studies, he adopted an objectivist sociological perspective and evaluated the constitution of meaning merely against the background of specific constellations of social structures.[14] Later, however, his analyses of works of art also consider the "subject's self-realisation vis-à-vis the external world".[15] As I demonstrate below, by introducing the concept of "unintentionality" as a structural dimension of the aesthetic or "autonomous" sign, he ultimately outlined a fundamentally dynamic structural theory of meaning which systematically considers how a sign is taken up by its perceiver.[16]

Building on the concrete arguments from Merleau-Ponty's and Mukařovský's writings, this paper aims to formulate key elements of an integrative third position that extends beyond structuralism and phenomenology as opposing disciplines. Specifically, I focus on how the two authors contribute to overcoming dichotomies between individual subjective experiences and impersonal social systems, concrete situated acts and abstract meanings, and representational and innovative speaking. Dedicated to Merleau-Ponty, Section 2 explains the fundamental concepts of his theory of language, such as "speaking speech" and "spoken speech", the Husserlian notion of "institution", and Merleau-Ponty's approach to Saussure. Dedicated to Mukařovský, Section 3 explains his notions of the "standard" and "autonomous" sign, the "semantic gesture", and "unintentionality". Both sections describe how the two authors conceive of thought as fundamentally determined by language and investigate how they envision linguistic innovation and the process through which it translates into changes in other social codes and institutions. Section 4 explains how they both congruently elaborate on Saussure's idea of language as a system of oppositions by interpreting cultural innovation as a systematic adjustment of pre-established social norms. Finally, it clarifies the two thinkers' opposing assessments regarding the priority between representational and innovative language.

2. Merleau-Ponty: from speech as a gesture to language as an institution

2.1. Dynamic intertwinement of speech and thought

Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language maintains that there is a close connection between thought and spoken language. He contrasts his position with that of early Husserl, for whom "language could not possibly play any other role in respect to thought than that of an accompaniment, substitute, memorandum".[17] In contrast to the idea of language as a mere material vehicle and secondary instrument of self-contained thought,

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[13] For example, in a 1932 interview, Mukařovský claimed that "structure is a phenomenological reality," that is, noetic and not empirical-noematic ('[Mukařovský interviewed] Rozhovor s Janem Mukařovským. Rozmlouval Bohumil Novák', 226). In 'Art as Semiotic Fact' (1934), Mukařovský elaborates this approach by attempting to synthesise Saussure's theory of linguistic sign with Husserlian terminology, in particular the distinction noetic-noematic. However, I believe that the most fruitful elements of Mukařovský's work come to light in the context of Merleau-Pontyan, and not Husserlian, phenomenology.

[14] See in particular Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function*.

[15] Mukařovský, 'Place of the Aesthetic Function among the Other Functions', 40.

[16] Sládek points out that, "in contrast to the post-structuralist proclamation of the 'death of the subject,' Mukařovský ... understands the subject of the perceiver as an active participant of the process of semiosis" (*Metamorphosis*, 154). Similarly, according to Steiner, Mukařovský viewed the subject as "an intersubjective creator and perceiver participating in the aesthetic process", "an active force indispensable to the genesis of meaning", "the crucial factor in aesthetic semiosis" ('Mukařovský's Structural Aesthetics', xxvii, xxxiii, xxxiv).

[17] Merleau-Ponty, 'On the Phenomenology of Language', 84.

Merleau-Ponty emphasises that language "is never the mere clothing of a thought which otherwise possesses itself in full clarity".[18] In other words, meaning emerges *in* speech itself; a person "does not think prior to speaking, nor even while speaking; his speech is his thought".[19] Thought does not truly exist until it is articulated in speech, for there is no thought that "does not require of words the means of being present to itself".[20] Not a mere external envelope and instrument, speech is the *intentional vehicle* of thought, an original operation through which we intend or grasp a particular type of meaning, for which it is necessary.[21]

Through interaction with language, our relatively global and fluid bodily relationship to the world becomes "articulated and determined".[22] Speech acts introduce a system of oppositions "without which everything would become inarticulate".[23] Speech regulates and stabilises thought, "supports" it, and "rescues it from the transitory".[24] Speech acts situate individual speakers in the supra-individual system of linguistic oppositions, and thereby supply their experiences with a more refined and stable means of organisation. To support this view, Merleau-Ponty indicates that our own discourses are "pure thought" for us, while all reflexive attempts to grasp "pure thought" produce speech.[25] Conversely, insofar as we perceive someone else's speech as "mere words", we are not (yet) grasping the thought that the speaker is attempting to convey.[26] In Merleau-Ponty's view, speech and thoughts are never independent of each other: though seemingly distinct, they are "enveloped in each other",[27] lead to one another, and unfold in reciprocity.

Moreover, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the relationship between speech and thought is fundamentally dynamic. He proposes that thought and speech not only correlate, but "*anticipate* one another".[28] Romdenh-Romluc observes that for Merleau-Ponty, "thought is performed or constituted by its expression" and concludes that "to think a thought just *is* to express it".[29] However, Merleau-Ponty argues more strongly that thought is not immediately identical to any type of expression or speech, but only to the speech that "formulates for the first time".[30] If speech and thought were *exact* correlates we would have to accept an idea that is openly rejected by Merleau-Ponty in *The Prose of the World*, namely that "one never means to say more than one does say and no more is said than one means".[31] Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, there is no exact correspondence between thought and speech, but a "reversibility" which he qualifies as "always imminent and never realised in fact".[32] We cannot claim that thought *just is* speech for Merleau-

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18   Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished Text', 288; cf. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 187, 408.
19   Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 185.
20   Merleau-Ponty, 'Introduction', 17.
21   Merleau-Ponty, 'On the Phenomenology of Language', 84.
22   Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, 64. In this text, Merleau-Ponty refers to Saussure's idea that thought and language are two "shapeless" masses "without configuration" which produce structures through their interaction, as the contact of water and air produces waves (*Course in General Linguistics*, 112). On several occasions, Merleau-Ponty claims that perception "requires" expression, that is, a finer articulation such as that provided by language (e.g. Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, 45; *Themes*, 4).
23   Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, 201.
24   Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished Text', 288; referring to Cassirer.
25   Merleau-Ponty, 'Introduction', 18.
26   Ibid.; cf. *Prose of the World*, 115.
27   Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 182; cf. ibid., 187.
28   Merleau-Ponty, 'Introduction', 17 (emphasis added).
29   Romdenh-Romluc, *Merleau-Ponty and Phenomenology of Perception*, 216, 187 (original emphasis).
30   Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 530.
31   Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 5.
32   Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 147; cf. 145 (note).

Ponty: rather, as Lawrence Hass accurately explains, thought and language "mutually elaborate one another".[33]

Hence, beyond criticising those accounts that separate speech and thought, Merleau-Ponty positively states that the two domains have an open-ended productive relationship. Language and thought are "waypoints, stimuli for one another" and "continually take one another's place" (*s'escomptent l'une l'autre*).[34] On the one hand, there is always "more in the thought than there is in the language"[35]; on the other hand, "no speech completely effaces itself before the meaning toward which it points" and thus, thought always draws from speech and linguistic articulation.[36] This is how speech is capable of "teaching us our own thought",[37] how another's speech can make me think, and how *someone else* can occasionally express *my own* thoughts better than I do.[38]

Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's strongest argument on the relationship between speech and thought is not that thought *just is* speech. Instead, he argues that thinking thought and speaking speech mutually shape and prompt one another in a *two-directional movement of innovation*. Thinking thought is "in a relationship of reciprocal exchange with the instruments which it uses, but uses only while rendering to them what it has received from them and more".[39] Merleau-Ponty understands speech as an *accomplishment* or elaboration of what has already been (provisionally) acquired in thought – and, simultaneously, as a *starting point* for a thought in its movement towards the articulation of a meaning. Thus, *language accomplishes thought*, but precisely for this reason, language is a complex of starting points for other thoughts and *thought consequently accomplishes language* in a continuous process in which the particular steps remain provisory.[40]

Connectedly, Merleau-Ponty clarifies that not all speech has the same value to thought. Specifically, he introduces the distinction between "spoken speech" and "speaking speech".[41] Spoken speech is based on the established meanings that people use to communicate within a linguistic community. At this level, speech poses no difficulty and requires no effort from either the speaker or the listener.[42] It draws no attention to itself, so it becomes "transparent" and we feel no need to formulate anything in a specific way. Conversely, there arises no need to think. Spoken speech is thus speaking within the range of what has already been said (*une parole sur des paroles*).[43] Analogically, such a speech "conveys an already acquired thought" and brings our attention to it.[44] Speaking speech, however, is the expression of something as yet unarticulated in speech and the established cultural tradition and is thus unfamiliar to the speaker and the listener.[45]

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[33] Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 179. See also Landes, *Paradoxes of Expression*, 133.

