

## **Merleau-Ponty's Embodied Semantics —From Immanent Meaning, to Gesture, to Language**

Mark Johnson

Department of Philosophy, University of Oregon  
E-mail: markj@uoregon.edu

### **Abstract**

Merleau-Ponty gave us an exemplary model of an empirically responsible philosophy of mind and language. At the heart of his view is his rejection of mind-body dualism and a view of meaning as tied to human embodiment. Merleau-Ponty gave an account of gestural meaning that can serve as the basis for a theory of meaning in general, including linguistic meaning. I show how gesture is embodied, immanent meaning and how it works in the same ways as meaning in art. Eugene Gendlin's account of the felt sense that accompanies semantic forms and structures can provide a link between an account of immanent gestural and artistic meaning and an account of embodied meaning in language and thought.

**Key Words:** body, enactment, felt quality, meaning, principle of continuity

## I. Toward an Empirically-responsible Account of Embodied Meaning

A “naturalistic” theory of mind and language is one that accepts only natural explanations of cognitive phenomena, without appeal to supernatural causes, disembodied mind, or transcendent ego. Naturalistic theories reject mind-body dualism, and they claim that so-called “higher” cognitive operations arise from the increasing complexity of organism-environment interactions. From this perspective, all explanations of understanding, reasoning, and willing are tied back to embodied processes. Within the Western philosophical tradition, the two greatest philosophers of the embodied mind were John Dewey and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Although from markedly different philosophical perspectives (namely, American Pragmatism and French Phenomenology), each of them tried to present a non-dualistic account of how meaning is grounded in aspects of our bodily engagement with our environment. In order to do that, they had to show that linguistic meaning is continuous with more obviously embodied processes such as perception, bodily movement, and gesture. They had to show how meaning was possible without disembodied concepts and propositions. In this essay I will focus primarily on Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied, immanent meaning and its relation to gesture, art, and language.

In search of a psychologically realistic view of meaning, Merleau-Ponty gave us a model for what I call “empirically-responsible” philosophy. He saw that no one method or orientation gives all truth, and so we need to draw from every available method—phenomenological, biological, neuroscientific, sociological, and psychological—in search of converging evidence about the phenomena of mind and language that we choose to study. Converging empirical evidence is the best we can hope for with our methodological pluralism, but it is enough. Consequently, the great phenomenologist of the body, Merleau-Ponty, drew from the best developmental and clinical psychology of his day, from the

best perception theory, from linguistics, and from biology and neuroscience. He realized that phenomenology alone could never provide the whole truth about meaning and thinking, and that is why he studied the development of children, trauma and lesion patients, and even healthy “normal” adults. He wanted to understand how meaning was possible for them and what factors led to deficits in their ability to understand and communicate meaning. Merleau-Ponty thus gives us an exemplary model of how to pursue philosophical investigations in an empirically sophisticated way that is at once both naturalistic and non-reductionist.

Merleau-Ponty helped us understand the embodied nature of *actual* human meaning as it is lived, in sharp contrast to the popular though mistaken view that meaning is merely conceptual and propositional in nature. In this way, Merleau-Ponty's work can serve as a corrective to the etiolated and impoverished conceptions of meaning that are so pervasive in analytic philosophy of mind and language. The principle shortcoming of analytic philosophy of mind and language is its nearly exclusive focus on meaning as being conceptual and propositional. Many major analytic treatments are classic instances of what Dewey called the “Philosopher's Fallacy,” by which he meant the mistake of taking high-level intellectualized or cognized experience and assuming that *all* experience can be adequately characterized in this same way. It is so tempting to take our abstract propositional accounts and then to read them back into, or onto, experience, claiming that experience is, by its very nature, conceptual and propositional. Merleau-Ponty showed us why this is a serious mistake, and he then developed an alternative, embodied, theory of meaning.

Now, if the Conceptual/Propositional view were true, then babies, infants, and young children would not experience meaning, and only a very small part of the vast, ever-developing experience of adults would be meaningful, too. Babies are not entertaining propositional contents or taking up propositional attitudes. Baby Paul doesn't lie in his crib thinking, “Gee, my pacifier is way over

there and I don't know how to crawl yet, and, boy, it is going to be hard to get it!" Baby Sarah doesn't lie there thinking "Mom's lips are sure red today," or "What's for dinner tonight?" Yet infants Paul and Sarah are learning the meaning of things every waking moment, and they are acquiring new meaning at an astonishing rate, via the massive growth of neurons and neural connections, all waiting for sequenced activations to determine which patterns of connectivity are established and become the basis for what and how things become meaningful to them.

