

In Search of Lost Speech: From Language to Nature in Merleau-Ponty's *Collège de France* Courses

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ABSTRACT

This paper tracks the development of Merleau-Ponty's inquiries into language through the themes of institution, symbolism, and nature in his *Collège de France* lectures of 1953-1960. It seeks to show the continuity of Merleau-Ponty's inquiries over this period. *The Problem of Speech* course (1953-1954) constitutes his last extended treatment of speech, language, and expression, and it leaves many questions unanswered. Nonetheless, a careful study of the course reveals that the inquiries that follow into institution and symbolism, and later into nature, do not mark a sharp rupture with his earlier thought. Rather, the later investigations are required by those into language and expression to clarify the underlying functions that support them. Ultimately, the themes of language and nature will be deeply interwoven in Merleau-Ponty's late thought, with institution and symbolism serving as important mediating concepts.

1. Introduction

In this paper I track the development of Merleau-Ponty's inquiries into language by way of the themes of institution, symbolism, and nature in his *Collège de France* lectures of 1953-1960, in particular, *The Problem of Speech* (1953-54), *Institution and Passivity* (1954-55), and the three *Nature* lectures (1956-1960). I seek to show the continuity of Merleau-Ponty's inquiries over this period. *The Problem of Speech* (Merleau-Ponty, 2020) constitutes his last extended treatment of speech, language, and expression, and it leaves many questions unanswered. Nonetheless, a careful study of the course reveals that the inquiries that follow into institution and symbolism, and later into nature, do not mark a sharp rupture with his earlier thought. Rather, the later investigations are required by those into language and expression to clarify the underlying

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functions that support them. Ultimately, the themes of language and nature will be deeply interwoven in Merleau-Ponty's late thought, with institution and symbolism serving as important mediating concepts. The *Collège de France* lectures bear witness to the influence not only of Saussure, but also of psychoanalytic thinkers in shaping Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the relationship between nature and language. Taken together, the lectures situate language between natural and artificial institutions and symbolisms.

I begin (Section 2) with a discussion of several questions posed in the Introduction to *The Problem of Speech* and survey the headway Merleau-Ponty makes on these throughout that course. I argue that these reflections directly point the way towards the inquiries into institution and symbolism found in the *Institution and Passivity* courses from the following year. When we turn to those courses, however, (Section 3) we do not find a direct approach to the question of language as institution. Nonetheless, the various inquiries there into institution in different domains (such as in art, knowledge, and animal life) overlap with and circumscribe in various ways the phenomena of language, situating language between natural institutions and more deliberate modes of cultural institution. This theme returns in the final *Nature* course (Section 4), where language is understood as existing between natural and artificial symbolisms and institutions. I conclude (Section 5) by highlighting some open questions and briefly addressing the relevance of these lines of inquiry for contemporary discussions in phenomenological and 4e approaches to language.

2. From expression to institution: *The Problem of Speech* (1953-1954)

It has been noted that Merleau-Ponty transitions in his writings following *Phenomenology of Perception* from a focus on expression to an increasing interest in institution (Vallier, 2005). The recent publication of *The Problem of Speech*¹ from 1953-1954 sheds light on this shift in focus. It also makes evident the underlying continuity of inquiry from the three courses dedicated to language and closely related themes from 1953-1954² to the lectures on institution and passivity from 1954-1955.³ *The Problem of Speech* is the last of

¹ Merleau-Ponty, 2020. Henceforth cited as "PbP". The translations from this text are mine.

² The other two courses have been published as Merleau-Ponty, 2011, 2013.

³ Merleau-Ponty, 2010b.

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Merleau-Ponty's texts or lecture courses to be dedicated to language.⁴ But this by no means implies that the themes of language and expression become less important in Merleau-Ponty's late thought. On the contrary, the late working notes and lectures can be seen as constituting a sort of regressive inquiry into the concepts of institution, passivity, and nature that are essential for understanding language. These concepts must be in place to resituate and properly appreciate the full account of linguistic expression and meaning-making that Merleau-Ponty was developing in earlier work. As he notes in an unpublished fragment,

We expect from an ontology of nature that it will instruct us regarding the modes of connection and a meaning of meaning that are present at the origins of all human history and the ignorance of which ultimately falsifies our conception of history and the human being.⁵

The Problem of Speech begins with an introduction in which Merleau-Ponty attempts to remove various prejudices of common sense, logic, and linguistics in order to prepare an approach to speech on its own terms (PbP 39-85). He then lays out the guiding problems for the inquiry. Of these, three are of primary interest for present purposes: (1) the relationship of language and speech, (2) the problem of the beginning of signification, and (3) the relationship of nature and culture. In Section 2.1, I will elaborate these three problems. In Section 2.2, I will discuss the progress he makes on each in *The Problem of Speech*.

2.1. Three guiding problems

Language and speech. A central problem of the course is the relationship between language and speech. At the outset, Merleau-Ponty refers to Saussure's distinction between *parole* (speech), *langue* (this or that individual language; linguistic structure, linguistic system), and *langage* (language in general; the language faculty).⁶ He notes that his focus in this context is on speech. A

⁴ But see also the discussions of language in connection with Husserl and Heidegger in the late courses *The Possibility of Philosophy Today from 1958-59* (in Merleau-Ponty, 2022), and *Husserl at the Limits of Phenomenology* from 1960 (Merleau-Ponty, 2001).

⁵ Merleau-Ponty 2008, 52f. - my translation. The editor dates this version of the text to 1957.

⁶ PbP 39. I have provided the parenthetical glosses on these terms. It is not here possible to discuss in detail the polysemy of these terms or the interpretation and translation of Saussure's distinctions (though see Stawarska, 2015). As we will see, Merleau-Ponty himself will make something of his own use of these terms and feels the need to go beyond Saussure in many respects. In the following, I leave *langue* untranslated where appropriate.

plausible albeit simplistic way of reading Saussure's distinction would be to grant priority to *langue* as the ideal object, the social institution and system of conventions (40). Speech, then, would be the simple derived effect of *langue*, and *langue* would be an independent whole definable in isolation from speech (59). Merleau-Ponty's intention, however, is not merely historical (59). Accordingly, he is not concerned to decide whether such a reading is exegetically and philosophically defensible, and at various points he encourages us to go beyond Saussure's formulations. He maintains that, by introducing the concept of *speech* and dedicating to it a separate branch of linguistics (de Saussure, 1983, pp. 18–20), Saussure forces us to reexamine all related categories, including, presumably, those of *langue* and *langage* (PbP 88). For Merleau-Ponty, the relationship between speech and *langue* is much more intimate and reciprocal than the simplistic interpretation allows. Far from speech being a mere realization of an independently existing *langue*, Merleau-Ponty views the real activity of speaking subjects as supporting and carrying *langue* (78). Speech creates and recreates *langue*. Given its inherence in the real, *langue* must be viewed as a “non-ideal system” (79). Merleau-Ponty sees *langue* now as a “whole of existence,” and, recalling the language of *Gestalt* psychology, it is the “level” or “ground” against which parole is divergence (*écart*).⁷ *Langue* “calls for effectuation in speech” and is only the “schema of possible speech [*paroles*] and the place of exchanged speech” (74). But this reconceptualization of the parole-*langue* distinction, Merleau-Ponty realizes, must be further specified. It raises new problems: What are the “status of the speaking subject and the status of institution” (74)? What is the relation between the individual and the historical (74)? How should we describe the “presence of *langue* to the speaker” (207)? And what is the “mode of existence of *langue*” if we do not give the final word to a science of linguistics that makes of *langue* an ideal scientific *constructum* (207)?⁸

⁷ PbP 79. Cf. Merleau-Ponty, 2010a, pp. 60–66.