[34] Merleau-Ponty, 'Introduction', 17 (cf. 'Préface', 25).

[35] Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, 201.

[36] Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 41.

[37] Merleau-Ponty, 'Introduction', 17.

[38] Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 139-46.

[39] Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished Text', 287.

[40] In an unpublished working note, Merleau-Ponty writes that "thought is a movement of language [*langage*]" (*Nature et logos*, 101). Similarly, he claims that "meaning is the total movement of speech" ('Indirect Language', 43).

[41] Merleau-Ponty uses several terminological variants of this distinction. For overviews, see Baldwin, 'Speaking and Spoken Speech'; Kee, 'Phenomenology and Ontology of Language and Expression'.

[42] Merleau-Ponty, 'Man and Adversity (Discussion)', 216.

[43] Literally "an utterance on utterances," as opposed to a speech formulating a meaning that has never been an object of speech. See Kee's analysis of this formulation, Kee, 'Phenomenology and Ontology', 6.

[44] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 409; Foultier, 'First Man Speaking', 200, speaks of "a mere linking of ready-made ideas".

[45] Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 409.

In Merleau-Ponty's view, speaking speech is particularly evident in the creative works of artists, philosophers, and scientists, and in children "who utter their first word" or lovers "who discover emotion".[46] However, the notion of speaking speech does not designate a *domain* of speech reserved for creative individuals. Speaking speech is not situated *outside* spoken speech: it is "the side of language" that correlates to expressive efforts, a "ubiquitous phenomenon, an aspect of all speech".[47] Thus, expressive, speaking speech must be considered a structural possibility of language, just as automatic and readily available speech.[48]

The structural relation between spoken and speaking speech is more finely described by Merleau-Ponty in connection to Husserl's concept of "institution" (*Stiftung*) and "sedimentation" of meaning.[49] Linguistic meaning is "sedimented", Merleau-Ponty claims, because it is an acquisition produced through historical, spatio-temporally situated development. Such sedimentation should be understood in contrast to the past elements being merely *summed up* or mechanically accumulated.[50] New expressive efforts realised through individual speech acts do not merely add another element to those already existent in a language[51]; rather, they claim to "recapitulate, retrieve, and contain [the past] in substance".[52] Language is "ready to convert everything new... into an acquisition"[53] because the "conventional" character of its signs allows meaning to be continuously readjusted. Language thus has the privilege of making it possible to contract a long history of previous innovative speech operations, and the insight they produce, into a single word or phrase, thereby incorporating them into spoken speech.[54] Hence, members of a linguistic community can use their inherited linguistic instruments of meaning in their relationships with the world and one another without explicating the history that originally led to their establishment in language.

This capacity of linguistic expressions to sediment is what distinguishes them from non-linguistic cultural instruments of expression, such as corporeal gesture or painting. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty claims, perhaps too one-sidedly, that "speech is a gesture" containing its sense "just like all gestures".[55] This interpretation would imply that sedimentation has no fundamental role in how language conveys meaning. Later, Merleau-Ponty explicitly rejects such an idea.[56] Unlike speech, Merleau-Ponty now points out, a painting "does not claim to sum up what has made it possible"; each

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46   Ibid., 184, note 7.
47   Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 178; Kee, 'Phenomenology and Ontology', 13; cf. Foultier, 'First Man Speaking', 207-9.
48   Cf. Merleau-Ponty, 'Man and Adversity (Discussion)', 216.
49   These concepts are prominent in Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry' which Merleau-Ponty interpreted on multiple occasions (see Merleau-Ponty, 'Titres et travaux', 31-32; *Institution and Passivity*, 50-61; *Themes*, 114-120). Mukařovský works with an interpretation of temporal dynamics very similar to *Stiftung*, although he does not explicitly refer to Husserl's concept (see, e.g. Mukařovský, 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 115-118; 'On Structuralism', 3-7; see also below, section 3.2.).
50   Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 413-4; *Prose of the World*, 99-100; *Institution and Passivity*, 61.
51   Language is not merely a "nomenclature", a repertory of available meanings (Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 45).
52   Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', 80-1; cf. *Prose of the World*, 99-100.
53   Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', 79 (original emphasis removed); cf. *Prose of the World*, 99.
54   Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 99-113; Merleau-Ponty, *Themes*, 114-20.
55   Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 189; cf. 200, 409, 424, 426. Merleau-Ponty presents an analogical argument regarding symbols in physical science and mathematics (*The Primacy of Perception*, 96). For a commentary, see Foultier, 'Creativity in Language and Expression', 50.
56   Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 129.

new work is added to the previous ones, replaces them, and is subsequently replaced.[57] Each new painting is an almost self-sufficient idiom, while language has a distinctive capacity to find various embodiments for the same meaning.[58] In language and the more formalised symbolic systems, such as algebra, the integration of meaning is never total, but is "more perfect".[59] Thus, language produces an effect absent in painting or corporeal gesture, giving us the impression that we experience a meaning independent of any signifier. Unlike non-linguistic types of expression, which are "mute", linguistic expression has the privilege "to be free from any task it accomplishes".[60] Hence, it allows access to "the experience of truth",[61] that is, to a signification that is relatively independent from its immediate experiential and pragmatic context.

Linguistic sedimentation therefore allows transcendence beyond an individual's experience and access to a repository of knowledge that "is not carried by any living subject and belongs in principle to everyone".[62] However, it also comprises the possibility of forgetfulness and an "empty", automatic speaking. Embracing Husserl's metaphor of "institution" (*Stiftung*), Merleau-Ponty views language as a living tradition which involves "foundational", originally innovative events that open a field of possible meaning for those who inherit from it and from whom it requires an active maintenance, a renewal of its original foundations.[63] The sedimented linguistic expressions must be adopted and actively recontextualised by individuals in their particular situations, or they become obsolete. A sedimented norm of speaking and thinking is thus never mere survival or residue of the past. Instead, it is a requirement of a renewal, an "invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future", through which the original meaning is recreated in different circumstances.[64] On the linguistic level, spoken speech is thus contracted in speaking speech as a previous acquisition, while speaking speech recreates and innovates its sedimented, "instituted" meaning. Novelty in language and thought is built *upon* previous acquisitions in these domains and *in contrast to* them.

2.2. Merleau-Ponty, reader of Saussure: linguistic innovation as a model for cultural innovation

After 1947, Merleau-Ponty studied Saussure's *Course*, and around 1951, speech and language become central subjects in his book-length project *Prose of the World*.[65] Additionally, he dedicated his first three lectures at the Collège de France (1953–1954) to cultural expression, language use in literature, and the problem of speech.[66] In these works, Merleau-Ponty expands his earlier interpretation of language and emphasises how

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[57] Ibid. 99 (translation modified; cf. *La prose du monde*, 141); cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 411, 413.