What Merleau-Ponty understood, perhaps better than anyone before or since, is how meaning is grounded in the phenomenal body. He saw that meaning is not a spontaneous construction of some *thing* we call "mind," any more than it is a mechanical production of some *thing* called "the body." Instead, it is part of the whole mode of being of what Dewey called the "body-mind." Meaning is our way of inhabiting our world. The fateful mistake of analytic philosophy of mind and language was to take one selective abstraction from our experiential process of meaning-making—namely, our framing of concepts and their combination into propositions—and to regard this as the whole of meaning. This assumption gives rise to

*The Conceptual/Propositional Theory of Meaning*

- Sentences or utterances (and the words we use in making them) alone are what have meaning.
- Sentences get their meaning by expressing propositions, which are the basic units of meaning and thought. Propositions typically have a subject-predicate structure.
- These propositions (and the concepts they contain) provide the basis for all of the types of speech acts that people perform, such as making assertions about the way the world is, asking questions, issuing commands, pleading, joking, expressing remorse, and so on.
- Our capacity to grasp meanings, and our capacity for reasoning, depends on our conscious use of symbolic

representations in the mind that somehow can relate to things outside the mind.

- These symbolic representations (usually thought of as concepts) are supposedly organized into meaningful propositional structures via formal rules of syntax, and then the propositions are supposedly organized into thoughts and arguments via formal rules of logic.
- According to this objectivist semantics, neither the syntactic rules, nor the logical relations, nor even the propositions themselves have any intrinsic relation to human bodies.

The key components of disembodied views that Merleau-Ponty challenged are the seriously mistaken claims that meaning and thought are exclusively conceptual and propositional in nature and that the apparatus of meaning, conceptualization, and reasoning is not intrinsically tied to the body. I do not mean to deny the existence of propositional thinking, but rather to see it as tied to and dependent upon the nature of our embodied, immanent meaning. In short, contrary to the fundamental claim of Gottlob Frege, the father of modern analytic philosophy, propositions are *not* the basic units of human meaning and thought. Meaning traffics in patterns, images, qualities, feelings, and only later, and derivatively, in concepts and propositions.

The idea that meaning and understanding are based solely on propositional structures is problematic because it excludes (or, at least, hides) most of what goes into the ways we make sense of our experience. If babies are learning the meaning of things and events, and if babies are not yet proposition-crunchers, then meaning and understanding must involve a great deal more than the ability to create and understand propositions and their corresponding linguistic expressions. In striking contrast to this Conceptual/Propositional view of meaning and knowledge, a substantial body of evidence from the cognitive sciences reveals that meaning is shaped by the nature of our bodies, especially our sensory-motor

capacities and our ability to experience feelings and emotions (Damasio, 1999; Edelman & Tononi, 2000; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). If you look at pre-linguistic infants and at children who are learning how their world works and what things mean to them, you will find vast stretches of embodied meaning that are not conceptual and propositional in character, even though they underlie and make possible later propositional thinking (Stern, 1985).

To extract Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied, immanent meaning, you must always keep in mind that he understands the term "meaning" in a broader sense than is typical in mainstream Anglo-American philosophy of mind and language. As a result, analytic philosophers will never see the relevance and importance of his philosophy for a fully adequate theory of meaning. I want to recover, in Merleau-Ponty, resources for an account of meaning-making, resources that are ignored in Analytic Philosophy. In addition to the standard notion that meaning involves the conscious entertaining of concepts and propositions, Merleau-Ponty focused on mostly unconscious aspects of a person's ability to meaningfully engage their past, present, and future environments. He articulated the basic tenets of what I call

*The Embodied Theory of Meaning*

- Human meaning concerns the character and significance of a person's interactions with their environments.
- The meaning of a specific aspect or dimension of some larger, ongoing experience is that aspect's connections to other parts of past, present, or future (possible) experiences. Meaning is relational. It is about how one thing, quality, or event relates to or connects with other things. Meaning is the developing significance of our ways of inhabiting our world.
- Sometimes our meanings are conceptually and propositionally coded, but that is merely the more conscious, selective dimension of a vast, continuous, unconscious or

barely conscious process of immanent meanings that involve structures, patterns, qualities, feelings, and emotions.

- An embodied view is naturalistic, insofar as it situates meaning within a flow of experience that cannot exist without a biological organism engaging its environment. Meanings emerge “bottom-up” through increasingly complex levels of organic activity; they are not the constructions of disembodied mind. There is also “top-down” structure that shapes and constrains what can be meaningful and how it is meaningful, but what is “top-down” was, in its origins, “bottom-up.” The trick is to give a non-dualistic, embodied view of meaning that is not one-dimensional or reductionist.