⁸ Already in *Phenomenology of Perception*, though the work contains no explicit reference to Saussure, Merleau-Ponty refers to something closely resembling the Saussurean distinction between *langue* and *parole* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 202). And by the time of the 1949–1950 course on consciousness and language acquisition, he sees the need to go beyond a simplistic understanding of the *langue-parole* dichotomy and its correlate diachronic and synchronic temporal perspectives (Merleau-Ponty, 2010a, p. 64ff.).

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The beginning of signification. “How is it that signification begins?”⁹ Merleau-Ponty asks. “How do we have the feeling of ‘understanding’?” (PbP 86) This question is framed within the context of a Saussurean understanding of signification: signifiers do not signify through positive, direct relations with the concepts or objects they denote, but rather only negatively, indirectly (diacritically), through the differences between signs. But if signification is strictly negative in this sense, how does it get off the ground to begin with? How can there be *differences* of signification without any (positive) significations to begin with? There is here perhaps a certain retrospective illusion at play, Merleau-Ponty suggests: while bodily gestures clearly presuppose a shared, concrete situation within and against which they are oriented and meaningful, writing and speech seem to have the power themselves to initiate a reader or listener into the very situation that they describe. When reading a novel, we are teleported to a different place and time, even one that we have never or could never encounter in real life. Nonetheless, speech, too, presupposes a “constituted landscape of culture” (86) where it introduces difference. It is perhaps only in hindsight, or once one has acquired an instituted, conventional language, that the “retrospective illusion” (cf. 209) of speech makes it seem as though it conjured its own situation from out of nothing. Speech presupposes on the most basic level a global referent: “A global view on the world, a perceptual, mute view, is presupposed by the speech that articulates it” (85f.). How, then, are we to understand this “preexistence of the whole,” this meaning before meaning, that is both presupposed by and articulated in speech? How is it that even “the first word [*parole*] is already a total possession of meaning?” (86)

Nature and culture. The question concerning the beginning of signification is related to a further issue, which Merleau-Ponty introduces under the heading of the “problem of nature and culture” (PbP 86). Merleau-Ponty claims that Saussure compels us to reexamine the relations between nature and culture. Specifically, this means further understanding what Saussure means by his famous statement that language (i.e., the signifier-signified relationship within a linguistic system) is *arbitrary*. This could be taken in two senses,

⁹ In Merleau-Ponty’s work, the question of the beginning of signification may refer to (1) the phylogenetic origin of human language, (2) the ontogenetic acquisition of language, or (3) the genesis of a new expressive meaning in speech. There is a structural isomorphism in each case of something new emerging against an already instituted background of sense. PbP focuses primarily on (2) and (3).

Merleau-Ponty suggests: (a) in the sense of “non-natural,” or (b) in the sense of “decisionary,” “deliberated” (86). It is in the first sense, Merleau-Ponty says, that Saussure is to be understood. Linguistic signs are arbitrary in that the signifier-signified relation does not result from any sort of natural or physical necessity. But this does not entail that they result from an overt contract or explicit decision. On the contrary, any such “arbitrary” decision concerning language would require “a clear vision of the constituent parts of the language, and of thought, and of their connection” (87) – which is precisely what we lack. Still, though the relation between signifier and signified is in principle “unmotivated” (arbitrary, non-natural), Saussure admits that language users introduce certain principles of order and regularity into the mass of signs. Compound words, such as those for numbers, provide a clear illustration. If the language were perfectly arbitrary, each number would have its own arbitrary signifier unrelated to others. Instead of “fourteen” there would be an entirely novel and unrelated signifier with no trace of “four” and “ten” in it. There are also grammatical motivations, based on analogies and established morphological precedents within a language. Given the pattern “*poir – poirrier*” (pear – pear tree), the pairings “*citron – citronnier*” (lemon – lemon tree), “*pomme – pommier*” (apple – apple tree), and so forth, are all motivated. Thus, Saussure concedes that while there is a principle of arbitrariness at work in language, there is also a motivational pull. No language meets the principle of pure arbitrariness in its signifier-signified relations.

Here Merleau-Ponty finds a link between Saussure’s thoughts on arbitrariness and convention, and Husserl’s late work on the founding of tradition (Andén, 2018). Once an arbitrary convention of signifier and signified, or a cultural institution, has been established, it can be taken for granted (*allant de soi* – PbP 88). Merleau-Ponty often cites Husserl’s claim that culture is the forgetting of origins, with the accepted cultural domain taken as “second nature.” We find ourselves here in a domain between the purely natural (construed as causality, necessity) and the purely rational or free.¹⁰ Merleau-Ponty construes this space as one of “spontaneity,” and we have an inkling that language understood as a “manner of living” (88) can be reduced neither to physical necessity, nor to a perfectly arbitrary, instituted system of signs (a certain reading of Saussure). Nor can it be understood as an object constituted by

¹⁰ It may be that Merleau-Ponty is fusing phenomenological and Saussurean notions of “motivation.” Recall that in *Phenomenology of Perception*, motivation occupies a space between natural causality and pure freedom or rationality (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 51).

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consciousness (a view Merleau-Ponty associates with Sartre). However, the adequate determination of this middle space is lacking in *The Problem of Speech*, a desideratum that, I will suggest below, may have motivated Merleau-Ponty's further inquiries into institution and nature.

2.2. Headway on the guiding problems

The central sections of *The Problem of Speech* discuss language acquisition in early childhood, the disintegration of speech in aphasia, and the creative speech of the writer as illustrated by Proust. Throughout these inquiries, the problems laid out in the introduction are more often implied than they are explicitly discussed. How much headway does Merleau-Ponty make on these problems in *The Problem of Speech*?