[58] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 99-101, 110-11.

[59] Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 61.

[60] Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 104, cf. ibid., 121.

[61] Merleau-Ponty, *Institution and Passivity*, 50.

[62] Merleau-Ponty, *Themes*, 119. Following Husserl's 'Origin of Geometry', Merleau-Ponty points out that this process is based on an "essential mutation of speech" which is the development of writing.

[63] Merleau-Ponty, 'Man and Aversity (Discussion)', 221.

[64] Merleau-Ponty, *Themes*, 41. Merleau-Ponty similarly speaks of a "posthumous productivity" of institutions (e.g. *Institution and Passivity*, 6, 9).

[65] On Merleau-Ponty's discovery of Saussure's writings, see Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 173; Kaganoi, 'Merleau-Ponty and Saussure', 152-3. Silverman (*Inscriptions*, 95-107) summarises Merleau-Ponty's first courses on Saussure, which remain unpublished.

[66] For Merleau-Ponty's thorough analysis of Saussure's *Course in General Linguistics* from this period, see *Le problème de la parole*, 59-91.

extensively it pervades our entire lives including our bodily experiences. He even deems his previous works on perception too abstract for not sufficiently reflecting this fact.[67]

In contrast to the more traditional or "doctrinal"[68] structuralist reading of Saussure, Merleau-Ponty argues that the linguist himself "challenged the rigid distinction between sign and signification" and, correspondingly, between contingent acts of speech (*parole*) and their general value in the system of language (*langue*).[69] In harmony with his interpretation of the relationship between speech and thought, Merleau-Ponty contends that speech "does not simply activate the possibilities inscribed in language [*langue*]... [it] modifies and sustains [*soutient*] language just as much as it is carried [*portée*] by it". [70] In this view, each individual linguistic act "re-creates" the signifying power of language as a whole and thus the domain of accessible meaning.[71] Consequently, language must be viewed as "a mass that progressively differentiates itself" through speech acts.[72] Merleau-Ponty thereby refuses a mere juxtaposition of synchrony and diachrony[73] and holds that language is not a system at a particular moment, but "a *Gestalt* in movement, evolving toward a certain equilibrium"; it is a "moving equilibrium" whose system "never exists wholly in act but always involves latent or incubating changes".[74]

Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the role of speech and individual linguistic acts was often perceived as a misunderstanding of Saussure's theory.[75] With the "doctrinal" structuralist reading, structural linguistics strictly separates the systematic aspects of language from the contingent ones, and consequently, synchrony from diachrony. In this view, structural linguistics concentrates on language (*langue*) as a relatively self-contained, closed system; speech, however, can only be understood linguistically against the background of a language system, for it potentially involves non-systematic, accidental deformations. As the systematic aspects of language are strictly distinguished from accidental ones, diachronic relationships cannot be investigated by structural means.[76] If language is understood in this way, investigating two different historical states of language means switching between two systems of oppositions. Even if some elements remain identical between the two states, they have a different diacritical value each time within the overall structure, and thus a different meaning. From this point of view, the diachronic dynamics of language could only be understood as a consequence of a continuous accidental phonetic change. Individual utterances would cause diachronic changes of the system to the extent that they are precisely non-systematic and would not reflect a subject's desire to convey specific meaning. Defined in these terms, structuralist linguistics cannot investigate language innovation.

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[67] Merleau-Ponty, 'Titres et travaux', 22.
[68] For a comprehensive analysis of how the 1916 edition of the *Course in General Linguistics* constituted a "doctrinal view" of Saussure which was later privileged and developed by structuralists, see Stawarska, *Saussure's Philosophy of Language*; *Saussure's Linguistics*.
[69] Merleau-Ponty, *Themes*, 19.
[70] Ibid. (translation modified); in French, Merleau-Ponty *Résumés de cours*, 33.
[71] Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 102-3.
[72] Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, 4; Merleau-Ponty explicitly attributes this idea to Saussure (ibid., 18).
[73] For an explicit argument, see Merleau-*Ponty, Le problème de la parole*, 63.
[74] Merleau-Ponty*, Acquisition of Language*, 100; 'On the Phenomenology of Language', 87. Landes (*Paradoxes of Expression*, 134) speaks of a "metastable" system. I also note that Merleau-Ponty identifies the notions of Gestalt and structure (*Le problème de la parole*, 64).
[75] See, for example, Ricoeur, *The Question of Subject*. For an excellent review of literature regarding this point, see Foultier, 'Merleau-Ponty's Encounter with Saussure's Linguistics'; Stawarska, 'Uncanny Errors'.
[76] Cf. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 99-100.

However, as Stawarska indicates, Saussure's distinction between *langue* and *parole* "is of degree and not in kind, and relative rather than absolute".[77] Consequently, the distinction between the synchronic and the diachronic ought to be understood primarily as a methodological requirement, not an ontological statement.[78] Saussure writes, for example, that as far as the speaking subject or the linguist are concerned, signs and meanings are never outside one another, and there is thus no value in the system outside a sign.[79] The two orders of signs and meanings, which both consist only of differences for Saussure, exist "only insofar as a first-order difference is *constantly incorporated into* a second-order difference and vice versa".[80] Thus, individual speech acts are not just unilaterally determined by the systematic values of a language as the traditional structuralist approach contends; the two orders are interdependent and constantly incorporate each other's differentiations.[81] Thus, language is not a system relatively closed in itself, but an equilibrium of stability and change open to the acts of individual speakers.

Beyond that, Saussure formulates a positive theory of linguistic innovation based on the effect of speech on the language system, without relinquishing his goal to study language as structure or a system of oppositions. He indicates that the system of language is renewed from within when its speakers construe new expressions after the pattern of those already established in language.[82] This process, Saussure claims, is particularly evident in the speech of children and literary writers. For example, a child may conjugate the French verb *venir* by following the model of *punir* or other regular verbs, thereby producing the incorrect future tense *venirai* instead of the correct *viendrai*.[83] Speech acts like these cannot be considered mere accidental deviations, because they introduce an intelligent, logical, and principled process of change in the language system. As Stawarska explains, the editors of the 1916 edition of the *Course* changed the order of Saussure's explanation regarding the problem of analogy to create the impression that this topic is of less importance than the discussions on general and synchronic linguistics.[84] Nevertheless, Saussure's writings beyond the 1916 edition clearly demonstrate that he considered analogical innovation as a principle inherent to language as a system (*langue*). Saussure's discussion of analogical innovation implies that change in the language system cannot be conceived of as a merely contingent empirical process, because the analogical innovation is systematic, rational. Moreover, the phenomenon of innovation reveals that the language system is modified through individual speech acts, and *paroles* and *langue* are therefore intrinsically intertwined in a non-hierarchical way.