The semantics of embodied meaning that is supported by recent research in the cognitive sciences (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) provides a naturalistic perspective, one that makes no explanatory use of any alleged disembodied or “purely rational” capacities. A naturalistic theory of meaning takes as its working hypothesis the idea that all of our so-called “higher” cognitive faculties (e.g., of conceptualization and reasoning) recruit cognitive resources that operate in our sensory-motor experience and our monitoring of our emotions. The guiding assumption for such a naturalistic semantics is what John Dewey called a “principle of continuity”:

*Dewey's Principle of Continuity*

The primary postulate of a naturalistic theory of logic is continuity of the lower (less complex) and the higher (more complex) activities and forms. The idea of continuity is not self-explanatory. But its meaning excludes complete rupture on one side and mere repetition of identities on the other; it precludes reduction of the “higher” to the “lower” just as it precludes complete breaks and gaps. . . . What *is* excluded by the postulate of continuity is the appearance upon the scene of a totally new outside force as a cause of changes that occur. (Dewey,

1991: 30-31)

An embodied view of meaning looks for the origins and structures of meaning in the organic activities of embodied, social creatures in interaction with their changing environments—environments that are at once physical, social, and cultural. It sees meaning and all our higher functioning as growing out of and shaped by our abilities to perceive things, manipulate objects, move our bodies in space, interact with other people, and evaluate our situation. Its principle of continuity is that the “higher” develops from “the lower,” without introducing from outside any new metaphysical kinds.

I will be using the terms “embodied meaning” and “immanent meaning” to emphasize those deep-seated bodily sources of human meaning that go beyond the merely conceptual and propositional. Structures and dimensions of this immanent meaning are what make it possible for us to do propositional thinking. But if we reduce meaning to words and sentences (or to concepts and propositions) we miss or leave out where meaning really comes from. We end up intellectualizing human experience, understanding, and thinking, and we turn processes into static entities or properties. Any philosophy that ignores embodied meaning is going to generate a host of extremely problematic views about mind, thought, and language.

## II. The Embodied Meaning of Gesture

Merleau-Ponty saw that words and sentences do not *re-*present already experienced meanings, concepts, or thoughts. Instead, just as in gesture, language *presents* and *enacts* the meaning:

The link between the word and its living meaning is not an external link of association, the meaning inhabits the word, and language ‘is not an external accompaniment to intellectual processes.’ We are therefore led to recognize a



gestural or existential significance in speech, as we have already said. Language certainly has an inner content, but this is not self-subsistent and self-conscious thought. What then does language express, if it does not express thoughts? It presents or rather it *is* the subject's taking up of a position in the world of his meanings. The term 'world' here is not a manner of speaking: it means that the 'mental' or cultural life borrows its structures from natural life and that the thinking subject must have its basis in the subject incarnate. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 193)

Our speaking and living of a language is a mode of being in or inhabiting a world. We dwell in meaning through our embodiment, and meaning is continually enacted as life goes on, whether through bodily experience, gesture, or language.

It should be no surprise that Merleau-Ponty emphasized *gesture* as a model of human meaning. Gestures are bodily enactments of meaning. They are not uses of bodily motions to express some pre-conceived thoughts. Rather, the gesture itself brings the meaning into existence. Gesture is the very incarnation of meaning-making.

The reason that spontaneous gestures are taken by Merleau-Ponty to be exemplars of meaning is that they wear their embodiment and their aesthetic qualities on their sleeves. As the psychologist David McNeill has shown in his book *Hand and Mind: What Gestures Reveal about Thought* (McNeill, 1992), the three kinds of spontaneous gestures operate in the most immediate bodily fashion. They can be *beat* gestures, which help parse, give emphasis to, or provide the rhythm of our thinking. They can be *iconic*, when their structure is isomorphic with some pattern or contour of some other part of our experience or perception. For example, in giving you directions to a restaurant, I might say, "Keep going for three blocks and then turn," accompanied by a straight-line hand motion that moves away from my chest and then curves in space to the right at a 90-degree angle. Third, there are *metaphoric* gestures, where our bodily movement can be used to

present some abstract domain. Thus I might say, “We just can’t deal with that now,” spoken as I move both of my hands at a 45-degree angle toward the sides and away from me in a sweeping motion. Metaphorically, I am pushing some entity (the issue at hand) away from me, indicating that I cannot interact with it right now. In all three of McNeill’s categories of spontaneous gesture, the gesture is the realization of the meaning. It is not merely an expression of something already thought. McNeill’s videotapes show that often gestures actually precede by several milliseconds any accompanying correlative verbalizations.

### III. Immanent Meaning in Art

Merleau-Ponty saw correctly that gestures have embodied meaning in just the same way as art does. Here’s the way he thought about this. A composer does not frame conceptual meanings in her head, which she then somehow cleverly expresses in musical pitch contours. Rather, the meaning emerges only in and through the act of making music. Music is not an external sign system we use to express non-musical meanings or concepts. Rather, the meaning exists in the enactment.

The musical meaning of a sonata is inseparable from the sounds which are its vehicle: before we have heard it no analysis enables us to anticipate it; once the performance is over, we shall, in our intellectual analyses of the music, be unable to do anything but carry ourselves back to the moment of experiencing it. During the performance, the notes are not only the ‘signs’ of the sonata, but it is there through them, it enters into them. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 182)

The composer Roger Sessions fully understood that the meaning resides in the musical enactment, which is grounded in the living, moving, feeling body. I know of no clearer or more concise a statement of the bodily basis of several key elements of

musical meaning and experience than that presented by Sessions in his essay, "The Composer and His Message," from which I quote at length:

It seems to me that the essential medium of music, the basis of its expressive powers and the element which gives it its unique quality among the arts, is *time*, made living for us through its expressive essence, *movement*.