Nature and culture. Concerning the relation of nature and culture, *The Problem of Speech* provides us very little to work with. But one passing mention of nature found in the section of the course on painting and literature is suggestive. In discussing how “things call for art [...] insofar as they are already allusive, lateral presentation” (PbP 154), Merleau-Ponty adds a marginal note reflecting on the “passage from the perceived to the imaginary.” He describes the passage as occurring at the moment when “the elements of the world are employed not because of their own [*propre*] meaning, but because of their figured or metaphorical meaning.” He adds that perception already contains such figuration, but “according to ‘natural’ relations.” Merleau-Ponty is claiming that natural relations in perception already include the allusive, diacritical logic that will be exploited to the next power in art and in language more generally. We may assume that he chose to place “natural” in quotation marks to avoid the misunderstanding that he here intends the kind of natural relations of signification (e.g., smoke naturally “signifies” fire) that he earlier had rejected as a candidate for understanding the relations at play in Saussurean sign systems (86f.). The observation here that (quasi)-natural diacritical relations are already operative in perception prepares the possibility of a deeper continuity between language and nature than the initial setup of the problematic seemed to allow. This theme will be further developed in the second and especially the third *Nature* courses. At the same time, we see a hint of the idea that linguistic and other forms of cultural expression take over and transform meaningful structures that are already in some sense natural “institutions,” a theme that will be explored in both the *Institution and Passivity* and *Nature* courses.

The beginning of signification. Concerning the problem of the “beginning of signification,” the discussion of language acquisition makes some headway. We also find here a significant departure from Merleau-Ponty’s previous discussions of the topic, most notably in the lecture course at the Sorbonne on consciousness and language acquisition from 1949-1950 (Merleau-Ponty, 2010a, pp. 3–67). Compared to the Sorbonne course, the work of psychoanalytic thinkers, especially that of François Rostand, figures heavily in Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of language acquisition in *The Problem of Speech*.¹¹ There is an increased emphasis on affectivity, the relation to the mother, and the use of language to resolve emotional tensions in development. As in his earlier discussions, it is intersubjective and intercorporeal life – an inchoate, preverbal, preobjective understanding of others and situations – that induces the infant into language. Merleau-Ponty is concerned to explain how the infant comes to configure the “verbal chain,” initially just a string of meaningless sounds, as significant speech (PbP 96). The infant’s experience, teeming with nascent meaning, is “snapped up” (*happé*) (102) by the spoken signs of the mother in which it “recognizes itself.” Or, again, events in the infant lifeworld create “whirlwinds” that arouse in the infant “quasi-sentiments of the psychic” (102). We glimpse here a strong component of passivity in the child’s being drawn into language. There is, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, a weight of the intersubjective world, a gravitational force drawing us into speech. At the same time, with the psychoanalytic influence, an *erotic* aspect has entered into the discussion that was lacking in Merleau-Ponty’s earlier discussions of language acquisition. At the center of this constellation of passivity and desire is an original identification with the speaking, gesturing, affective body of the mother (101, 106). Here there is no clear division of whose body or voice is whose, or, indeed, whose affective experiences are whose.¹² This is both an original and

¹¹ There is only one brief mention of psychoanalysis in the Sorbonne “Consciousness and Language Acquisition” lectures (Merleau-Ponty, 2010a, p. 43), though psychoanalytic works play a somewhat larger role in the other two courses from the same year, including discussions of dreams (p. 73) and symbolism that anticipate somewhat the treatment of those themes in *Institution and Passivity*. Later in the Sorbonne lectures on child psychology and pedagogy, there is a reference to Rostand (p. 244), whose article “Grammaire et affectivité” (1950) and book of the same title (1951) appeared too late for Merleau-Ponty to incorporate them into the lectures on language acquisition. On Merleau-Ponty’s dialogue with psychoanalysis during the Sorbonne period, see Welsh, 2013.

¹² Merleau-Ponty here returns to and deepens a theme explored already in the Sorbonne lectures. See Whitney, 2012.

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immediate source of meaning and pleasure, but also a source of conflict. For the identification will inevitably be ruptured. In Rostand's account, the acquisition of various concepts and grammatical functions is motivated by and provides a sort of resolution to the conflicts. Language allows for an intellectualization and "diserotization" (100) of original syncretic affectivity. Language allows the child to restore at a higher, mediate level of communication the immediate, bodily identification that has been ruptured (108). But the achievement is imperfect. Acquired language carries within it a trace and implicit reference to the original affective identification with the mother. As such, language both allows us to exit the original affective order while at the same time surreptitiously preserving and transforming it. It expresses original affectivity at the same time as it conceals it (104). "Speech is as much mask as expression" (109).

All of this amounts to saying that the affectively laden language that we acquire in childhood and carry with us our entire life does not stand in a direct relationship to an underlying affective, sensorimotor, or bodily substratum that it expresses. Rather, the relationship must be understood as one of *symbolism* in a psychoanalytic sense of the term. Thus, alongside the Saussurean sense in which expression is indirect (i.e., diacritical), a new sense of the symbolic indirectness of language and expression has emerged, this one drawn from psychoanalysis. But the precise nature of this symbolism remains underdeveloped in *The Problem of Speech*. It will be pursued further in the Passivity course the following year (see below, §3).

Thus, linguistic expression does not transparently communicate an underlying lived experience without mutation. Nonetheless, here as in earlier work, Merleau-Ponty continues to acknowledge a continuity of expression in language with more basic modes of bodily, preverbal communication (Kee, 2018). While speech can serve as a vehicle for a kind of universal communication, it achieves this insofar as it "drags with it prehistoric sediments of our preobjective relation with the world" (PbP 109). The body, the "language of the body," is a "first language," and one that "calls, with all its weight, speech proper [*proprement dite*]." ¹³ The perceptual world, too, is already at least to some extent articulated significantly and expressively prior to speech. The idea from the *Phenomenology of Perception* that *prior* to the other, things achieve the "miracle of expression" (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, p. 333) is explored again in

¹³ The analogy of the body, or gesture, as a first language and natural, acquired languages as second languages (or, indeed, the analogy of acquired language as a second *body*) occurs throughout Merleau-Ponty's corpus (e.g., 1964a, p. 7, 2003, p. 211).

The Problem of Speech through painting and literature (PbP 135ff.). What is new in *The Problem of Speech* compared to *Phenomenology of Perception*'s discussions of this continuity is the influence of psychoanalysis, highlighting (1) the role of identification with the maternal body in cohesive preverbal communication and understanding, and (2) the revealing-concealing, symbolic nature of expression; and the influence of Saussure, highlighting (3) the diacritical and *divergent* aspect of signification.¹⁴ Further, at the root of these various diacritical systems of meaning-making (the body, the perceptual world, language), Merleau-Ponty hypothesizes as the foundation of language a "capacity to assume diacritical systems" (211). If there is an isomorphism between language, other higher forms of expression such as music (cf. 161), and more basic modes of perception and expression, it is because "the field of language [*langage*] [...] is only a reiteration at a higher power of processes of articulation: it resolves the ambiguities of perceived experience, but in doing so it opens a new field where other ambiguities are found" (123). Though the issue is not explicitly stated here, the fact that higher modes of expression always direct us back to perceived experience raises the question of the ultimate genesis of the latter and its relation to meaning in nature. Merleau-Ponty will return to this theme in the *Nature* courses