Merleau-Ponty is aware of Saussure's thoughts on language as a dynamic social institution and uses the argument on analogical innovation to support the idea of interdependence between speech and the language system. He explicitly discusses the process of creating new linguistic forms from existing ones and emphasises that the former must have "its analogue in other forms of speech based on the same pattern".[85] He also draws on Saussure's analyses of historical linguistic development, such as the

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[77] Stawarska, *Saussure's Linguistics*, 84; cf. ibid., 67-76.
[78] E.g., Foultier, 'Creativity in Language', 55; cf. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 19.
[79] Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 48.
[80] Ibid., 49 (emphasis added).
[81] Cf. Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 19; Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 85–6.
[82] Cf. Stawarska, *Saussure's Linguistics*, 77-85; Foultier, 'Creativity in Language', 59, 58.
[83] Saussure, *Writings in General Linguistics*, 107.
[84] Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 161-72; Stawarska, *Saussure's Linguistics*, 78-9.
[85] Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 35, referring to the linguist Joseph Vendryès; cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Le problème de la parole*, 60, 69, 83-4, 87-8, referring to Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 161-5.

transformations that led from Latin to French.[86] In these examples, Merleau-Ponty finds confirmation that language is a living tradition, an institution in the course of development.[87] As speakers strive to understand and be understood by others, they continuously integrate all "accidental" linguistic changes into a coherent, meaningful totality, and thus contribute to the maintenance of language as a continuously renewed tradition.[88]

Thus, considering the editorial context of the 1916 edition of the *Course* and Saussure's original writings, the claims of Merleau-Ponty's incompatibility with a structural understanding of language are unconvincing.[89] Although Merleau-Ponty did not have access to any writings beyond the *Course*, he was particularly attentive to what he perceived as the text's conceptual ambiguities. The formulations that separate the language system from speech are considered "limitations" of Saussure's theory, and conversely, he feels that Saussure "corrects" himself when the question involves the dependence of the language system on speakers and their speech acts.[90] Merleau-Ponty emphasises precisely those aspects of Saussure's thinking which were marginalised by the editors of the 1916 edition of the *Course* and the traditional interpretations of structuralism, which are now being rediscovered within Saussurian scholarship.

During the period of his most intense interest in Saussure's works, Merleau-Ponty also starts to give more general value to the relationships between speech and language. He views Saussure's linguistics as "the most rigorous examination of language as an institution"[91] and argues that our understanding of linguistic innovation sheds light on cultural dynamics and innovation in general. Above all, Merleau-Ponty contends that innovative types of linguistic production, such as literary prose, accomplish a "systematic and unexpected variation of the modes of language and of the narrative",[92] thereby providing intersubjective access to new ways of understanding the world. Innovative authors begin their work with access to the signifying instruments available to all members of their cultural community. In the case of linguistic works, they use spoken speech and familiar means of literary, philosophical, scientific or other type of expression. In the process of creating their work, Merleau-Ponty explains, the authors subject these instruments to a "systematic distorsion ordered by [a] new relation to the world".[93] An innovative writer's speech comes to "dominate" their language and thereby "reinvents" it[94]; they accomplish a "warping of the whole language system" characteristic of the new "idiom" they embody.[95] If the converging words intended to provide a new meaning within a creative work are "numerous and eloquent enough",[96] the author is understood by others, who henceforth become capable of manipulating the original signifying

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[86] Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 33-5; *Le problème de la parole*, 61-2; referring to Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 89, 125.

[87] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Le problème de la parole*, 70, 87-8.

[88] This point is recognised by Stawarska, *Saussure's Linguistics*, 122.

[89] See also Foultier's substantial critique of the arguments against the compatibility of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language with Saussure's linguistics: 'Merleau-Ponty's Encounter with Saussure's Linguistics'. Similarly, Stawarska explains why Merleau-Ponty's approach is fully congruent with Saussure's: 'Uncanny Errors', 152; *Saussure's Philosophy*, 193-194; *Saussure's Linguistics*, 122-123.

[90] Merleau-Ponty, *Le problème de la parole*, 59-60; referring to Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 5 (note), 6, 19.

[91] Merleau-Ponty, *Child Psychology and Pedagogy*, 53.

[92] Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished Text', 288; cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Recherches sur l'usage littéraire du langage*.

[93] Merleau-Ponty, 'Titres et travaux', 29.

[94] Merleau-Ponty, 'On the phenomenology of language', 91; 'Man and Adversity (Discussion),' 216.

[95] Merleau-Ponty, 'Man and Adversity (Discussion)', 234; cf. *Prose of the World*, 12-13.

[96] Merleau-Ponty, 'On the phenomenology of language', 91.

instruments "according to a new syntax" outlined within the work.[97] To speak or write innovatively is a matter of producing "a generalized buckling" of one's cultural landscape, "reorganizing things-said, affecting them with a new index of curvature, and bending them to a certain enhancement of meaning".[98] Therefore, to produce speaking speech does not mean to linguistically materialise a meaning available to the individual independently of language. It means to create a divergence within the system of divergences constituted by one's language and the previously established modes of expression by materialising in them a certain relation to the world.

Hence, innovative speaking and writing not only innovate language as a system, but transform the well-established social institutions at all levels – it discovers new ways of living and thereby recreates humanity.[99] Building on his interpretation of speech as such a "conquering function,"[100] Merleau-Ponty argues that the institution of language is "a model for other institutions" and that it helps us understand "the more general order of symbolic relations" which involves "the exchange not only of thoughts but of all types of values".[101] Linguistics thereby provides a model for sociology and the study of interpersonal cultural relations.[102] Moreover, because linguistics redefines the general relationships between what is meaningful or logical in our experience and what is contingent and accidental in it, it offers a model for "a new philosophy of history".[103] The linguistic study of the relationship between speech acts and the language system helps us better understand the connections and mutual relations between the individual and the social, nature and culture, trans-temporal universality and historical arbitrariness.[104] Thus, combining his phenomenological sources, specifically the Husserlian idea of institution (*Stiftung*), with his Saussurian interpretation of speech and its relation to the language system, Merleau-Ponty elaborates a theory of cultural, institutional innovation.

3. Mukařovský: from pragmatic communication to gesturing in language

Merleau-Ponty's interpretations of language contain important analogies with Mukařovský's structural analyses of works of art, including literary works. By distinguishing between "standard" (communicative, pragmatic) and "autonomous" (aesthetic, artistic) signs and thoroughly analysing the latter, Mukařovský engages in a path similar to that of Merleau-Ponty. He also delineates a theory of cultural innovation and conducts a novel exploration of important aspects of Saussure's linguistic framework which were discarded by traditional structuralism.

In Section 3.1, I explain the main distinctions introduced by Mukařovský in his theory of sign. In Section 3.2, I then explore Mukařovský's analysis of the structural organisation of the autonomous sign. This aspect of his works is perhaps the most

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[97] Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished text', 288. Merleau-Ponty's reference to a "syntax" should be understood primarily as a metaphorical description of any consistent use of language. Merleau-Ponty's idea of a systematic variation is closely related to his discussions on "style" and "coherent deformation".

[98] Merleau-Ponty, 'Introduction', 19; *The Visible and the Invisible*, 119.

[99] This aspect of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy is analysed by Andén, 'Literature and the Expressions of Being', and Apostolopoulos, 'Systematic Import'.

[100] Merleau-Ponty, *Themes*, 20 (translation modified); cf. *Résumés de cours*, 32.

[101] Merleau-Ponty, 'Titres et travaux', 31-2; 'An Unpublished Text', 289.

[102] Merleau-Ponty, 'Titres et travaux', 32.

[103] Merleau-Ponty, 'In Praise of Philosophy', 55.

[104] Merleau-Ponty, 'Titres et travaux', 31. Merleau-Ponty elaborated on the idea of institution in the *Institution and Passivity* course (1954-1955), which immediately followed his courses on speech and linguistic expression.

interesting today and it makes it possible to confirm and complement Merleau-Ponty's ideas on language from a perspective originally rooted in structuralism.

3.1. Standard and autonomous signs

Mukařovský's main field of expertise was literary theory and his focus only gradually shifted from analyses of particular works of poetry to a general theory of aesthetics. His theory of language is therefore much less philosophically underpinned than that of Merleau-Ponty. However, it is clear that Mukařovský's theoretical point of departure with regard to language corresponds to a relatively conservative structuralist position. In his early works, he views standard language, existing linguistic and cultural norms, as "directly and unconditionally necessary" for society's functioning in its utilitarian, practical aspects.[105] According to this view, each individual is, above all, a member of a collective, and "the framework of individual consciousness is constituted, even in its innermost layers, of contents belonging to the social consciousness".[106] All reality an individual can come to know is thus determined by social codes and there is no language-independent thinking.

