

Research
Based
Curricula

Does consciousness have
a body?

Key Stage 5 Philosophy
Resource 5

2019



Resource Five

Overview



Topic	An embodied view of Language
A-Level Modules	Supra-curricular content
Objectives	<p>After completing this resource you should be able:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ To develop an understanding of language from a phenomenological perspective✓ To understand in what sense language is an embodied phenomenon✓ To explore in what ways linguistic signification is linked to bodily gestures
Instructions	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Read the data source2. Complete the activities3. Explore the further reading
Context	<p>According to Merleau-Ponty, linguistic meanings are neither perceptive nor conceptual, but function as the processes generating conceptual meanings from the perceptive field. More precisely, language accomplishes the passage from an affective level of meaning to a properly linguistic meaning : while in the first case each gesture is intimately linked to what it means and its significance cannot be separated from the occurrence of the gesture itself, on the linguistic level meanings are still open and can change, but are not arbitrary, as they must take into account the complex web of reciprocal differentiations shared by an intersubjective community.</p>

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**Body and Language:
Butler, Merleau-Ponty
and Lyotard on the
Speaking Embodied
Subject**

Vasterling, V. (2003).
International Journal Of
Philosophical
Studies, 11(2), 205-223.

A phenomenological reading of language is indeed “a reflection upon our being-in-the world through embodiment”. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty says that ‘ it is the body which speaks’ (PhP:197). This statement does not refer to the fact that speaking requires physical equipment like vocal chords. What Merleau-Ponty means to say is that the body is an expressive and intentional body and, as such, a source of meaning.

Although the body is a biological entity, the biological dimension is transcended by the intentionality characteristic of the body. Merleau-Ponty describes the intentionality of the body as a way of being in the world, of a relating to and shaping of the world. Drawing on Heidegger’s analysis of human existence as being in-the-world, Merleau-Ponty explicates the bodily dimension that Heidegger overlooks. According to Merleau-Ponty, it is the body’s perceptions and capacities that open up the world and enable us to move around in it with confidence.



*Active
Reading*



*Deep
Dive*

The body’s intentionality is linked to the body’s expressiveness. That is, bodily intentionality expresses itself in gestures of, for instance, anger or love. In Part I, Chapter 6 of *Phenomenology of Perception*, entitled ‘ The Body as Expression and Speech’, Merleau-Ponty analyses bodily gestures as the primary form of language. Bodily and more specifically emotional gestures express possible ways of encountering and living the world; they give shape to stimuli and situations. As such they create and convey meaning. By understanding the phenomenon of speech in terms of “gesture”, Merleau-Ponty believes that we will be able to overcome traditional philosophical dichotomies (PhP:206)

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If speech presupposed thought, if talking were primarily a matter of meeting the object through a cognitive intention or through a representation, we could not understand why thought tends towards expression as towards its completion, why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name, why the thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken and written them, as is shown by the example of so many writers who begin a book without knowing exactly what they are going to put into it.

According to Merleau-Ponty, behaviour creates meanings which are transcendent in relation to the anatomical apparatus, and yet immanent to the behaviour as such, since it communicates itself and is understood' (PhP:189). Bodily gestures cannot be reduced to purely natural signs emanating from a body that is equipped or programmed to produce these signs. Even if human beings share the same psychophysiological equipment, this equipment 'leaves a great variety of possibilities open' (PhP:189). As Merleau-Ponty puts it: 'It is no more natural, nor less conventional, to shout in anger or to kiss in love than to call a table "a table". Feelings and passionate conduct are invented like words' (PhP:189). Language is rooted in corporeality, in the signifying powers of the body. Linguistic signification, that is, the expression of meaning in speech, prolongs and accomplishes the gestural signification that is deployed in bodily forms of behaviour.

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Speech does not consist of verbal signs representing a meaning external to them. Speech consists of linguistic gestures, which, like bodily gestures in general, express and hence contain their meaning. Instead of the usual distinction between a bodily language consisting of natural expressive signs on the one hand and a verbal language consisting of conventional referential signs on the other, Merleau-Ponty posits a continuity of expressive gestures which are neither natural nor purely conventional, a continuity of expression starting with bodily gestures and ending with spoken (and written) words.

Yet, if the intentional and expressive body is the source of meaning or, to put it another way, if the body is the source of an open and indefinite power of giving significance, how does Merleau-Ponty explain the fact that we are able to understand each other's bodily and linguistic gestures? Expressive gestures do create meaning, but they do not create meaning ex nihilo, as it were from scratch. Expressive gestures presuppose and make use of an 'alphabet of already acquired meanings' (PhP:194). The world we live in is a linguistic world ' where speech is an institution' (PhP:184).

PhP = Maurice Merleau-Ponty (2012/1945). *Phenomenology of Perception* (Donald A. Landes, Trans). Routledge.
/ *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Gallimard.

Resource Five

Activities



Activities

1. Read the text and write a mini essay on "Language & Embodiment in Merleau-Ponty.

Points to consider:

- How the body's intentionality is linked to the body's expressiveness (give examples)
- Why speech is not a function of the intellect.
- In what sense Merleau-Ponty's view of language is gestural.



2. Film various persons talking and interacting. Based on your material create a short video to illustrate Merleau-Ponty's idea of language. Present your video to a group of students & teachers at your school.
3. Listen to Merleau-Ponty on Mallarmé and Poetic Language (brief excerpt from Merleau-Ponty's radio lecture "Art and the Perceived World" (Causeries 1948).

In French with English subtitles: [Merleau-Ponty: Art and the Perceived World \(1948\)](#)

Resource Five Further Reading



Explore

Read "Merleau-Ponty: from perception to language". Visit web link below and download PDF.



<https://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/Lebenswelt/article/download/7962/7626>



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