. . . .

Time becomes real to us primarily through movement, which I have called its expressive essence; and it is easy to trace our primary musical responses to the most primitive movement of our being—to those movements which are indeed at the very basis of animate existence. The feeling for tempo, so often derived from the dance, has in reality a much more primitive basis in the involuntary movements of the nervous system and the body in the beating of the heart, and more consciously in breathing, later in walking. Accelerated movement is, from these very obvious causes, inevitably associated with excitement, retarded movement with a lessening of dynamic tension. The experience of meter has the most obvious and essential of its origins in the movements of breathing, with its alternation of upward and downward movements. The sense of effort, preparation, suspense, which is the psychological equivalent of the up-beat, finds its prototype in the act of inhalation, and the sense of weight, release, and finality produced by the down-beat corresponds most intimately to the act of exhalation.

. . . .

The other primary elements of music—melody and rhythm—derive from more complicated but only slightly less essential muscular movements, which it has been fairly well demonstrated, are reproduced in miniature by the human nervous system in response to musical impressions.

If we instinctively respond to a rising melodic pitch by a feeling of increased tension and hence of heightened expression, or a falling pitch by the opposite sensation; if an increase in intensity of sound intensifies our dynamic response to the music, and vice versa, it is because we have already in our vocal experiences—the earliest and most primitive as well as later and more complicated ones—lived intimately through exactly the same effects. A raising of pitch or an increase in volume is the result of an intensification of effort, energy, and emotional power in the crying child just as truly as in the highly-evolved artistry of a Chaliapin or an Anderson.

Similarly, our feeling for rhythm in the stricter sense, derives from the subtle and more expressive nervous and muscular movements, such as occur in speech, song, gesture, and the dance. (Sessions, 1941: 105, 108-109)

This remarkable passage is a primer for our understanding of the power of music to move us, to give rise to feelings, to be meaningful to us, and to enact changes in our body-mind. It calls to mind what Daniel Stern (Stern, 1985) calls “vitality affect contours”—the patterns of process and flow of our felt experience, such as the build-up of tension and its release, the sense of drifting, the energetic pursuit of a goal, the anxious anticipation of some coming event, and the starting and stopping of a process. Stern sums up vitality affects as “those dynamic, kinetic qualities of feeling that distinguish animate from inanimate and that correspond to the momentary changes in feeling states involved in the organic processes of being alive” (Stern, 1985: 156). Stern’s account of the role of vitality affects in dance applies directly to music, too:

Dance reveals to the viewer-listener multiple vitality affects and their variations, without resorting to plot or categorical affect signals from which the vitality affects can be derived. The choreographer is most often trying to

express a way of feeling, not a specific content of feeling.  
(Stern, 1985: 56)

The meaning of music—and of all art, and of most of language generally—is precisely this kind of embodied, immanent meaning. Music does not typically *re-present* anything, even though there may occasionally be a few representative elements in a particular musical work. Music's function is not primarily representation, but rather *presentation* and *enactment* of felt experience. Susanne Langer captured this dimension when she said that

a work of art is an expressive form created for our perception through sense or imagination, and what it expresses is human feeling. The word "feeling" must be taken here in its broadest sense, meaning *everything that can be felt*, from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement and repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling-tones of a conscious human life. (Langer, 1947: 15)

An expressive form is "any perceptible or imaginable whole that exhibits relationships of parts, or points, or even qualities or aspects within the whole, so that it may be taken to represent some other whole whose elements have analogous relations" (Langer, 1947: 20). In any musical work, for example, there is a structure and pattern of temporal flow, pitch contours, and intensity (loudness/softness) that is analogous to felt patterns of the flow of human experience. When a listener becomes imaginatively engaged in the development of these musical contours, that person's *experience* has the felt qualities of the music. That is, if the music builds to a climax of high drama and tension, the engaged listener experiences (in their own feeling body-mind) that dramatic tension.

When Langer says that an expressive form "represents" something, she does *not* mean that the music gets its meaning by referring beyond itself to some other object, event, or experience

that is its meaning. On the contrary, just as Merleau-Ponty said, the meaning of the music is immanent:

But a work of art does not point us to a meaning beyond its own presence. What is expressed cannot be grasped apart from the sensuous or poetic form that expresses it. In a work of art we have the direct presentation of a feeling, not a sign that points to it. (Langer, 1947: 133-134)

The feeling is presented—enacted—in the felt experience of the listener. To hear the music just is to be moved and to feel in the precise way that is defined by the patterns of the musical motion. Those feelings are meaningful in the same way that any pattern of emotional flow is meaningful to us at a pre-reflective level of awareness.