Moreover, Mukařovský adopts Saussure's idea of "semiology" as a general theory of signs covering all areas of life[107] and approaches the collectively shared reality as constituted exclusively of signs. Specifically, Mukařovský asserts that "all psychic content exceeding the limits of individual consciousness acquires the character of sign by the very fact of its communicability".[108] According to him, all interpersonal communication assumes the use of signs and no intersubjectively shared reality can exist without the use of signs. Building on this view, Mukařovský's primary goal is to investigate humans as social beings who acquire all meaning based on socially established rules or norms present in the collective consciousness. While he acknowledges that these norms evolve and adjust to historical and sociocultural conditions, he believes that they remain binding.[109]

For Mukařovský, a standard communicative sign is "something which stands in place of something else and points to that other thing"[110] and consists of three elements: (1) a signifier, which is perceptible by senses, (2) a meaning (that which is signified), which is accomplished in an individual's consciousness and "consist[s] of what the subjective states of consciousness evoked in the members of a certain collectivity have in common"; and finally, (3) a reference, that is, a relation to particular realities in the world.[111] Mukařovský believes that this threefold relation constitutes all sign systems designed for interpersonal communication, such as natural languages, the theoretical language of science or ideology, or monetary systems.

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[105] Mukařovský, 'Significance of Aesthetics', 22.

[106] Mukařovský, 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', 82.

[107] Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 16.

[108] Mukařovský, 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', 82.

[109] Mukařovský, *Aesthetic Function*, 25.

[110] Ibid., 71.

[111] Mukařovský, 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', 83. According to Mukařovský, the necessity for a sign to have a reference "follows quite naturally from the fact that the sign must be understood in the same way by the one who expresses it and by the one who perceives it" (ibid., 84). Mukařovský seems to believe that although our knowledge of the world is necessarily mediated by social norms and codes, it ultimately relates us to specific material and immaterial realities that exist independently of our individual or collective grasp. By considering a "relation to reality" as a necessary third aspect of sign, Mukařovský diverges from Saussure's binary model involving only signifier and signified. Sládek, who analyses the relations between the two models (*Metamorphoses*, 49-56), explains that Mukařovský in fact significantly transforms Saussure's concepts and ideas by synthesising them with many other sources. Cf. also Sládek, 'Mukařovský's Structuralism and Semiotics', 194-195.

However, Mukařovský also emphasises that if the practical, socially determined activity based on standard signs is "left alone, [it] impoverishes, makes one-sided, and inordinately simplifies man's relation to reality".[112] He contends that individuals and society can only prevent their decline and exist fully if sociocultural norms are constantly renewed and innovated. In his view, such renewal is realised particularly through works of art.[113] Correspondingly, Mukařovský observes that in the sphere of the aesthetic, the general structure of sign is subject to a modification, due to which the sign refers primarily to itself and is thus "autonomous".[114] In Mukařovský's view, in standard signs, including communicative linguistic signs, the emphasis is placed on the "unequivocal relation to reality".[115] In contrast, an autonomous sign is "liberated from an unequivocal relation to the reality to which it points, and to the subject from which it stems, eventually at which it is aimed (the originator and perceiver of the work of art)".[116]

Expanding this idea, Mukařovský describes how, in the aesthetic domain, the three constitutive elements attributed by him to signs generally are specifically modified: (1) The sensorial aspect of an autonomous sign is too "opulent" to merely relate the perceiver to something other than itself. Correspondingly, as a signifier, the autonomous sign paradoxically draws the perceiver's attention *to itself* and to its sensorial aspects. The red colour of a stoplight, for example, is viewed by Mukařovský as a standard sign which is sufficiently "sensorially poor" to denote the meaning "stop!" in an unequivocal way. In contrast, in an artistic painting, for example, red evokes a plethora of meanings in the viewer. (2) In contrast to a standard sign, an autonomous sign is not unambiguous, but contains an excess of meaning. Rather than having a specific meaning, it refers to all that a person "has experienced and can still experience, the whole universe of things and actions".[117] (3) Correspondingly, the autonomous sign "is not bound to any concrete reality".[118] It does not refer to particular objects but to something that "is not distinctly delimited" and which includes "the total context of so-called social phenomena – for example, philosophy, politics, religion, and economics".[119]

In short, while Mukařovský believes that the meaning of a "standard" sign is *referential and representational*, the meaning of an "autonomous" sign is *symbolic* to him. Rather than representing specific relations between objects in the world, an autonomous sign affects one's "general relation to the universe".[120] Works of art thus "provide a certain direction to our view of reality in general" and change this relation "to a greater or lesser degree".[121] However, Mukařovský also delineates how, in an autonomous sign, the practical (documentary, communicative, representational) and aesthetic (symbolic) functions interpenetrate.[122] In literature or figurative art, for instance,

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[112] Mukařovský. 'Significance of Aesthetics', 22.

[113] Although Merleau-Ponty's view on institutions is broader than Mukařovský's, he too views art as a paradigmatic example of such a renewal of our institutions (see, for example, Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', 77).

[114] The notion was initially coined by the Prague Linguistic Circle to describe the specific nature of poetry. It was Mukařovský, however, who comprehensively elaborated on it in relation to aesthetics in general.

[115] Mukařovský, 'On Structuralism', 8.

[116] Mukařovský, '[Art] Umění', 185.

[117] Mukařovský, 'Significance of Aesthetics', 20.

[118] Ibid., 22.

[119] Mukařovský, 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', 84.

[120] Mukařovský, 'Significance of Aesthetics', 22.

[121] Ibid., 20-21; 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 107.

[122] Mukařovský more precisely distinguishes four areas of signification: the practical, the theoretical, the magic and religious, and the aesthetic. See Mukařovský, 'Significance of Aesthetics'; 'Place of the Aesthetic Function'.

the sign refers to certain personages or definite events, but such representational meaning is neutralised by being employed for the sake of symbolic meaning. When specific communicative, "standard" signs are integrated into a work of art, they become "dominated" by the aesthetic function correlative to the sign as a whole.[123]

3.2. The structure of an autonomous sign: unintentionality, semantic gesture

Mukařovský typically holds that even an autonomous sign is a *semiotic* phenomenon and therefore can always be eventually integrated into social norms and customary linguistic meanings. However, in *Intentionality and Unintentionality in Art*,[124] Mukařovský argues more radically that an artwork includes aspects that *fundamentally resist* semiotic unification. In this way, Mukařovský outlines a theory of meaning that maintains the structuralist principle that signs are differential, but also fundamentally transforms it by admitting that it might not be possible to completely subordinate the meaning of specific expressive acts to the language system and other social codes even if they are understood dynamically. I now explain in detail how an autonomous sign relates to established norms while simultaneously innovating them and changing perceivers' general understanding of the world by requiring them to actively participate in the semiotic process.

In Mukařovský's view, natural realities are asemiotic or "unintentional" and their meaning is thus determined by individuals' practical considerations. In contrast, the meaning of "intentional" human artifacts, such as material and immaterial cultural objects, is determined by their originators and the context of their social usage. The situation is considerably different in the case of the autonomous sign. As noted, for Mukařovský, a work of art is not a sum of univocal practical signs and does not refer to particular realities. However, Mukařovský specifies that, without ever becoming a simply asemiotic natural fact, an autonomous sign "exceeds the limits of its semiotic range and becomes something other than a sign"; it acquires "the nature of a peculiar, illusory objectivity" or thing-like nature.[125] On the one hand, an autonomous sign is a product of human creativity and is thus perceived as an expression of an intention to communicate specific meaning.[126] On the other hand, "integrally along" with the impression of intentionality, it affects the perceiver with "an immediate impression of reality" which is "unintentional".[127] Correspondingly, Mukařovský argues that the originator of the autonomous sign deliberately "violates" its semiotic unity and thereby charges it with an "intentional unintentionality", or a "polarity of intentionality and unintentionality".[128] An autonomous sign is thus organised by its originator to appear as (at least in part) not organised by anyone.