Langue and speech. Merleau-Ponty began the course by emphasizing that *langue* cannot be understood in abstraction from speech. Speech produces and reproduces *langue*, and the latter is not definable without the former (PbP 40). While he acknowledges that the converse is also true, and that there is no speech without a preexisting background of acquired linguistic meaning, Merleau-Ponty at times in *The Problem of Speech* seems to want to set aside the question of the nature of *langue* and its relation to speech in order to isolate the problem of speech (e.g., 159f.). Part of the purpose of studying Proust and the phenomenon of literary language was to focus on the "total function of speech as *langue* in its nascent state" (178). Such "total expression" is the fundamental function of speech, speech as instituting ideality, engendering of the idea (189). However, in concluding the course, Merleau-Ponty acknowledges that the attempt to treat speech in action as somehow prior to and in separation from *langue* has only underscored the need for the inquiry into institution and its

¹⁴The character of language and especially its acquisition as *écart* is also informed by Merleau-Ponty's reading of Goldstein's (1948) work *Language and Language Disturbances*. Though Merleau-Ponty was already familiar with this work at the time of his earlier course on language acquisition (2010a, p. 47), he did not make extensive use of it in earlier lecture courses.

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application to language (200). All creative speech, whether in language acquisition or literary expression, creates and recreates a background of acquired, instituted meaning – *langue* – that it takes over without itself creating it *ex nihilo*. Hence, after the inquiry into creative speech, we must study creative speech’s relation to instituted language. In Merleau-Ponty’s revised conclusion to the course we read the following:

1) Creative speech itself assumes [*se donne*] its (private) institutions thanks to which it goes further. The study of this development could teach us something about collective institution and above all make the connection between speech and *langue*.¹⁵ It is only by degrees that speech acquires its force.

2) Creative speech itself crystalizes upon constituted *langue*: it reveals itself to the writer like a certain magnification of the *langue*, it grafts itself onto pre-personal *langue*. More precisely: it grafts itself onto the personal speech of others [*d’autres paroles personnelles*]. It’s not by looking at the world that one becomes a writer, but by reading other writers [...]. This means that instances of personal speech [*paroles personnelles*] = stimulation from the personal speech of others that does not resemble it = as fragment of an immense language [*langage*] whose other portions remain to be conquered. They are this only because the *langue* has opened a *field*, is an invitation to speak, poses the possibility of a whole series of speech on the horizon, is itself already like a first book, the outline of a work.

The maturation of creative speech supposes as given the collective and personal diacritical systems defined by the first works, and it is born from decentration, from restructuration of that system – which is the register [*le register*] of our personal and also interpersonal history.

Thus, it remains to be studied how speech becomes institution (and how the institution is call to speech, a sort of “general speech”), this being not a secondary operation, but rather the very virtue of expression.

We have only cleared the terrain for this study, which must (1) be supported by the analysis of *langue* [and] (2) connect to the problem consciousness-history. (PbP201f.)

¹⁵ The contrast between the private and collective has been implicit all along in PbP, where the focus is on individual achievements of speech. Merleau-Ponty will explore further the contrast between the personal and the public in the “Institution” lectures. The talk of “going beyond” instituted language recalls the distinction between speaking and spoken speech, familiar from *Phenomenology of Perception*, *The Prose of the World*, and other texts (see Kee, 2018). Merleau-Ponty is perhaps attempting here a different approach to much the same set of issues, departing in PbP from the *langue-parole* conceptual pair rather than that of speaking and spoken speech.

We see, then, that though some headway has been made in each of the problem areas to be addressed in *The Problem of Speech*, in many ways Merleau-Ponty has only further sharpened his statements of those problems. All three problems converge on the question of institution that Merleau-Ponty has highlighted in the concluding remarks of the course. In order to properly fathom the relationship between *langue* and speech, the child's acquisition of language, and the relationship between nature and culture, we need a deeper understanding of the phenomenon of institution that cuts across these issues. It is to that topic that Merleau-Ponty turns in his teaching the following year.

3. In search of lost speech: *Institution and Passivity* (1954-1955)

All signs in *The Problem of Speech* point towards the question of institution. However, if we turn to the *Institution and Passivity* courses from the following academic year¹⁶ in the hopes of finding an explicit discussion of language in terms of institution, we are disappointed. But it does not follow that Merleau-Ponty has simply lost sight of the questions of speech and language that initially motivated the study of institution. The studies of institution in different domains in *Institution and Passivity* (e.g., life, art, knowledge, culture, history) all contribute to a broader understanding of institution that promises to shed light on our understanding of institution in language. Merleau-Ponty did not see language “in the classical sense” as being the sole manifestation of the “symbolic activity” he was attempting to elucidate in *The Problem of Speech* (PbP 205). As such, the efforts in *Institution and Passivity* to explore that common symbolic power in different regions is consistent with and a natural progression of the earlier studies.¹⁷

3.1. Institution

Indeed, the Introduction to the Institution lectures reminds us that *all* doing is symbolic activity (IP 7). Merleau-Ponty describes institution as

establishment in an experience (or in a constructed apparatus) of dimensions (in the general, Cartesian sense: system of references) in relation to which a whole

¹⁶ Merleau-Ponty, 2010b. Henceforth cited as “IP”.

¹⁷ For Merleau-Ponty, language does not pose a merely regional ontological problem that could be isolated in a simple way from those of other regional ontologies. See his critical remarks concerning Sartre's opposed approach on this point (PbP 205; IP 122; 1969, p. 126; cf. 2012, 433).

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series of other experiences will make sense and will make a *sequel*, a history.
(8f.)

Shortly thereafter, in discussion of the historical character of institution, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that instituting events are not isolated, but are rather “event-matrixes, opening a historical field which has unity” (13). Thus, “institution in the strong sense [is] this symbolic matrix that results in the openness of a field, of a future according to certain dimensions” (13). This understanding of institution can be seen as synthesizing various of the decisive influences in Merleau-Ponty’s thinking at this stage of his work. First, there is a phenomenological motif in the choice of term itself (from Husserl’s *Stiftung*). Further allusions to phenomenology can be detected in the open-ended, horizontal character of institution (e.g., 14, 63ff.), a notion echoed in the language of a “system of references” (which also recalls Heidegger’s *Verweisungszusammenhang*). Second, there is a Saussurean, structuralist aspect to Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of institution insofar as its sense is shaped by diverge (*écart*) and difference (11; cf. 25, 46, 51) and in the *systemic* character of institution. However, Merleau-Ponty largely preserves his appropriated, transformed conception of divergence while now omitting the explicit references to Saussure that were still present in *The Problem of Speech*.¹⁸ Meanwhile, the idea of a system of signs is increasingly replaced by or merges with the idea of *symbolic matrices*. Here in the emphasis on symbolism we can detect a third influence, that of psychoanalysis, which, as discussed above, grew in importance in *The Problem of Speech* compared to Merleau-Ponty’s previous discussions of language and acquisition. Borrowing again from psychoanalysis, Merleau-Ponty sees the dynamics of *investment* (*cathexis*) at play in institution (IP 9f., 17f., 25; cf. PpP 109, 189).

