"Polyfunctionality", "Structural Dominant" and "Poetic Function" in Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception

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1 | Introduction

In this article, I attempt to show the presence of certain structuralist concepts developed by the linguist and semiotician Roman Jakobson in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*. There are no direct references to Jakobson in *Phenomenology of Perception*, and the aforementioned presence therefore is best considered as a convergence of interests and ideas.[1] Certain key themes of Merleau-Ponty's work can be rewardingly translated into Jakobsonian terms, in particular Jakobson's polyfunctional model of language and the concept of the structural dominant. A deeper intellectual affinity between the phenomenological philosopher and the structural linguist is indicated in their agreement on the fundamental importance of a poetic dimension of experience and expression.

My concern thus lies predominantly in the area of conceptual analysis, not in that of intellectual history, or history of philosophy. Particularly, I am interested in how a convergence of Merleau-Ponty and Jakobson might lead to the development of concepts that can be applied to empirical problems in

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1 This is not to say that there was no direct influence of Jakobson on Merleau-Ponty, especially in the works after *Phenomenology of Perception*. Holenstein (1976b, 22) mentions that Merleau-Ponty visited Jakobson 1948 in New York and that they met again later in Paris. Waldenfels frequently refers to Merleau-Ponty's acquaintance with Jakobson's linguistics. Most direct references in Merleau-Ponty's published work, however, are to the structural linguistics of de Saussure.

the social sciences, for example cultural anthropology. Within the context of the present essay, I can only point in the direction of this project, indicating its significance and possibility. It needs to be stated, however, that the effort to initiate, or, depending on one's assessment of the relation between them, uncover a dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and Jakobson is not merely of historical interest. The problems addressed in such a dialogue, the nature of the relations between objective empirical "facts" and subjective experiential "meanings", between structure and agency, determination and volition, have not been solved by the various following "post"-developments (post-modernity, post-structuralism, post-humanism, post-phenomenology). Investigations at the cross-section of phenomenology and structuralism promise new insights into old problems that continue to haunt the empirical sciences as well as philosophy itself.

Earlier efforts of highlighting the structural dimensions of Merleau-Ponty's thinking date from the 1970s and 1980s, a reaction to the prominence gained by structuralism in a wide variety of sciences and in the intellectual scene in general (Edie 1971, 1987; Grathoff & Sprondel 1976, Schmidt 1985). Many of these efforts concentrate on Merleau-Ponty's theory of language (Edie 1971, 1987; Waldenfels 1976), an understandable focus considering the role played by structural linguistics as a kind of vanguard of structuralism. Despite this linguistic orientation there was, however, no study on affinities or convergences between Merleau-Ponty and Jakobson. In addressing this topic, the present essay puts itself at odds with Holenstein (1976a, 1976b) who regarded it as a mistake that contemporary phenomenologists were trying to establish a dialogue with structuralism from the perspective of existential and hermeneutic phenomenology. He argued that Husserl's phenomenology provided a much more compatible counterpart to the "systematically strictly defined concepts" of the structuralists (Holenstein 1976b, 54/55). Although Holenstein (1976b, 22) acknowledges Merleau-Ponty as the most original phenomenologist after Husserl, he dismissed Merleau-Ponty's contact with structural linguistics as not "particularly fertile" (Holenstein 1976b, 22), and consequently didn't explore possible connections. I am proposing here that Merleau-Ponty and Jakobson are suitable interlocutors for a dialogue between phenomenology and structuralism. In distinction from other studies of Merleau-Ponty's "structuralism", I extend the view from the focus on the philosophy of language towards Merleau-Ponty's conceptions of non-verbal behaviors and of human existence in

general, therefore moving closer to the main themes of *Phenomenology of Perception* (see also Waldenfels 1985).

The decision to limit the scope of investigation to one of Merleau-Ponty's works requires some explanation, even though *Phenomenology of Perception* is regarded by many as his "main work". One reason is heuristic, as this limitation allows me to move closer to the text itself, rather than making general statements about Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Another reason has to do with my disciplinary background as cultural anthropologist. Over the last three decades, Merleau-Ponty's theory of the sentient body as origin and medium of cultural signification has exerted great influence in anthropology (see, for example, Csordas 1990, 1999; Jackson 1989). It was predominantly through reading *Phenomenology of Perception* that anthropologists became acquainted with Merleau-Ponty's thought, and the same applies to other disciplines outside of philosophy. Thirdly, to consider the presence of structuralist concepts in *Phenomenology of Perception* allows us to get a better sense of their applicability beyond their original linguistic context than a focus on Merleau-Ponty's texts devoted specifically to the problem of language.