More precisely, Mukařovský claims that the presence of the "unintentional" dimension of an autonomous sign is linked to the fact that the sign's originator intentionally introduces semiotic "disunity" or "discord" into it.[129] The special structural

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[123] Cf. Mukařovský, 'Art as a Semiotic Fact', 85-7.

[124] Mukařovský presented this essay in the form of a lecture at the Prague Linguistic Circle in 1943 and only published it in print in 1966.

[125] Mukařovský, 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 109.

[126] It must be noted, however, that "intentionality" and "unintentionality" do not necessarily coincide with what the actual author's intended to communicate. They are understood by Mukařovský as semiotic categories which pertain to the work of art itself and are inseparable from the perspective of the perceiver. Mukařovský explicitly states that his analysis aims to "depsychologise" the interpretation of how a sign conveys its meaning; 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 100.

[127] Ibid., 102.

[128] Ibid., 102 and 105.

[129] Ibid., 122. Mukařovský holds that the disunity is not merely formal and related to syntax and vocabulary, but also to the work's contents such as protagonists' experiences and actions, events described, or the spatio-temporal organisation of the plot.

organisation of the autonomous sign, or its "unifying semantic intention", which contains a discord, is also called a *semantic gesture* by Mukařovský.[130] In contrast to both asemiotic natural realities and the unequivocal communicative signs, the organisation of a work of art thus adumbrates a meaningful unity of all its heterogeneous elements and "gestures" towards it, but does not establish it definitively. As a specific type of structure, an autonomous sign is "a set of elements, the internal equilibrium of which is constantly disturbed and restored anew and the unity of which thus appears to us as a set of dialectic contradictions".[131] The semantic gesture is structurally "concrete" because the elements that constitute it are established in writing or another medium of signification, but "qualitatively not predetermined",[132] because the special configuration of an autonomous sign requires an attempt for unification from its perceiver.

The antinomies deposited in the semantic gesture need to be considered by a concrete perceiver to be provisorily resolved. The perceiver must productively find a perspective from which the semantic disunity organised between the sign's elements becomes provisorily meaningful as a coherent whole.[133] Because unification is never absolute in a work of art, it necessitates the perceiver's effort to bind all its elements into a unified whole and, thus, a semantic unity. However, while the perceiver strives to encompass all the "components"[134] of the work within a unifying intention, the specific organisation of the autonomous sign implies that this process necessarily remains incomplete. It is precisely against the background of the perceiver's efforts for the unification or systematisation of all the work's elements that its disunity becomes apparent.[135]

Hence, Mukařovský succeeds in describing how, in works of art, a specifically organised deviation from semiotic systematicity of the established language and cultural norms plays a positive semiotic role. As Mukařovský eventually concludes, the unintentionality inherent to an autonomous sign is "a concomitant phenomenon of intentionality" and it therefore represents "a certain kind of intentionality".[136] This means that an artist's or writer's intention to communicate involves, as an essential and irreducible component, exactly determined deviations from established norms of communication.

Interestingly, Mukařovský explains how the unintentional, thing-like dimension gives the autonomous sign the force to transcend unequivocality and the function of a

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[130] Ibid., 110. Regarding Mukařovský's notion of semantic gesture, see Mercks, 'Introductory Observations'.

[131] Mukařovský, 'On Structuralism', 4.

[132]   Mukařovský, 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 110-1.

[133]   Mukařovský also describes two extreme situations in which a perceiver fails to accomplish this process and consequently cannot not assume the autonomous sign (ibid., 102-110). A perceiver lacking an appropriate aesthetic distance from an artwork becomes too absorbed by it and confuses it with a real, "unintentional" event or object. Conversely, too much aesthetic distance prevents us from entering its fictional world and causes the artwork to appear as a *mere* artefact—someone else's attempt at imposing their thoughts on us.

[134] The principal aim of Mukařovský's structural aesthetics is to study "interrelations among the components" of the work of art ('On Structuralism', 4). In a poetic literary work, for example, "single words, sound components, grammatical forms, syntactic components (the sentence structure), and phraseology" all participate in the organisation and the meaning of the sign "in the same way as the thematic components" such as literary characters or events described (ibid., 9).

[135]   Mukařovský, 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 125: "a feeling of unintentionality can arise in the perceiver only if obstacles stand in the way of his effort to unify the work semantically".

[136] Ibid., 125.

pragmatic reference to specific objects and how this aspect relates to the perceiver.[137] He argues that the originator of the sign introduces a thing-like dimension into it to render "more striking" its "mediating task" and to empower the signifying act.[138] It is precisely due to the "mysterious" quality related to the intentional unintentionality that an autonomous sign has the power to "set into motion the perceiver's entire existential experience" and affect them with an "urgency" unattainable, in Mukařovský's view, within a standard sign.[139] An autonomous sign's meaning is determined by how the sign is organised, but because this organisation involves an element of underdetermination, it also necessarily depends on the perceiver's attitude and effort for its unification.[140] This allows the possibility to "leav[e] the decision about [the] functional use" of the sign to the perceiver, even though it is never reducible to any specific decision.[141] Correspondingly, by mobilising the perceiver's effort for its unification and requiring an appropriate attitude, an autonomous sign provokes transformations of the perceiver's general understanding of the world.

Mukařovský's theory implies that the sign's meaning is univocally tied neither to its originator's nor to its perceiver's "intentions" to understand or be understood, and results from a consistently singular and provisory link between these and other factors, which is mediated by the structural organisation of the sign. Correspondingly, the meaning of the autonomous sign is "wholly dynamic" and temporal.[142] Structural elements that initially resisted perceivers' attempts to be integrated within the totality of the work may become perceived by society as intentional, but Mukařovský argues that "unintentionality will again revive"[143] in the work of art because unintentionality, like intentionality, is "by no means... rooted in the work of art unequivocally and invariably" and is "permanently renewed" in how perceivers' unifying intentions evolve.[144]

By clarifying the fundamentally open and provisory structural nature of the autonomous sign, Mukařovský abandons the "doctrinal" structuralist conviction that all meaningful reality is accessible to us only as a value within a supra-personal symbolic system. An autonomous sign cannot be understood simply by being situated within a pre-established system of communicative pragmatic signs referring to specific realities or referents, because it coherently deviates from the shared systemic values and reinvests them with new ones. Thus, Mukařovský shows how a specific type of "disunity" or deviation from a complete structural coherence of a sign has a positive semiotic and epistemic function. Correlatively, he opens a way to explain how a subject's relation to the world codetermines a sign's meaning without the latter being reduced to the former. The perceiver provisionally finalises the sign's meaning by incorporating it into their life, subsequently changing their relation to reality as a whole, rather than referring them to a

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[137] Ibid., 128: "It is precisely as a thing that the work is capable of affecting what is universally human in man, whereas in its semiotic aspect the work always appeals eventually to what is socially and temporally determined in him".

[138] Ibid., 94.

[139] Ibid., 121-2.

[140] The subject involved in the establishment of meaning of an autonomous sign can thus be characterised as "a point from which the whole structure can be encompassed by a single glance"; '[The Individual in Art] Individuum v umění', 258.

[141] Mukařovský, 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 106. Cf. ibid., 96: The meaning-conveying function of an autonomous sign must be understood as a "semantically unifying force ... operating within the work which strives toward the resolution of the contradictions and tensions among its individual parts and components". The perceiver decides which component of the work will be the basis for the unification, which involves the possibility of changing the "dominant".

[142] Ibid., 106; cf. ibid., 96, 110.

[143] Ibid., 115.