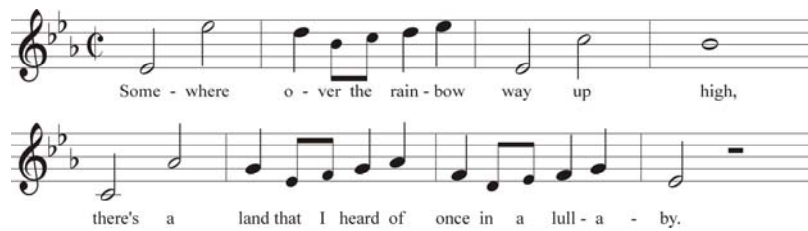
Langer is saying that, when we are actively listening to music, we imaginatively enter into its “motion,” experiencing all of the ways it moves, swells, hops, rushes, floats, trips along, drags, soars, and falls. This *musical* soaring, floating, or falling is experienced by us as *our felt flow* of experience. We feel it in our vital, tactile-kinaesthetic bodies. When the music builds up tension (for example, as it moves pitch-wise from the lower through the middle to a high range), *we* experience that tension *in ourselves*. If we didn't, music would never move us. Langer sums this up:

A work of art presents feeling (in the broad sense I mentioned before, as everything that can be felt) for our contemplation, making it visible or audible or in some way perceivable through a symbol, not inferable from a symptom. Artistic form is congruent with the dynamic forms of our direct sensuous, mental, and emotional life. (Langer, 1947: 25)

As an example of this process of musical meaning-making—of the musical presentation of forms of feeling and the meaning that

is intrinsic to those forms—let us briefly consider the song “Over the Rainbow,” from *The Wizard of Oz*.<sup>1</sup> This is one of the best known songs ever written. It comes inextricably intertwined with the events of *The Wizard of Oz* and is always measured relative to Judy Garland’s famous rendition of the song. It is thus difficult, and somewhat artificial, to talk about what and how the song means, independent of the lyrics. However, we can highlight some of the embodied structures of meaning in the music and see how perfectly they mesh with the lyrics.

“Over the Rainbow” is a simple song, as simple as the longing (Dorothy’s longing and our longing) that it expresses. The form of the chorus, which constitutes most of the song, is roughly: AABBAABBC. The chorus starts with the famous A section, “Some-where o-ver the rain-bow way up high” (Example 1).



Example 1

The movement in the first two notes (E-flat moving up an octave to E-flat) is already dramatic. The slide from “some” (E-flat) up to “where” (the octave) creates a tension, the felt tension as we move from the lower pitch to the higher pitch and feel the strain and increased energy required to reach the higher note. The second

<sup>1</sup> “Over the Rainbow,” music by Harold Arlen and words by E. Y. Harburg (EMI Feist Catalog Inc., 1939), from the film, *The Wizard of Oz* (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, Inc., 1938). “Over the Rainbow” was recently voted the number one song from a motion-picture soundtrack in the American Film Institutes top 100 songs.

measure (“o-ver the rain-bow”) sustains this tension and expectation by sliding slightly downward and then tensively upward to high E-flat again. The next two measures (“way up high”) resolve this tension a bit, but not completely, finally settling into B-flat. Some of the tension remains, since the pitch never returns back to the range of the initial lower E-flat. The next four measures (“there’s a land that I heard of once in a lull-a-by”) start with two measures that structurally mirror the pattern of the opening two measures (“Some-where o-ver the rain-bow”), although in a lower pitch register, and then the subsequent two measures resolve most of the tension by eventually moving back to the initial lower E-flat from which the chorus began. So, there was a build-up of tension, a longing that points you toward some as-yet-unrealized state, but then brings you gradually back home. Immediately, however, this entire section is repeated, thereby reinstating the longing, sustaining it briefly, and then resolving it in a move back down to the starting pitch.

With this longing tension still in the air, we then turn to the more active B section (Example 2), which speeds up, surges forward, and jumps rapidly up and down, ever driving toward some anticipated future event. The speeding up is a definite change in the character of the song. Something new is happening. Excitement and anticipation build.

Some day I'll wish up- on a star and wake up where the clouds are far be-  
hind me, where trou- bles melt like lem- on drops, a-  
way a-bove the chim-ney tops that's where you'll find me.

Example 2



The first four measures (“Some day I’ll wish up-on a star and wake up where the clouds are far be-hind me”) are a series of middle range rapidly alternating eighth notes that create a strong sense of anticipation and anxious, energetic movement, jumping from G to B-flat four times in quick succession, jerking us up and back. But then, in the next measure, simply by moving up a half step from G to A-flat, our agitated expectation is heightened even more: the rapidly alternating eighth-notes jump from A-flat to B-flat, instead of G to B-flat. This modest, almost imperceptible, little change ratchets up the sense that something is about to happen, that we are “going somewhere” via this half-step upward pitch change. And, indeed, we *do* go somewhere—we are carried right on up to high F (then slightly down to C). This is the passage (“where you’ll find me”) and it slows down considerably from the rapidly jumping eighth notes to reduce some of the sense of forward movement and give the listener a feeling of temporary rest.