Nevertheless, it needs to be kept in mind that Merleau-Ponty's notion of structure, while prominent in all of his writings, did not remain static over the course of his career (see Edie 1987, 55-70, Waldenfels 1985). Strictly speaking, the following remarks thus only apply to a specific phase of Merleau-Ponty's thinking. On the other hand, there is also considerable continuity in the way this philosopher formulated and approached problems, in particular between *Phenomenology of Perception* and the project of a phenomenological ontology in *The Visible and the Invisible*. In this sense the following remarks also make a – very modest and limited – claim to contribute to the understanding of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy.

2 | Jakobson and Merleau-Ponty: Phenomenological Structuralism and Structural Phenomenology

As Elmar Holenstein has shown in his book on Jakobson, the antagonism between structuralism and phenomenology was not one of essence or origin, but was produced performatively by representatives of the respective methods or styles of thinking at a later phase of their historical development. In the beginning there was a recognition shared by phenomenologists and structuralists that both were not only concerned with the same intellectual problems,

but also tried to solve them by compatible means. By initiating the shift from the positivist conception of experience as reflection of autonomously existing objects to a conception of experience in terms of relations between observer and observed, phenomenology can even be regarded as the "historical and logical 'condition of possibility' of structuralism" (Holenstein 1976a, 3). At the turn of the 20th century, phenomenology was the first philosophical movement that stressed, in form of Husserl's revision of the concept of intentionality, the priority of relations before substance. This change of perspective is commonly regarded as the "first principle" of a structuralist way of thinking:

> At its simplest, it claims that the nature of every element in any given situation has no significance by itself, and in fact is determined by its relationship to all the other elements involved in that situation. In short, the full significance of any entity or experience cannot be perceived unless and until it is integrated into the structure of which it forms a part. (Hawkes 1977, 18).

Husserl's investigations into the essential correlations between acts of consciousness and experiential objects manifested the first explicit instance of this way of thinking.[2]

An awareness of the affinity between phenomenology and structuralism was particularly pronounced in Jakobson who, as a young student in Moscow, came into contact with Husserl's philosophy. In particular the second volume of *Logical Investigations* made a deep and lasting impression on Jakobson that would shape and penetrate his entire approach to language. Holenstein claims that "there is hardly a basic and methodological concept of structural linguistics and poetics that does not undergo an explicit and implicit phenomenological determination and elaboration by Jakobson" (1976a, 3), and proposes the term "phenomenological structuralism" as designation of Jakobson's theoretical perspective. Since Ricoeur's polemical characterization of Levi-Straus's structuralism as "Kantianism without a transcendental subject" (cf. Holenstein 1976a, 47), the alleged absence of the subject as center of intentionality and agency is one of the main criticisms raised by phenomenologists against structuralists and post-structuralists.

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2 Especially the third of his *Logical Investigations*, titled "On the Theory of Wholes and Parts"

Holenstein, however, dismisses this allegation as too absolutist for structuralism in general, and as non-applicable to Jakobson in particular:

> The subject in Jakobson's structuralism appears in three shapes: (1) as observer, who is himself part of the observation; (2) as intersubjective and (3) unconscious producer and recipient of the linguistic message. Instead of being Kantian, in the sense of a philosophy aimed at the a priori and universal forms and laws of its object and without a "transcendental subject," Jakobson's structuralism proves to be Kantian with a more sophisticated concept of the subject. The subject is extended to the dimensions of intersubjectivity and the unconscious. (Holenstein 1976a, 48)

There are thus plenty of reasons, historical as well as intellectual, to claim Roman Jakobson as a kind of mediator between phenomenology and structuralism whose work can be used to reconnect phenomenological philosophy with developments in the empirical sciences in productive ways.

A similar claim can be made for Merleau-Ponty, although it has not been argued as systematically as for Jakobson; in Merleau-Ponty's case the evidence is more scattered.[3] Nevertheless, there is a widespread sense among readers of Merleau-Ponty that he is the "most structuralist" of the eminent phenomenologists. Referring to the philosophy of language, James Edie (1971, 299), for example, speaks of the "unique place" of Merleau-Ponty: "He is about the only phenomenologist whom the Structuralists are wont to treat with respect and whose authority and support they readily invoke." Edie (1987, 56/57) distinguishes four phases in Merleau-Ponty's structural thinking: the early "Gestaltist" phase of *Structure of Behavior*, published in 1942;[4] the dialectical understanding of structure in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945); a "properly structuralist" phase characterized by intensive studies in structural linguistics, from the end of the 1940s to the mid 1950s; a "post-structural phase" lasting

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3 Despite their differences in philosophical outlook, Merleau-Ponty was friends with Claude Levi-Strauss, his colleague at the College de France. After Merleau-Ponty's unexpected death, Levi-Strauss dedicated his book *The Savage Mind* to the philosopher. Merleau-Ponty also communicated with the Dutch linguist and philosopher Hendrik Pos, and engaged critically with his work, e.g. in the essay "On the Phenomenology of Language" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a)