[144] Ibid., 117, 122.

pre-established systematic value. In this way, Mukařovský's analysis of unintentionality makes it possible to confirm some of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologically inspired ideas from a perspective that evolves from a relatively conservative structuralist position. In Section 4, I analyse this relation closely and clarify some fundamental differences between the two authors.

4. Merleau-Ponty and Mukařovský in dialogue on linguistic and cultural innovation

By developing the intrinsic requirements of structural aesthetics and phenomenology, Mukařovský and Merleau-Ponty stepped beyond the boundaries of the allegedly opposed theoretical frameworks that originally inspired them. Merleau-Ponty integrated his early interpretation of speech as one's individual bodily act or a gesture, to an understanding of language as an interpersonal system and a repository of general meanings. Analogically, Mukařovský transformed the concept of sign as an unequivocal value in the social consciousness by recognising that the values of aesthetic signs are deliberately constructed by their originators so as to require semiotic concretisation by their perceivers.

In developing their frameworks, both thinkers disavow the view that individual speech acts must be strictly distinguished from, and subordinated to, the language system. In this section, I explore some essential aspects of language that are revealed when Merleau-Ponty's and Mukařovský's works are read in the context of each other. I summarise the authors' interpretations of linguistic innovation as a systematic deformation of the pre-established systems of differentiation and the role of the subject in this process. Additionally, I analyse one fundamental difference between the two authors that concerns the status of representational language.

4.1. Gesturing in language: innovation as a supplementary dimension of differentiation

Despite their divergent beginnings, Merleau-Ponty's and Mukařovský's works converge in their interpretation of the dynamic relation between thought and language and the consequent linguistic and cultural innovations. Mukařovský's distinction between standard and autonomous signs largely corresponds to Merleau-Ponty's distinction between spoken speech and speaking speech. While a standard sign or spoken speech offer readily recognisable meanings that refer to familiar ideas and things in the world, an autonomous sign or speaking speech integrate the denotative aspects of language into a unity of superior order, thereby redefining our relationship with reality in general.

Both Merleau-Ponty and Mukařovský endorse Saussure's idea that "in language there are only differences"[145] or that a sign's meaning is determined not by what it positively contains, but by its difference or divergence from other signs.[146] In this view, the meanings of signs are not determined by a relationship to a referent, but by their diacritical value or their power to articulate their differences from other signs implicit in the structure at a particular moment.[147] According to Merleau-Ponty, speaking speech creates "new idioms" in language, i.e. it specifically modulates the established linguistic and socio-cultural systems of differences.[148] Similarly, for Mukařovský, autonomous signs are specifically organised deviations from communicative signs and socio-cultural

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[145] Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 120.
[146] Merleau-Ponty, 'On the Phenomenology of Language', 88; 'Indirect Language', 39; Mukařovský, 'The concept of the Whole in the Theory of Art', 74-76.
[147] Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, 114, 120.
[148] Merleau-Ponty, 'An Unpublished Text', 288.

norms. In both frameworks, the linguistic acts producing new expressions are not merely non-intentional and sub-optimal deviations from a self-contained system of language or universally shared norms of linguistic communications, but intrinsically coherent, orderly procedures.[149]

Moreover, both Merleau-Ponty's and Mukařovský's approaches show that innovative linguistic procedures are irreducible to an analogical transfer of already existing forms to other domains, as in Saussure's account of linguistic innovation. Whereas Saussure emphasises that novelty is introduced into language based on already established forms,[150] Mukařovský and Merleau-Ponty describe linguistic innovations that are organisational principles *of a higher order of complexity* compared to those existent in language. A conjugation of *venir* constructed on the model used for *punir* is initially incorrect even if it is logical and eventually integrated into the language system. As such, it does not embody any different linguistic understanding of the world. In contrast to the analogical transfer, Mukařovský and Merleau-Ponty describe linguistic experiences that can neither be considered erroneous nor become immediately translated into established meanings.

According to Mukařovský, an autonomous sign oscillates "between semioticity and 'reality'", between its socio-culturally mediated and "immediate" material and perceptual effect.[151] The components remaining outside the unity of the work render it *more than* a sign, "an immediate reality, a thing, as well".[152] Similarly, Merleau-Ponty emphasises how an innovative cultural creation presents itself "in the way that things exist",[153] as opposed to merely representing a value in a pre-established communicative system. Novelists do not write *about* ideas, Merleau-Ponty explains, but "make [them] present" as unfamiliarly organised realities and thereby extend the domain accessible for us as reality.[154] Drawing on Russian formalists, Mukařovský emphasises that a work of art accomplishes a "defamiliarisation" or "deautomatisation" of our everyday context[155] and Merleau-Ponty, drawing on Malraux, observes that an innovative expression, initially appearing "false or dissonant", accomplishes a "coherent deformation" of the established signifying instruments and familiar understanding of the word.[156] By performing a "systematic variation" of some of the system's elements within a creative work, creative individuals invest them with a new diacritical value with respect to the symbolic system as a whole.[157] If the values are adopted and used in language by receptive speakers, they are eventually transferred into the system as a whole. In elaborating on their descriptions of semiotic innovation, Merleau-Ponty and Mukařovský thus congruently extend Saussure's interpretation of language as a system of oppositions. They clarify how cultural and, more particularly, linguistic innovation is produced as a systematic variation related to and (intentionally) inflicted upon the pre-established system of differences, or

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[149]   Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', 54-5.

[150]   Saussure writes, for example, that analogical innovation is a "conservative force"; *Course in General Linguistics*, 172.

[151]   Mukařovský, 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 121.

[152]   Ibid., 119.

[153]   Merleau-Ponty, 'Metaphysics and the Novel', 26.

[154]   Ibid.

[155]   Cf. Steiner, 'Mukařovský's Structural Aesthetics', xiv-xv.

[156]   Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 13. On coherent deformation, see ibid., 60-61, 91, 104, 113; 'Indirect Language', 54, 78, 91. I note that Merleau-Ponty defines structure as "a whole, a system, but whose principle is not explicit and only appears as a style or coherent deformation" (*Le problème de la parole,* 64).

[157]   On systematic variation, see above, section 2.2.

as a supplementary dimension of differentiation above all that is already systematised in a language and culture.[158]

As explained in Section 2, Merleau-Ponty did not initially grasp the trans-individual dimensions of language sufficiently, which changed only gradually after his encounter with Saussure's works.[159] Subsequently, Merleau-Ponty maintains that to convey meaning in a gestural way is a structural possibility of language, but he now gives equal importance to the fact that gestural speech acts sediment into a properly linguistic meaning and thus detach themselves from all individual experiences. As shown in Section 3, Mukařovský's analysis of the "unintentional" dimension of the autonomous sign leads him to conclude that its coherent disunity constitutes a "semantic gesture". Mukařovský's analysis thus makes it possible to more clearly comprehend the validity of Merleau-Ponty's continued emphasis that there always remains a gestural dimension of language (even if it remains silent and unexplored by the speakers). Because productive linguistic expressions are more complex organisations constructed within the field enabled by the pre-established linguistic and cultural organisations, they can be viewed as *gestures within language.*

Another important contribution of Mukařovský's and Merleau-Ponty's interpretations of linguistic creativity is that they both illustrate that the meanings of the coherent deviations and "semantic gestures" are *originally linguistic*. In other words, both authors help us understand that gesturing in language does not imply returning to sensorimotor behaviour or to the thoughts and acts of an autonomous subject independent of cultural acquisitions. As Merleau-Ponty explains, expressive speech does not communicate a subject's language-independent experiences, but articulates "the excess of what we live over what has already been said".[160] Similarly, Mukařovský describes "unintentionality" as a *semiotic* phenomenon which can be explained neither by reference to the creator's nor the perceiver's experience. This means that linguistic innovation is neither a process simply inherent to the language system, nor is it introduced into the language from its absolute outside. It is only made accessible in contrast to what is established in language.