In short, we have moved from a soft, dreamy longing that seeks fulfillment in something yet to come, musically, to a sense of rapid oscillation up and down with increased agitation and a strong sense of moving toward some unrealized goal. Then the song brings us back to the original patterns of longing and expectation. In the final section (Example 3) there is that anxious return to the earlier pattern of alternating eighth notes (four alternations from G to B-flat) stepping up the tension to a higher pitched alternating movement (four alternations of A to B-flat), ending in a continuing ascent (A-flat, B-flat, C, D) up to the sustained high E-flat.



**Example 3**

The final effect is a feeling of rising up in longing and eventually drifting, without any final resolution of tension, at a high level of

desire for a hoped-for state (“why oh why can’t I \_\_\_”). The last three measures gradually slow down and wane into a nearly audible pianissimo. The effect is as though we were carried up and away, drifting off into the space of another place or world.

It is difficult to describe the dynamics of this melody without interpreting them from the perspective of the lyrics. For example, I spoke of the sense of longing that accompanies the rise in tension as the pitch moves upward into a higher range, pulling up and away from the starting point, which we are tempted to call “home.” Perhaps we are enticed into reading “longing” into this passage, because we hear Dorothy longing for some place far, far away, where things will be better and her hopes will be realized (in technicolor). Should you take objection to describing the “longing” in the musical passage, you will at least know the felt sense that the rising notes convey, a feeling pattern that perfectly fits with the pattern of Dorothy’s longing.

In art we recognize meaning as inextricably tied to the relations of lines, qualities of colors, felt contours of rise and fall of pitches, build up and release of tensions, rhythmic patterns and changes, and a host of other embodied dimensions. There is no meaning independent of its experienced enactment in the artwork at a given moment, and it means in and through our bodily engagement with it. Merleau-Ponty stresses this intimate connection of meaning and gesture:

Aesthetic expression confers on what it expresses an existence in itself, installs it in nature as a thing perceived and accessible to all . . . No one will deny that here the process of expression brings the meaning into being or makes it effective, and does not merely translate it. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 183)

#### IV. From Gesture to Art to Language

Merleau-Ponty wanted to connect gesture, art, and linguistic

meaning in just the way that John Dewey did. Both of them saw gesture as what I'm calling immanent, non-conceptual meaning. Both of them saw that gestures are meaningful in the same way that works of art are meaningful. And both of them suggested that the best way to understand linguistic meaning is by looking at its relation to gestural meaning and art. Merleau-Ponty's claim is that gesture is the prototype of meaning. We can use our understanding of gesture to then explore linguistic meaning: "The spoken word is a gesture, and its meaning, a world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 184). "The spoken word is a genuine gesture, and it contains its meaning in the same way as the gesture contains its. This is what makes communication possible" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 183). It might have been better if Merleau-Ponty had not used the word "contains," since the gesture is the meaning showing forth, rather than a container for a pre-given meaning. At any rate, he directs us to look at words, not as symbols of some conceptual content, but rather as part of an unfolding enactment of developing meaning.

So far, we've been sailing right along with the embodied, immanent meaning of aesthetic experience and gesture. Embodiment seems obvious and omnipresent here. The problem is not to reveal the bodily dimensions; rather, the only problem is to convince people that we are talking about *meaning* when we discuss the phenomena of art and spontaneous gestures. However, when we turn to language and abstract thought the problem changes from showing that we are dealing with meaning to showing that meaning is *embodied*. How is linguistic meaning embodied just like gestural meaning?

Under the heading of "Cognitive Linguistics," a growing body of research over the past two decades is devoted to showing that all meaning is embodied, and that our conceptualization and reasoning are shaped by our bodily makeup (Frank, R. et al., 2006; Johnson, Mark & Lakoff, George, 2002; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Regier, 1996). In the absence of the full-blown argument and presentation of evidence that is needed to support such a hypothesis, I want to end by at least marshalling some

phenomenological evidence that even our most abstract thinking and language use are inextricably tied to our bodily situatedness and our felt sense of how meaning is developing in a concrete context.

I suggest that we must here follow Eugene Gendlin, who has spent decades showing that interfused with the conceptual, propositional, and representational aspects of language, there is the felt-sense of the situation that is unfolding as our words pour out. The forms, structures, patterns, and representations in our thinking do not exist independently from the developing felt sense of qualities, emotions, activities, and possible outcomes of our situation. One of Gendlin's favorite examples of the all-pervasive working of embodied meaning—as a process of symbolic expression and felt sense working together—is his tale of a poet searching for the right words to an unfinished line:

The poet reads the written lines over and over, listens, and senses what these lines need (want, demand, imply, ....). Now the poet's hand rotates in the air. The gesture says *that*. Many good lines offer themselves; they try to say, but do not say—*that*. The blank is *more precise*. Although some are good lines, the poet rejects them.

