The Phenomenological Dimension of Meaning: Words, Vowels, Phonemes As Ways To Sing The World, To Celebrate The World, and To Live It

Daniela De Leo

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Abstract This is commentary on Cornejo’s Intersubjectivity as co-phenomenology: from the holism to the being-in-the-world-with-others, co-phenomenology, in which meaning is defined as a construal of phenomenological experience, it is not an individual creation, but rather an intersubjective one. In this paper the basic question is how language expresses the world and things and, consequently, what vision of the world is expressed by language and what relationship it creates with the real. Language is a set of differences between signs and meanings. It lives for and by this constant aspiration to say the inexpressible, to capture the elusive. Language tries to express the driving inner movement of the real through references and interlacing, by multiplying the relational threads of meanings. For example, the phonetic gesture performs for the speaker and his listener a certain structuring of experience, a certain modulation of existence. This is a communicative dimension in which meaning is always a process. It is the situation of co-feeling between subjects, in which understanding is achieved, as defined by Cornejo in his essay.

Keywords Language · Phenomenological dimension · Being with · Being through a being · Co-feeling · Erlebnis

The starting point upon which this contribution is based is understanding language as a set of differences between signs and meanings.

Language is a problematic concept, the coexistence of logical and pragmatic levels, in a continuous movement, which cannot be captured in signs, and in that sense, is precisely inexpressible and elusive. Language lives for and by this constant aspiration to say the inexpressible, to capture the elusive. But let us proceed a step at a time. Language has, on the one hand, the logical form of language itself and, on the other hand, the construction of a framework of relations between linguistic expressions and the entities that make up the form of semantic content of utterances.
And it is in this second phase that the semantic content carries on from ontology. The concreteness of the factors inherent to speech show the drawbacks of seeing language phenomenon as a mere system and the need to go beyond the structuralistic approach in a perspective that can account for the typical capacity of discourse to transcend the system and relate to the world.

The basic question is then how language expresses the world and things and, consequently, what vision of the world is expressed by language and what relationship it creates with the real.

Language evolves in the processing of the natural and social context in which we are living. These amendments are transposed and expressed in language, which is not a reality complete unto itself, a sort of absolute subject of the forms of life and tradition, but something closely linked to the context which determines it and which, through its own symbolic development, it in turn helps to determine.

This semantic approach, therefore, is confirmed at the level of reflection, where the subject who interprets himself, by interpreting the symbols that he meets in his existence, will no longer be the Cartesian and Husserlian *cogito*, but to use the terms of Ricoeur (1969), *an existing that* discovers, and this is the phenomenological dimension in which the issue of language finds its place.

In this phenomenological view there is a field of meaning that predates all objectivity; the origin of meaning is found in the phenomenological dimension of inter-subjective space—formed by the subject (s), the other (or) and the common object (R) that they discuss.

The prospect that opens up is to overcome idealism, to go beyond the subject locked into his system of meaning, to affirm the worldliness of man human as a living being, whose intentional horizon extends to the whole world.

Therefore it is useful to think of this world we are referring to, that is one in which every “thing” is not closed in itself, but is part of a contextual plexus that brings many relations together into a single figure.

The focus is the concept of *relating*, that is understood not as an unbroken circle, but as a movement that remains inexorably open and incomplete. And it is this relation between activity and passivity on which to base the re-thinking of the ontology of The All as a hollow fullness, a plurality made of finite sharing/divisions. The sharp separation between the subject that perceives and the perceived object, between the activity and at the same time the passivity of the subject, comes into play. This is the complex path that allows us to guage the awareness and the level of phenomenological reflection, as a philosophy for which the world is always “already there” before thought, as an inalienable presence. However, this “return to things in themselves” is a step past the idealistic Cartesian system, which is typical of the whole Western tradition and in particular of the modern one, and a striking return to the investigation of the world’s inner relational rules, to reveal their interlacing with the sensitive substratum, sediment of the world itself, and to reveal this as a “system of equivalences” that is always “already there”, before any explicit ideation.

In other words, one must investigate those identities that are no longer the finished product, i.e. the integral and well-defined shapes of a relationship between already given elements that are in turn enclosed within a pre-established, separate individuality, but identities that are born for and from the relation with all the other, to paraphrase Merleau-Ponty “everyone is what the others can see”.
This leads to going beyond the conception that on the one hand saw subjects and on the other, objects. This step forward is achieved by analyzing that specific experience which is the phenomenon of the body being touched: we see, at the same time, that the body is both touching and being touched; therefore, simultaneously both subject and object.