Even if there is no extended, explicit discussion of language in *Institution and Passivity*, these general remarks on institution provide a framework for rethinking the institutional character of language. Further, we may survey Merleau-Ponty’s discussions of different species of institution in *Institution and Passivity* to see to what extent they laterally shed light on language. They do this in a variety of ways: through the general insight they provide into institution as such; through the *analogy* these specific examples offer with language *qua* institutional (e.g., in the analogy with painting); through

¹⁸ The *Institution and Passivity* lectures do not contain any explicit reference to Saussure. The three *Nature* lectures only include passing mentions (Merleau-Ponty, 2003, pp. 146, 158)

the *overlap* of these various areas of institution with language (e.g., in the discussion of symbolism, or institution in domains of knowledge); and through the occasional offhand remarks that Merleau-Ponty makes concerning language throughout. The most obvious points of overlap here are the discussions of the institution of a work of art, the institution of a domain of knowledge, and the field of culture from the Institution course; and the discussion of symbolism in the Passivity course. But no less significant is the brief discussion of institution and life with which the main content of the Institution course begins. This waymark points both backward to Merleau-Ponty's first book, *The Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty, 1963), and to the underdeveloped theme of the nature-culture relationship signaled at the beginning of *The Problem of Parole*; and forward to the more extensive discussions of nature in later courses (Merleau-Ponty, 2003).

At the outset of the section "Institution and Life," Merleau-Ponty dispels a mistaken impression one might have about institution. One might think that there is a simple opposition between the innate and the instituted, or between behaviors resulting from the natural maturation of an organism and those resulting from cultural learning. However, the distinction between instituted and "natural" animal behavior is not so black and white. Already in embryology and earliest development of the anatomical organism, there is an element of plasticity that will allow the course of maturation to be shaped by the environment (IP 16). Merleau-Ponty is increasingly recognizing that structure, function, development, and behavior are internally related concepts in the study of the organism, a theme that will return in the *Nature* lectures. Further, there is a degree of openness and flexibility to much "instinctive" behavior. Environmental and developmental factors will determine the patterns into which instinctual behaviors resolve, with moments of flexibility, possibilities of substitution, and pluralities of meaning along the way (17, 19). The organism's developmental "blueprint" is open to instituting events that shape the future possibilities even of some behaviors that we generally classify as instinctual. What characterizes human institution, however, is that it integrates its past into a new signification and sets underway an "investigation" (18f.) for which there is an indefinite openness in the individual and collective history (22f.). Merleau-Ponty illustrates this with a discussion of the incomplete resolution of the Oedipal complex in puberty (20ff.). The "concrete dialectic" of puberty plays out at the nexus of bodily events brought about by hormonal changes and psychological, experiential developments in the growth of the person. But while

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a certain equilibrium is achieved, it is open to further development in later romantic attachment. The “investigation” opened by puberty is never truly completed: “Institution is therefore real and never finished” (25).

The discussion of institution in nature, animality, and life, exhibited through embryology and puberty, begins to explicate a theme implicit all along in Merleau-Ponty’s acquisitional treatment of language. “Human institution,” Merleau-Ponty notes, “always resumes a prior institution, which has posed a *question*” (IP 22). This point is of considerable import for the issues of the beginning of signification and the relationship between nature and culture posed in *The Problem of Speech*. In language acquisition, for example, signification is acquired against the background of existing social institutions. In turn, human individual and collective institutions point back in historical and phylogenetic time to more ancient social, animal, and organic institutions that nondeterministically inform the development of the individual. If the series of human institutions cannot carry on indefinitely, then it must eventually direct us back to non-human (or not-just-human) institutions. This theme will be taken up in the *Nature* courses.

The discussion of institution in life, then, has indirect consequences for the understanding of language. For any such human institution, even the “system of references” of a conventional and arbitrary system of signs, at some point will intersect not-just-human institution in a manner that will need to be further specified. In the discussions in “Institution” of the institution of a work of art and a domain of knowledge, by contrast, we might hope to find reflections that bear more directly on our understanding of language. After all, in these domains, language is often the medium of the institution itself (e.g., for literary works among works of art, and for much work in scientific fields). Further, the discussion of painting as institution of a symbolic form (IP 41ff.) allows Merleau-Ponty an opportunity to explore an analogy he has broached elsewhere between painting and literary expression, or language more broadly.¹⁹ Here various problems of the relationship between speech and *langue* return in parallel form. Whereas in *The Problem of Speech*, Merleau-Ponty asked in what way *langue* is present to the speaker (PbP 207), in the discussion of painting in *Institution*, he asks the parallel question concerning the presence of “the entire field of *the art*

¹⁹ See PbP 150ff., and the essay “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence” in Merleau-Ponty, 1964.

of painting [*la peinture*]” to the painter.²⁰ In painting, there is a similar dialectical relationship between individual acts (or works) of painting (roughly the counterparts of speech) and the whole social-historical enterprise of painting (roughly, *langue*). Though the painter need not be explicitly aware of it, “each attempt proceeds from the preceding ones and cannot be deduced from them, re-creates the whole” (47).

Thus, there is an analogy between the expressive, institutional logic of painting and its history; and that of language (or, perhaps more precisely, literature) and its history. But with *what* exactly is the analogy, natural language or literature? Pushing the analogy further, we start to see its limits. “The writer makes use of his language as the painter makes use of his brush,” Merleau-Ponty claims (IP 51). One limitation of the analogy, however, is that in writing, language is both the instrument and the product, the very material and medium of the artform. Consequently, comparing painting to literary language, it is not only literary language as a somewhat separate domain of culture that is transformed through literature (as it is with painting), but *langue* itself. Further, while literary language has its counterpart in speech, a “second nature” of the human being that is a near universal of the species, not everyone practices some form of visual art, just as not everyone writes or practices deliberately creative expression with language. Parity can be restored somewhat when we recall that for Merleau-Ponty, all perception is in some sense expression (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, p. 67). Hence vision itself is something like the counterpart to speech in the analogy, with painting and literature respectively being the higher forms of the basic mode of expression. The analogy looks even more promising when we consider that for Merleau-Ponty, the perceptual world already contains a nascent symbolism and is diacritically articulated.

Thus, we might propose a three-term analogy between (1) a natural capacity for vision, (2) *visual culture* more generally (with which almost all humans are at least conversant, if not themselves producers), and (3) the art of painting, on the one side; and (1) a basic bodily capacity for expression, (2) natural languages, and (3) the art of literature, on the other. But if this new analogy does hold, it highlights that Merleau-Ponty has not provided an analysis of visual culture more broadly – its institution and acquisition – that would help

²⁰ IP 41. The translation of “la peinture” as “the art of painting” obscures the tight parallel between *la peinture* and *la langue*. See also Merleau-Ponty’s fascinating comparison of planimetric perspective painting to the effort to constitute a perfect *langue* – which would, effectively, eliminate the effort of speech (42).