That .... seems to lack words, but no. It knows the language, since it understands—and rejects—these lines that came. So it is not pre-verbal; Rather, it knows what must be said, and knows that these lines don't precisely say that. It knows like a gnawing knows what was forgotten, but it is new in the poet, and perhaps new in the history of the world.

Now, although I don't know most of you, I do know one of your secrets. I know you have written poetry. So I can ask you: Isn't that how it is? This .... must be directly referred to (felt, experienced, sensed, had, . . . .). Therefore, whatever term we use for such a blank, that term also needs our direct reference.

The blank brings something new. That function is not performed by the linguistic forms alone. Rather, it functions *between* two sets of linguistic forms. The blank

is not just the already written lines, but rather the *felt sense* from re-reading them, and *that* performs a function needed to lead to the next lines. (Gendlin, 1991: 38)

*Where*, exactly, is the so-called “meaning” our poet is trying to express? It’s not entirely in the words themselves. It resides not just in forms, or concepts, or patterns. Nor does it lie entirely in our felt sense of the situation. The structural and the felt are not two independent realities, but, rather, they are intertwined aspects of a developing process of meaning-making. The “meaning” is in what you think and feel and do, and it lies in recurring qualities, patterns, and feelings all tied up together. You *have* meaning, or are *caught up* in meaning, before you actually experience meaning reflectively. The words, symbols, representations are not independently existing entities that capture or express the felt-sense of a situation. Nor does the felt sense exist entirely independent of the words we are speaking. Instead, they are intertwined and develop together. The words are not the meaning, but they carry forward the meaning within a situation.

Gendlin sees that modes of thinking that employ only forms, distinctions, patterns, and rules will necessarily miss large parts of the embodied situational experiences that make these forms meaningful in the first place. The fateful error, which Gendlin attributes not just to Western philosophy, but to our general cultural understanding and practices, is to miss much of what goes into making something meaningful to us. Then we are seduced into mistaking the forms for that which they inform, and we fool ourselves into thinking that it is the forms alone that make something meaningful, real, and knowable. We think that if we have succeeded in abstracting out a form—conceptualizing some aspect of our experience—then we have captured the full meaning.

So, we do not have two independent entities externally related, but one continuously developing meaning of a particular situation that we identify, via reflection, as having these two intimately interwoven or blended dimensions—the formal/

structural and the felt/qualitative. It is for this reason that the words or formal distinctions are not adequate in themselves. If they copied the “subjective” side, then that side would be eliminable, replaceable by the forms and patterns. Conversely, the subjective side, the ....., is what it is only in relation to the forms that give expression to it.

Between the subjective and objective sides there is not a relation of representation or likeness. The words don't copy the blank. . . . The explication releases *that* tension, which was the ....., But what the blank was is not just lost or altered; rather, *that* tension is *carried forward* by the words. (Gendlin, 1991: 38)

Notice that this nonformal side is not vague, mushy, empty, or chaotic. It is, as Gendlin says, extremely *precise*. Its meaning is carried forward only by quite specific words or forms. The nonformal dimension is so precise that it rejects many candidate expressions as inadequate. When you are considering how to continue a line of poetry, or a line of thought in a philosophical argument, or an episode within a narrative, the felt sense of the qualitative whole is what determines how well various candidates for the next thought, word, or symbol will carry forward the thought. This qualitative, felt sense is vague, but only in a rich positive sense, namely, it is full of possibilities that are not yet realized, and so it only *seems* to lack precision. I would say that it is full of embodied *structure*, if that term had not been lumped together by Gendlin along with “form” and distinguished from the felt sense.

So, we are living in and through a growing, changing situation that opens up toward new possibilities and that is transformed as it develops. That is the way human meaning works, and none of this happens without our bodies, or without our embodied interactions within environments that we inhabit and that change along with us. A “situation,” as Gendlin uses the term, thus has as two of its abstract aspects an organism and its

environment. But it would be a mistake, as Richard Levins and Richard Lewontin observe, to think of the organism and its environment(s) as autonomous, independent entities that are only externally related. Rather, organisms and environments are co-evolving aspects of the experiential processes that make up situations (Levins & Lewontin, 1985: 89).

This explains why we should not think that our embodied meaning, understanding, and reasoning could ever be adequately thought or grasped by our concepts, symbols, rules, or patterns. Our situations, with all of their summing up, implying, and carrying forward, are *embodied situations*. Meaning, therefore, is embodied. And neither the nonformal, nonconceptual, implicit dimension nor the explicit forms, patterns, words, and concepts are the meaning in itself. Meaning resides in their situational relation, as that relationship develops and changes.

Looked at from the point of view of the role of our encounter with the pervasive quality of a situation and our felt sense of how thought can be carried forward, it is perfectly acceptable to say that “the *body carries forward*” the meaning of a situation. Via our embodied understanding we learn how to go on with our thinking, how to find words that carry the meaning of our situation in just the right way. Gendlin sums up this embodiment of meaning and thought:

The body implies what we want to do *and say*.