This subject–object duality is also found with all the other beings with which it come into contact. To be an experience therefore means communicating with the world, with the body and with other people, to be with them rather than next to them.

The aim is to demonstrate through analysis of their bodies that ideas are the essence of “typical” which appear and are formed in the bodies’ concrete dynamics. In this sense, they are incarnate in them and in existence.

The “return to things in themselves” therefore entails not simply looking at an object but living in it, and hence perceiving all things according to the side that is shown.

The ontological declivity of this reasoning leads to the following analogy: just as the body sees itself and then becomes light that reveals its inside to the sight, producing the segregation of the inside and the outside, so the word, which is supported by thousands of ideal relations of language, is therefore a certain region in the universe of meanings: it is also the organ or resonator of all the others and so coextensive to the thinkable. The word is a total part of the meanings like the flesh of the visible, as it is in relationship to Being through a being, and finally as it is narcissistic, erotized, endowed with a natural magic that draws other meanings into its net in the same way in which the body feels the world feeling itself (Merleau-Ponty 1983).

The word extends, to the invisible and to semantic operations, the body’s belonging to being and the bodily relevance of every being.

To add another piece to the mosaic, our knowledge too passes through a consciousness that has different levels: for example, at the first level we hear a sound, but “we aren’t aware”, at the second level, the reflection level, “we are aware”.

There is thus a split between the consciousness of the sound and the psychical reaction: the sound is picked up perceptively and we react to the sound. In other words, there is a level or feeling that we take in, and this taking in, “being aware of” is the consciously lived experience that corresponds to feeling, called by phenomenologists Erlebnis.

Consciousness is, using a metaphor by Edith Stein, that “inner light that goes with us”, this conscious dimension is in movement, it flows and refers to feelings and psychic reactions, which are for example experienced as conscious, and therefore might be called Erlebnis. And this is the territory of consciousness with lived experiences in flux.

This flow of lived experiences, in which thought too is a lived experience in the flow of consciousness, is metaphorically shown by Stein as a cluster of lived experiences, organized so that they appear at a certain moment. Any action, even the simplest, implies a cluster of lived experiences, from the sphere of passions to that of the intellect and evaluation, in a continuum of lived experiences that are of different qualities.

So, in this new ontology, the initial question becomes how does language express this movement? How can the ‘really being’ be brought into language? Language
represents stand taken be the subject in the world of its meanings and has in itself an inwardsness, which is however not closed, self-conscious thought.

Language tries to express the driving inner movement of the real through references and interlacing, by multiplying the relational threads of meanings. For example, the phonetic gesture performs for the speaker and his listener a certain structuring of experience, a certain modulation of existence. The system of sounds and of defined words goes off center in speech, it is broken off and reorganized according to a pattern that is apparent to the speaker and his listener when the communication is underway.

The system of words and signs that form the visible hand of language correspond to the invisible side, the hidden frame. Language lives by the impossibility of saying what it wants to say, it revolves around a deep cavity without which language itself would not exist, and having recovered the pragmatic nature of meaning, becomes language in action.

And this is shown even better in that figurative sense that goes with language: knitting one’s brows, a spasm of the throat, the sibilant emission of air ... mean language outside of us, and transcend the rigid pattern of the words themselves.

The conceptual level of language, made of figures, of purely conventional ideal signs, is therefore coming down to a communicative dimension in a network of common actions involving all the actors engaged in the conversation, and expresses their mutual acting out themselves, their relating and moving-to-each-other.

This is a communicative dimension in which meaning is always a process. It is the situation of co-feeling between subjects, in which understanding is achieved, as defined by Cornejo in his essay Intersubjectivity as co-phenomenology: from the holism to the being-in-the-world-with-others, co-phenomenology: “I call co-phenomenology that common feeling we are experiencing with others as a consequence of our inalienable sense of being-in-the-world” (Ivi).

But co-phenomenology is not a theory: “since sharing an experience about the common world does not occur by way of a reflective explanation of our respective viewpoints, co-phenomenology cannot be a theory. It is rather the basic mode of being-there-with-others. Since it is a pre-reflexive mode of being-in-the world, it corresponds to a presentational knowledge, not a representational one” (Ivi).

The origins of meaning are, therefore, to be recovered neither in the head of cognitive system nor in the socially isolated subject, but in the intersubjective space contingently formed between the subject (S), the other (o) and the common object (r) which they are talking about. And as can be shown, the two problematic levels on which speech unfolds are as follows: meaning as a dynamic object, as the intersubjective creation and the phenomenological dimension which is implicit in every intersubjective encounter. Essentially, there is the attempt to restore to meaning the depth of existence; the critical thinking that is opening up intends to remove meaning from the pedestal of individual creation and to involve it in the tormented adventure of existence, in the communicative intersubjectivity influenced by the context, which constitute interiorized social resources.