By interpreting linguistic innovation as a supplementary dimension of differentiation within a linguistic system of differences, Merleau-Ponty and Mukařovský succeed in describing how intentional innovations are introduced into language without returning to the idea of a wholly autonomous subject. Correlatively, they succeed in including the subject into the process of semiosis. On the one hand, it is not the subjects who one-sidedly transform the system through their meaning-giving intentional acts, because such intentions are never independent of the established cultural norms, and always build on them.[161] On the other hand, the system is subjected to development based on the subjects' linguistic behaviour. Speakers not only take up linguistic "accidents" to integrate them back into a totality, but also potentially "coherently deform" established communicative norms by gesturing in language. This incites a disquieting experience for the users of the initial system, thereby requiring them to find a new perspective from which new communicative and experiential norms can be grasped. In Merleau-Ponty's and Mukařovský's descriptions, the phenomenological subject and trans-personal

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[158] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 35.

[159] Cf. Hass, *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*, 183; Noble, *Silence et langage*, 181.

[160] Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 112.

[161] We therefore cannot fully adhere to the idea that "it is the speaking subjects who transform the system" (Andén, 'Language and Tradition', 196; similarly, Koukal, 'Merleau-Ponty's Reform of Saussure', 601). Similarly, Foultier appears unaware of this point when criticising Merleau-Ponty's approach to innovation for supposedly overemphasising perception and not introducing a principle similar to Saussure's idea of analogy ('Creativity in Language and Expression', 62-63).

structures are therefore no longer presented as contradictory, but as originally intertwining factors.

4.2. Merleau-Ponty versus Mukařovský on the priority of representational language

Notwithstanding the important convergences between Merleau-Ponty's and Mukařovský's projects, they clearly approach the problem of sign and its innovation from opposite starting points. Merleau-Ponty admits that instituted, pre-established, unambiguous language is useful and indispensable, but maintains that such a representational language is "dependent" on the language that opens access to meaning that has not been available thus far.[162] Conversely, the pragmatic linguistic requirement of unequivocal communicability appears primary for Mukařovský, who believes that a sign can be meaningful only if it is a part of a supra-individual linguistic system and thus unequivocally refers to a specific reality that can be intersubjectively verified.[163] He contends that a standard communicative sign conveys the information that *this* reality is for *this* purpose and thus unequivocally refers to something outside of itself.[164] Moreover, given that Mukařovský holds that the relationship between a standard sign and its referent is based on a "single uniform meaning",[165] he seems to presuppose that within a standard sign, semantic unity is fully achieved. Conversely, he believes that to the extent to which the structural organisation of a sign involves a disunity, it does not *signify*, but only "affects" us in an "immediate" reality.[166] Because Mukařovský understands the original semioticity of a sign as an unequivocal reference to an unequivocal reality, his claims related to the "standard" sign are epistemologically representationalist and ontologically objectivistic.[167]

Conversely, Merleau-Ponty approaches the difference between communicative and innovative sign with an entirely different idea of semioticity. With representational sign, Merleau-Ponty is more Saussurian than Mukařovský. Merleau-Ponty appreciates Saussure's structural framework precisely because the idea of language as a system of oppositions enables him to reject the objectivistic view, according to which signs possess a complete unity and refer to univocal referents or objects.[168] Because signs have meaning laterally, due to their difference from other signs and ultimately from all the structural elements involved in our total experience, they do not signify by a relation to something that exists outside a signifying system.[169] Our ordinary language provides us only with an *illusion*, as Merleau-Ponty writes, of a total and fully achieved expression which attains the thing itself.[170] Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea of a purely representational language, emphasising the fact that the "desired contact with things does not lie in the beginning of language but at the end of language's effort".[171] We never relate simply to referents;

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[162] Merleau-Ponty, 'Man and Adversity (Discussion)', 216.
[163] Cf. Mukařovský, 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 96.
[164] Ibid., 106.
[165] Ibid., 125.
[166] Ibid., 102, 109, 114-5.
[167] Mukařovský's objectivism manifests itself in his mentions of "natural" realities that are supposed to "affect" us directly. Similarly, he claims that some artistic expressions provide us with a "faithful presentation of nature"; 'Intentionality and Unintentionality', 108.
[168] See Merleau-Ponty, *Prose of the World*, 3-8.
[169] Cf. ibid., 112: "In speaking or writing, we do not refer to some *thing to say* [*quelque* chose à dire] which is before us, distinct from any speech".
[170] Ibid., 110.
[171] Ibid.; for a detailed commentary on this topic, see Foultier, 'First Man Speaking', 198, 200.

instead, we relate to what remains to be said, in our total situation, in contrast to what has already been formulated in our language and culture.

Thus, while Mukařovský ultimately relies on the idea of a referent that is independent of one's attitude towards the (standard) sign, according to Merleau-Ponty, objects do not exist independently of our relationships with them, but in dependence on our capacity to "articulate"[172] them within the "diacritical systems"[173] available to us. While Mukařovský believes that all the structural elements of a sign must be unified to be meaningful, Merleau-Ponty argues that, because signs only signify within systems of oppositions, a total unification is impossible. Given that the linguistic meaning is *between* signs rather than *in* them, signs cannot be attributed an inherent unity, and there is an irremediable "silence" in language.[174] Correlatively, Merleau-Ponty rejects the idea of a simple "natural reality" that would affect us in a direct manner. Elaborating the Saussurian interpretation of meaning as constituted by differences without terms, Merleau-Ponty argues that even perception must itself be viewed as a "diacritical system".[175] To perceive does not mean to be passively subjected to external sensations, but to actively use our corporeal capacities to articulate perceptual values (such as figures on grounds).

In summary, both authors investigate and positively appreciate the intertwinement between representational and innovative speaking, but each assigns a different status to these dimensions regarding their originality and derivativeness. Mukařovský has awareness that a representationalist account of language is incomplete, but constructs his analysis of the artistic "autonomous sign" on a representationalist background. For him, the autonomous sign is a special modification of the standard sign, due to a lack of unity, unequivocality, and a specific referent. Conversely, Merleau-Ponty considers spoken speech a restriction, or a sedimentation of the diacritical, articulating procedures of speaking speech. Language, Merleau-Ponty explains, successfully conceals itself as a diacritical expressive operation "by referring us to what it signifies for us", that is, by contracting this operation in its result.[176]

Although the two thinkers' theories only partially converge, I believe that Mukařovský's analysis of the autonomous sign contributes to a better understanding of Merleau-Ponty's anti-objectivistic theory of language and philosophy. Mukařovský's analysis of the autonomous sign clearly shows important implications of a sign's open unity for its epistemological function, its relationship to the perceiver, and its dynamic temporal character. Conversely, while Mukařovský does not apply these ideas to linguistic signs generally, Merleau-Ponty's works suggest that this is precisely what we ought to do. If signs are differential in nature and never possess an intrinsic unity, the main implications of Mukařovský's analysis of the autonomous sign should be investigated with regard to language universally. Rather than merely conflating the difference between pragmatic and innovative speaking, such an investigation would facilitate a better understanding of how linguistic innovation is contracted and sedimented in our established language.

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[172] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Le problème de la parole*, 119-20.

[173] Cf. Merleau-Ponty, *Themes*, 19; *Le problème de la parole*, 85, 119.

[174] As Merleau-Ponty indicates, language signifies "through what it *does not* say as much as what it says" (*Prose of the World*, 43; emphasis added).

[175] See Merleau-Ponty, *Le monde sensible et le monde de l'expression*, 117-8, 173, 180, 203-4; *The Visible and the Invisible*, 213, 233.

[176] Merleau-Ponty, 'Indirect Language', 46; cf. *Phenomenology of Perception*, 413-5, 417.

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