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sketch out the analogy with natural language discussed in the context of child language acquisition in *The Problem of Speech*. We would be left, then, with the counterpart to the problem already noted at the end of *The Problem of Speech*: Though (almost) everyone speaks, literary expression is an expressive operation “in the second, creative sense” (PbP 199) that only the few pursue. And though almost everyone is literate in visual culture, painting is an expressive operation in a second, creative sense that only the few exercise. We are left wondering again whether quotidian language use and creative, literary expression are indeed manifestations of one and the same capacity (199).²¹

To put the concern somewhat differently, if pre-verbal bodily language is our first body and first nature; and acquired, conventional languages are a second body, a second nature; then we can perhaps describe literary and painterly expression, which are more deliberate (if not entirely self-transparent) undertakings as a kind of *third* nature. And while such tertiary phenomena may in important respects be exemplary of human capacities, they are not basic and universal (or even nearly so) to the species. The study of life and animality in *Institution and Passivity* has shown that even the most basic vital institutions are not simple reflexive or mechanical phenomena. But natural language, speech, must be situated somewhere between the most basic natural institutions and the more deliberate institutions of artworks and their histories. The question posed in *The Problem of Speech* concerning the relationship of nature and culture, especially with respect to language, though again somewhat sharpened, has certainly not been resolved.

Similar comments apply to the discussion in *Institution and Passivity* of the institution of domains of knowledge, where Merleau-Ponty considers deliberate efforts to establish a field of systematic knowledge, such as in mathematics or geometry (IP 50ff.). Again, as in literature, natural languages

²¹ Merleau-Ponty mentions at least one respect in which the language-painting analogy seems not to hold. There is a limited sense in which more recent paintings can be said to take up the work of preceding painting. While such integration is never total in any modality of expression, Merleau-Ponty notes that it is “more perfect in language” (IP 61). He continues: “This produces the impression that language is not only, as [in] painting, a construction of a series of quasi-aphasic and mute signifying machines, but the conquest of a free signification, liberated from this gangue, before which the language erases itself” (61). The wording here and the surrounding context suggest that Merleau-Ponty thinks there is something incorrect about such a characterization of language as completely liberating itself from its conditions of discovery (cf. 54f.). However, he does not further pursue this line of thought: “We are not going to consider this, for this is not our subject” (61).

are the medium, or the basis for such institutions. Here, though, while natural language is a necessary condition for a systematic domain of knowledge, the reverse is not the case. Accordingly, while the study of such institution may indirectly shed light on language by illuminating one of its functions and possibilities, we should be wary of taking the analogy too far or absolutizing that particular function as the essence of language.

3.2. Symbolism

We have not yet considered the *Passivity* course that accompanies *Institution*. Its major contribution for present purposes is its development of the concept of symbolism in discussion with Freud and Sartre. We have already seen that Merleau-Ponty's understanding of early language acquisition takes on a decidedly psychoanalytic emphasis in *The Problem of Speech*. There, he acknowledges a symbolic dynamic to the relationship between the affective situation in which new concepts or grammatical structures are acquired and the literal significations of those concepts and structures. Symbolism also moves to the fore in the *Institution* course's understanding of institution in terms of "symbolic matrices" (IP 13). While the *Passivity* course's discussion of symbolism is terse and leaves many questions open, it is the closest thing we have to an elaboration of this key concept from the lectures of the mid-1950s.

Merleau-Ponty's concern in the discussion of dream symbolism is to restore, against Sartre and certain tendencies and interpretations of Freud, the "proper language of dreams" (IP 153): a "positive" (152), "constitutive" (153), or "primordial" (154) symbolism. Freud (at times) and Sartre both err by reducing dream symbolism to conventional thinking, though they do this in different ways. Sartre does this by treating dream consciousness merely as "fiction which is given as fiction," as a "capricious *Auffassung* which is known as such" (153). And in Freud there is a tendency to treat the meaning of the dream as completely outside of the dream, only capable of being retrieved through the interpretation of the analyst (153). Contrary to these falsifications, Merleau-Ponty follows Politzer (and, he believes, the true spirit of Freud's thought²²) in describing the "primordial" dream symbolism as a kind of

²² The influence of Politzer on Merleau-Ponty's appropriation of "psychoanalysis in the broad sense" (Merleau-Ponty, 2010a, p. 73), which goes all the way back to *The Structure of Behavior* (Merleau-Ponty, 1963, pp. 177–178), has not been sufficiently appreciated. In particular, Merleau-Ponty credits Politzer with substituting the notion of *ambivalence* for that of the

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“unconventional thought” (154). Merleau-Ponty’s treatment of this primordial symbolism here is as brief as it is suggestive. He states that in the dream, there is an “imminence of the latent meaning” (154). And this imminent meaning cannot be stated openly in conventional language or grasped clearly and distinctly by conventional thought because “the very idea of *openly* or of *exactitude* makes no sense here” (154). Merleau-Ponty claims that in the dream, “the unity is undivided” – that is, the meaning of the symbol is not to be found in some other content, or mode of thought or expression, beyond the dream itself. As such, a suitable method is required for understanding dreams on their own terms, namely, “reverie over dreams, hermeneutical reverie. Because it is not something said, but an echo through totality. It is this system of echoes which also constitutes the oneirism of wakefulness” (154).

What bearing do these investigations into dream symbolism have on our question concerning the nature of language and speech? On the one hand, it might seem that we have in language and dreams two completely equivocal senses of the “symbolic.” Earlier in the “Institution” lectures Merleau-Ponty had stressed that signification should not be equated with symbolism. There is a distinctive productivity “of language and of the algorithm” that allows them to exceed basic symbolism (IP 54). And in the further discussion of dreams following the passages on symbolism we have just examined, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that in the dream there is an “abandonment of the norms of wakeful expression [and] direct language, which presupposes distance and participation in the category” (159). To the extent that language is present, “we do not truly speak in dreams” (154). Rather, words turn up as wordplay, as “echoes [with] several centers” (154). Indeed, in the dream, words “pass for things” (158). Waking consciousness’ discourse on the dream tends to cut apart the original symbolism by retelling it according to a “different signification” (158). If institution in the work of art or a domain of knowledge seemed too artificial, too deliberate, to serve as a model for institution in language, conversely symbolism in the dream may appear too natural, too haphazard to shed light on the functioning of language.

And yet, on the other hand, *The Problem of Speech* had recognized language as but one manifestation of a single underlying symbolic activity (PbP 205) and stated the need to compare verbal symbolism and other forms of

unconscious (2010a, pp. 73, 124), and with the correct understanding of the relationship between the first and second reports of dreams (175, 294).

symbolism (214). Surely, then, the inquiries into symbolism in *Institution and Passivity* cannot be unrelated to the inquiries into language broadly construed. And if the functioning of language in dreams is different from that of direct expression, it is no doubt still language in some sense functioning symbolically in dreams. Further, the determination of institution in terms of symbolic matrices (IP 13), and the importance established in *The Problem of Speech* of understanding language in terms of institution, shows a further convergence of the issues. Finally, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes that imagination and perception, dreaming and waking consciousness, do not constitute two completely separate domains of our conscious life. They should not be distinguished absolutely any more than they should be confounded. Rather, they “communicate” (155). The same presumably holds for waking and dreaming uses of language.