And it is precisely by considering this kind of problems that the need arises to rethink in a new way the intersection between context and language and as Cornejo says “context and language are imbricated in a unique holistic totality of sense” (Ivi).
And this is the path outlined as alternative to the classical cognitive approaches that conceive meaning as an intrinsic characteristic of certain linguistic forms: “in what follows I outline an alternative way to approach meaning. Assuming that language is a kind of action, I consider the often forgotten phenomenological dimension of meaning, while making explicit the traditional prejudice against phenomenology in psychology. This movement allows conciliating the socio-pragmatic with the phenomenological dimensions of meaning, by anchoring meaning within an anthropological situation—the minimal communicative situation—rather than a metaphysical stance—such as the mental lexicon or historical spirit” (Ivi).

In the light of the foregoing considerations, in this system of relations, in this relational cypher—i.e. in a system of relations in which we ourselves are involved, being ourselves constituted of it—in this pre-objective framework (Merleau-Ponty 1983), meaning is the construct of phenomenological experience.

Furthermore, as Cornejo argues “meaning is not only experience in the world, but experience with others” (Ivi), which leads us to acknowledge the fact that every being is for all the others that surround him and watch him and his existence means communicating with others, being with them, rather than next to them, being-with.

This being-with explains why the world is, not an objective, briefly organized set, or a multiplicity of objects beside each other, but a system of concordance or inherence-concordance, namely, a net of rational exchanges that refer to each other.

Hermeneutics of the symbol is revealed, maintaining the exchange between phenomenology and philosophy of thought generated by the Cartesian cogito, in other words thought and interpretation are two complementary phases of the hermeneutic pathway that integrate the cogito with the awareness that the concrete situation of man is not only that of being the centre of his existence, but also of being in the world with others.

These are the philosophical implications of the conception of situated meaning, that lead as emphasized by Cornejo: “against the idea of ‘meaning-in-itself’ [...] Global situation, world knowledge, personal disposition, gestures, micro- and macro-contextual information seem to impact meaning neither marginally nor lately, but crucially and constantly. Empirical findings recurrently demonstrate that something like a pure lexical processing of semantic units is an idealization” (Ivi).

The paths suggest prospects to think about, leading us to redefine the process of meaning construction from the angle of phenomenology and mark the entrelacs area between philosophy and psychology: the symbol is not uninterpretable, and nor can it be reduced to a mere sign, but rather it should be recognized that its interpretation is inexhaustible, a moment of construction and development of the hermeneutic circle. Language is not an exclusive intelligence operation, or an exclusive phenomenon motor, is at fully mobility and flexibility and fully intelligence.

Words, vowels, phonemes from an analysis that includes, not only the conceptual and the final sense of words, but also their emotional sense, are ways to sing the world and are intended to represent the items not because of their objective similarity, as believed in the naive theory of onomatopoeia, but because they extract and, in the strict sense, they represent the emotional essence. The preponderance of vowels in one language, of consonants in another, the systems of construction and syntax, do not represent as many arbitrary conventions to express the same thought,
but more ways for the human body to celebrate the world, and, ultimately, to live it (Merleau-Ponty 1951).

This is a communicative dimension in which signs in themselves are already meaning, and this is all included in the concrete gestural expression situated in the relationship between sender and recipient: “the word brings all ideas and becomes itself an idea”.

It is not towards the completeness of language that philosophical action must be pushed, it is not towards the determination of the weight of words, but the thought of these “fields to think”, as places in which communication is “reviving in the mind of others through external signs a design that has been in the author’s. Two thinking subjects and some signs” (M. Merleau-Ponty, 1958).

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References


Daniela De Leo is Professor of Theoretical Philosophy and Aesthetics at the Faculty of Sciences of Formation, University of Salento (Italy). She began to develop her interest in twentieth-century Italian and French philosophy, focusing on the “philosophies of existence”. She edited transcription of manuscripts by Carlo Michelstaedter and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Her interest in French existentialism, in particular in Merleau-Ponty resulted in some publications such as D. De Leo, Merleau-Ponty: la musica negli scritti postumi, in G. Invitto (a c.), La fenomenologia e l’oltre fenomenologia, Mimesis, Milano 2006, pp. 141–167.