Therefore sophisticated linguistics and philosophical details can make *our bodies* uncomfortable. From such a discomfort the body can project (imply . . . ) finely shaped new steps to deal with such a situation. . . . (O)ur bodies shape the next thing we say, and perform many other implicit functions essential to language.

That is how our next words “come” from the body, just as hunger, orgasm, and sleep *come* in a bodily way, and just as food-search comes in an animal. It is familiar that after inhaling the body implies exhaling, and when in danger it totals up the situation and its muscles and blood circulation imply fighting, or quite differently, may imply

running, or again differently, it may paralyze itself and freeze. . . .

*Our bodies imply the next words and actions to carry our situations forward.* (Gendlin, 1997: 28)

What is most compelling about Gendlin's method of philosophizing is that way it calls us back to the meaning of our situation, reinvigorating our felt sense of the situations out of which meaning, thought, and language emerge. He does this by helping us be more attentive to what our bodies tell us. He invites us to listen to our embodied experience—to be “present to our experience,” as some Buddhists would say. He challenges us to gather the embodied meaning of our situation.

This brings us back to Merleau-Ponty's account of embodied, immanent meaning. For him, we can communicate and share meaning because we dwell together, bodily and socially, in a shared world of meaning. It is the shared characteristics of our human bodies, our shared cultural institutions and practices, and our shared social interactions that are the source of all our meaning, shaping both its form and content.

For Merleau-Ponty the connection between gesture and language is that, in both cases, meaning is an enactment and a transaction, rather than a matter of representation. We must recover the enactive process of language and the growth of meaning. This process is obvious in gesture, but it is the basis for linguistic meaning, too.

The phonetic ‘gesture’ brings about, both for the speaking subject and for his hearers, a certain structural co-ordination of experience, a certain modulation of existence, exactly as a pattern of my bodily behaviour endows the objects around me with a certain significance both for me and for others. (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 193)

To recognize this same embodied, immanent semantic process in spoken and written linguistic utterances is the key to an adequate theory of meaning.



## References

- Damasio, A. (1999). *The feeling of what happens: Body and emotion in the making of consciousness*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
- Dewey, J. (1991). Logic: The theory of inquiry. In J. A. Boydston (Ed.), *John Dewey: The later works, 1925-1953* (Vol. 12). Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press. (Original work published 1938)
- Edelman, G., & Tononi, G. (2000). *A universe of consciousness: How matter becomes imagination*. New York: Basic Books.
- Frank, R., Dirven, R., Ziemke, T., & Zlatev, J. (Eds.). (in press). *Body, language, and mind* (2 vols.). Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Gendlin, E. T. (1991). Crossing and dipping: Some terms for approaching the interface between natural understanding and logical formulation. In M. Galbraith & W. J. Rapaport (Eds.), *Subjectivity and the debate over computational cognitive science* (pp. 37-59). Buffalo: State University of New York.
- Gendlin, E.T. (1997). How philosophy cannot appeal to experience, and how it can. In D.M. Levin (Ed.), *Language beyond postmodernism: Saying and thinking in Gendlin's philosophy* (pp. 3-41, 343). Evanston: North-western University Press.
- Johnson, M., & Lakoff, G. (2002). Why cognitive linguistics requires embodied realism. *Cognitive Linguistics*, 13, 3: 245-263.
- Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (1999). *Philosophy in the flesh: The embodied mind and its challenge to Western thought*. New York: Basic Books.
- Langer, S. (1947). *Problems of art*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Levins, R., & Lewontin, R. (1985). *The dialectical biologist*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- McNeill, D. (1992). *Hand and mind: What gestures reveal about thought*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962). *Phenomenology of perception* (C. Smith, Trans.). London: Routledge.
- Regier, T. (1996). *The human semantic potential: Spatial language and constrained connectionism*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sessions, R. (1941). The composer and his message. In A. Centeno (Ed.), *The intent of the artist* (pp. 101-134). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Stern, D. (1985). *The interpersonal world of the infant: A view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology*. New York: Basic Books.

## 梅洛龐蒂以身體和情境感為基石的語意學 ——內含的意義、表意動作和語言

姜申

### 摘 要

在心靈與語言哲學的領域裡，梅洛龐蒂對如何將哲學和經驗科學合宜配合而深化哲學論述，樹立良好的典範。消除心物二元論，並由貼近人之身體活動說明意義，為其哲學核心觀點。身體活動中之表意動作的意義，在梅洛龐蒂的論述裡，成為說明意義（包括言詞意義）的基石。本文說明表意動作之意義如何體現並內含於該姿勢動作中，而且其體現與內含之方式，也見於藝術作品。由簡德林對伴隨語意形式與結構的身體感的描述與說明，可連結以下二主題論述：對表意動作和藝術作品中內含的意義的論述，以及對語言與思想中體現的意義的論述。

**關鍵詞：**身體、實作、情境感、意義、連續性原則