The question is all the more important for our understanding of language when we recall that symbolism (understood in a sense presumably quite close to that discussed in *Passivity*) played a role in the treatment of early language acquisition in *The Problem of Speech*. There we saw Merleau-Ponty follow Rostand in seeing a symbolic, concealing-revealing relation between language and the underlying affective situations that it expresses, between the conscious and unconscious aspects of the personality. Language both expresses and conceals. It continues and transforms underlying affective motivations (PbP 100ff.). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty characterizes both the symbolism of the dream and the infant’s original experience of connection with the maternal body as meaningful experiences characterized by “indivision” (108, 121f.). But does this mean that language is “symbolic” simply in the sense that it contains an implicit reference back to the field of dreamlike indivision and latent meaning from which it first emerges? For if the original affective situation, like the dream situation, is one of indivision and latent symbolism, language conquers it by introducing distinction, difference, *écart*. Surely, the significations of articulate language are, following Saussure, precisely a matter of such diacritical differentiation. Further, insofar as these significations (at least at times and in certain uses of language) can be led towards universal, essential determinations, they would seem to pull us precisely away from a symbolism of indivision towards a symbolism of articulation and differentiation. And yet, Merleau-Ponty has emphasized that even in its universalizing tendency, language “drags with it prehistoric sediments of our preobjective relation with the world” (109; cf. IP 52-57).

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Natural language, it would seem, straddles both of these domains. It possesses tendencies pulling it both from and towards the symbolism of indivision in our affective and preobjective relations to others and the world; as well as tendencies pulling it from and towards the ideal of perfect articulation and division. And it must pull in these opposed directions so to serve our varying expressive needs, affective, intellectual, and other. This is a virtue of language, not a defect. If *Institution and Passivity* evades the question of the institutional nature of language posed at the end of *The Problem of Speech* (e.g., IP 61), it nonetheless furnishes resources to understand and situate language. We can catch glimpses of how these resources might have been utilized to understand language in Merleau-Ponty's late working notes and lectures, including the late courses on nature.

4. Language between symbolisms and institutions: The *Nature* courses (1956-1960)

We have seen that, while the *Institution and Passivity* courses may initially appear to break with the previous inquiries in *The Problem of Speech*, they are in fact entirely continuous with the earlier inquiries and mark a natural unfolding of their problematic. So, too, Merleau-Ponty's inquiries into nature in his last years follow from the interest in institution and passivity. We have already seen that institution cannot be understood as the cultural, human, or artificial in simple opposition to the natural. Institution is already operative in the animal world. And human institutions in the narrower sense ultimately take up and point back to nature, to institution in nature, and to the most basic processes of sense generation in nature. In nature, Merleau-Ponty notes in his Introduction to the first of three courses he would deliver on the topic from 1956-1960, we arrive at what "has a meaning [*sens*], without this meaning being posited by thought: it is the autoproduction of a meaning."²³

Merleau-Ponty initially characterizes nature as "the primordial—that is, the nonconstructed, the noninstituted" (N 4). But this cannot be the whole story. If nature is not instituted by human being (N 3), that does not entail that the dynamics of institution are not at play in nature. As Merleau-Ponty will later observe in a sketch for the third course on nature (from 1959-1960), our senses "function by the institution of Nature" (N 226). This remark occurs within the

²³ Merleau-Ponty, 2003, 3. Henceforth cited as "N".

context of one of the most striking passages in Merleau-Ponty's work on the relationship of nature and language:

The human body is symbolism. Insertion of my movements, of my αίσθητα, of all my behaviors in the interorganic and interindividual system of equivalences. An eye that inspects the landscape, interrogation and response. [...]

[W]e must specify the relations of this "natural" symbolism and "conventional" symbolism or "code." Are there not two symbolisms, one of nondivision, of nondifferentiation, with a latent, blind meaning—the other artificial, conventional, with a manifest meaning? The first is a sort of natural teleology (our senses function by the institution of Nature); the second is truly instituted by us, manifest meaning.—Must we derive the first from the second or the second from the first? The human body as symbolism remains equivocal as long as we do not respond to this question.

In order to respond to it, we would have to address ourselves to what is between the symbolism of nondivision and artificialist symbolism: to language [*langage*][.] (N 226)

This passage confirms the hunch expressed earlier: while the various inquiries of *Institution and Passivity* do not deliver a direct discussion of institution in speech and language (the desideratum identified at the end of *The Problem of Speech*), the targeted inquiries into different domains of institution illuminate different aspects of language. For it is itself a multifaceted phenomenon and is drawn in different directions by different institutional dynamics – natural and cultural, affective and intellectual. Language involves elements of natural institution, insofar as it emerges out of and returns to the intercorporeal, envired human body with its symbolism of nondivision. This was explored in different ways in *Institution and Passivity* in the discussions of institution in animality and life, and in the discussion of dream symbolism; and in the treatment of the symbolism of indivision in the infant's relation to the mother's body in *The Problem of Speech*. And, indeed, the Introduction to the first *Nature* course had already stressed this connection between nature, the organic, and language. Merleau-Ponty cites Lachelier with approval: "The words of a language [...] are themselves a φυσικς" (N 3). Conversely, *Institution and Passivity* also examined the "artificialist" and artifactual symbolisms of a domain of knowledge and works of art. An account of the institutional, symbolic nature of language, which is itself something like the nexus of these various symbolisms, would need to draw insights from all these investigations.

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We have from Merleau-Ponty various drafts and outlines of what his final account of language might have looked like. One such programmatic statement can be found at the end of the second *Nature* course: “We have seen the physical, φυσικς, and we have just seen animality. It remains for us to study the human body as the root of symbolism, as the junction of φυσικς and λογος, because our goal is the series φυσικς–λογος–History” (N 199). Merleau-Ponty’s untimely death in 1961 meant that these projects were bequeathed to his successors.²⁴

5. Conclusion

I have argued that a careful study of the developing problematic of language from *The Problem of Speech* through *Institution and Passivity* and beyond sheds light on the development of Merleau-Ponty’s thought at a critical transitional period of his work. It also bears witness to the continuity of his project. The early studies of embodiment and perception entailed a closer examination of expression, which in turn demanded further studies of institution, which in turn pointed to a foundational inquiry into nature. Only on the basis of the new fundamental, phenomenological ontology of nature could the phenomena of language, expression, and perception – and, indeed, of institution itself – properly be understood. At the nexus of expression and institution, *The Problem of Speech* turns out to be a pivotal text in Merleau-Ponty’s progress. My interpretation agrees with Beith (2018, p. 5) that the overall trajectory is one of continuous development, and with Morris (2018, p. 21) that there is a broad consistency between the early and later work (see also Fóti, 2015, p. 146f.).

At the outset, I identified three guiding questions from *The Problem of Speech*, concerning respectively the relationship between speech and *langue*, the beginning of signification, and the relationship between nature and culture. We have seen how these inquiries directed Merleau-Ponty to the discussions of institution and nature, which in turn granted deeper insight into the original questions. The beginning of signification in language must be traced back to an institution in nature of a symbolism of indivision, glimpsed in dreams and early

²⁴ As Fóti observes, commenting on the continuity between *Phenomenology of Perception* and the late works on nature and phenomenological ontology, “It is a task for contemporary interpreters of Merleau-Ponty to explicate and develop further the nexus between his phenomenological ontology as a philosophy of expression and the understanding of nature as the matrix of expression” (2015, p. 153).

childhood experience.²⁵ At the nexus of culture and nature, of these two poles of institution and two poles of symbolism, we find the human body as symbolism. Merleau-Ponty calls for an esthesiology of this symbolic body to explicate the emergence of cultural institution and the symbolism of division from natural institutions and symbolisms of indivision.²⁶ Such an esthesiology would be not only a “science” or “account” (*logos*) of the senses, but also would hold the key to understanding the *logos* of the sensible or aesthetic world. For there is a dialogue between the senses and the sensible world, and an intertwining of the two in the chiasmic structure of the flesh. However, given the open and incomplete status of Merleau-Ponty’s oeuvre, this esthesiology remains a rubric still in need of further elaboration.

What, then, of the question of the relation of *langue* and speech? We saw that Merleau-Ponty conceives *langue* as instituted language and speech as the acts that create and recreate *langue*, a prioritization that he retains in his later work (e.g., Merleau-Ponty, 1969, pp. 154, 181). This is contrary to a certain way of reading Saussure, where *langue* would be seen as primary and individual acts of parole would be mere instantiations of *langue*. Given what has been said about language in general (*langage*) as existing at the nexus of natural and deliberately instituted symbolisms, and Merleau-Ponty’s refusal to accept it simply as an abstract or ideal object, *langue*, too, must in some way be situated at this juncture. But what, then, *is* it? Is it merely a *constructum* of linguists? And what, to return to a question from *The Problem of Speech*, is its mode of givenness to the speaking subject? In his earlier reflections on this question, Merleau-Ponty had already cast doubt on the absoluteness of distinctions between different languages.²⁷ Further, in line with his willingness to revise

²⁵ And perhaps also in the experience of non-human animals and embryos. Merleau-Ponty cites Ruyer in *Institution and Passivity*, in the context of the discussion of animality and life on this point: “The primary consciousness of the embryo or of the instinctive animal must be conceived, in many regards, as similar to dream consciousness in humans. In the dream, the mnemonic themes are called forth by resonance and are captured mutually by semi-causal, semi-logical influences. A lot of instinctual laws can be stated in the vocabulary of the psychoanalysis of dreams: condensation, overdetermination, displacement, etc.” (IP 84). See also N 178.

²⁶ See especially the sketches for the third course (N 201–284).

²⁷ Merleau-Ponty, 2010a, pp. 60ff. Merleau-Ponty quotes Vendryes stating that “A *langue* is an ideal that is sought, a reality in potentiality, a future that never arrives” (60 – translation modified). He glosses that *langue* is “an entity comparable to the Kantian idea that results in the totalization to infinity of all the convergent means of expression. French is instantly defined as the common

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Saussure's formulations as required, he urged that it would be necessary to reconsider the relationship between the diachronic and the synchronic in Saussure – and with it, the relationship between speech and *langue* with which the first pair is coordinated (Merleau-Ponty, 2010a, pp. 64ff.). As Merleau-Ponty noted already in *The Problem of Speech*, the relationship of speech to *langue* also concerns the relationship of the individual to history (PbP 74). As we saw in the outline for the overarching project of the *Nature* lectures, this topic was to be addressed after the relationship of nature and *Logos* had been fully elaborated. This points us towards the questions of ideality and the constitution of ideal objects pursued in another late lecture course on Husserl's "Origin of Geometry" (Merleau-Ponty, 2001). There again Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the dependence of ideality upon the concrete embodiment of language and symbolic behavior in speech and writing. But it is beyond the scope of the current discussion to pursue this question further.

I have emphasized throughout the importance of symbolism, taken with a distinctively psychoanalytic flavor, to Merleau-Ponty's understanding of both language and the natural body and perception in his middle period and later thought. This was evident not only in the discussion in *The Problem of Speech* of infant experience and early language acquisition in symbolic terms, but also in the discussion in the third *Nature* course of language as situated between a bodily symbolism of indivision and an artificial symbolism of division. In general, however, recent interpretations of Merleau-Ponty's thinking of nature and language have not explored this emphasis.²⁸ Most work on higher modes of expression and language in Merleau-Ponty has not considered the consequences of his late attempts to reframe all expression and speech against the background of nature's "autoproduction of meaning." Meanwhile, many authors working both on the late concept of nature and on questions of expression or language often emphasize some version of a *sens-signification* distinction in Merleau-Ponty, where *sens* refers to more basic species of meaning encountered in

aim of all the subjects who speak it to the extent that they come to communicate with each other. [...] French is not an objective reality that can be sliced up along strict boundaries of space and time; it is a dynamic reality, a gestalt in the simultaneous and the successive. It is a whole that culminates in certain distinctive properties, but about which we cannot say what is exactly here and what is there. We cannot exactly date the appearance of French, although, at the end of a certain evolutionary time, we see a certain 'architectonic' that emerges which is not Latin" (60f.).

²⁸ Notable exceptions include Kaushik (2019)'s exploration of symbolism and Saint Aubert (2013)'s careful attention to the role of psychoanalysis in the development of Merleau-Ponty's late thought.

perception and *signification* refers to an abstract, ideal, or conceptual species of meaning.²⁹ This distinction is no doubt critical, but it may need to be reformulated to recognize the protean, formative element of symbolism.

The issue goes beyond Merleau-Ponty scholarship narrowly construed. There has been a renewed interest in the phenomenology of language in recent years, with many authors contributing to the discussions drawing from Merleau-Ponty (e.g., Engelland, 2020; Inkipin, 2016; Romano, 2015; Taylor, 2016). But few have been so bold as to follow Merleau-Ponty himself in his latest vision in tracing this problematic back to the ultimate origins of meaning in nature. How might this reframing of the project force us to reconsider the phenomenology of language as such? The question will also be relevant for phenomenologically inspired 4e approaches to language that confront the so-called “scaling-up problem” concerning the relationship between meaning-making in language and our more (and, ultimately, *most*) basic modes of meaning-making (Clark & Toribio, 1994; Gallagher, 2017; Kee, 2020; Kiverstein & Rietveld, 2018).

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²⁹ E.g., Apostolopoulos, 2019, p. 22; Morris, 2018, p. 6ff.

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