4 But already finished in 1938, according to Waldenfels (1985, 57)

until Merleau-Ponty's death in 1961, connected with his project of a pheno-menological ontology sketched in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

While this neat division might be justified with respect to the specific issue of an influence of structural linguistics on Merleau-Ponty's conception of language, I believe that there is a broader current running through his thinking that can be labelled structural, if not structuralist. This current is certainly discernible at the end of *Phenomenology of Perception*, when Merleau-Ponty sums up his reflections on the question of human freedom:

> I am a psychological and historical structure. Along with existence, I received a way of existing, or a style. All of my actions and thoughts are related to this structure, and even a philosopher's thought is merely a way of making explicit his hold upon the world, which is all he is. And yet, I am free, not in spite of or beneath these motivations, but rather by their means. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 482)

And the very last sentence of the book is taken from a quote of the writer Saint-Exupery and reads: "Man is a knot of relations, and relations alone count for man" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 483) These are structuralist formu-lations indeed, but they also indicate the specific place which Merleau-Ponty's structural thinking holds within the context of his philosophy. Merleau-Ponty never portrays structures as existing autonomously from their implementation in concrete behaviors and actions. For him there is simply no separate domain of laws, rules or regulations that would determine a situation by being applied to it. Rather, experiential reality springs from an indeterminate, or dialectical meeting between structure and behavior, where the essence of one consists in expressing itself in the other: structures must necessarily be thought of as structuring, as processes of differentiation and articulation unfolding in concrete matter, or empirical content. On the other hand, matter or content is never amorphous, is always structured or given form as perceptual sense. The dialectical relationship between structure and behavior is at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's conception of the body in *Phenomenology of Perception*: Lived perceptual experience as disclosed by phenomenological description is impossible without the acknowledgment of an inborn embodied knowledge of the world. We would never know what a visual object is if, before the appearance of any particular object, we weren't already familiar with the multiple ways in which it presents itself to us, in

relation to other things in the field of vision, as a type of resistance against a certain level of illumination, as an articulation of spatial depth, etc. We arrive at the unity of the perceptual object not through some sort of calculation, but through an intuitive assurance about the structures of the perceptual world that is given to us with our body. In this sense, the body in *Phenomenology of Perception* appears as a set of structures, or a dynamic system, and its experience of itself consists in a *body schema* in which every part of the body is assigned a function in relation to the whole. Paradoxically, however, the body schema, while belonging to our organic constitution, only operates by establishing relationships to the world:

> If my body can ultimately be a "form," and if there can be, in front of it, privileged figures against indifferent backgrounds, this is insofar as my body is polarized by its tasks, insofar as it exists toward them, insofar as it coils upon itself in order to reach its goal, and the "body schema" is, in the end, a manner of expressing that my body is in and toward the world. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 103)

In other words, the perceptual world is always structured because the perceiving body itself is a process of structuration; at the same time, this structuration is only possible because the body relates to the world through perception and movement. Structure and behavior go hand in hand, none can be said to precede the other; their relationship is chiasmic, hence essentially ambiguous.

James Edie's assessment of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language can therefore be extended to his structural thinking in general:

> In short, what most interested Merleau-Ponty in the structuralist attempt to establish phonological, morphological and syntactical rules (which we call *la langue*) according to which we must speak in order to make sense, is the dialectical relationship of these rules or structures to actual acts of usage. On the one hand the structures of language are nothing other than the scientific description of speech acts, and therefore are ontologically dependent on a community of speakers. On the other hand this community of speakers must already – in some dumb, sub-understood manner – follow the rules of *la langue* even while their language patterns are being described. Here we have a good

dialectical situation. Neither is prior to the other, neither can subsist without the other, neither is independent of the other. Each is necessary for the constitution of meaning and the articulation of thought. (Edie 1987, 60)

The same can be said for Merleau-Ponty's conception of the relationship between body and world in perception, and of his notion of human existence as the movement of taking up a de facto situation (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 173). If we accept Holenstein's claim regarding Jakobson's insistence on the necessary presence of subjectivity as the field in which linguistic structures must realize themselves, we can justifiably assume that to him as well the problem posed itself in dialectical terms. At this point, however, we also are confronted with a major difference between the two scholars that relates to their respective disciplines: For the linguist Jakobson, the question of the relationship between structure and subject, or between language and speech-act, could remain undetermined, as long as it did not interfere with the investigation of concrete linguistic phenomena. For the philosopher Merleau-Ponty, the uncovered indeterminacy became the actual problem, the situation that needed to be investigated and clarified.[5] Committed to a radical inquiry into Being, for Merleau-Ponty bracketing the question of the relationship between sentient subject and worldly structure for heuristic reasons was not an option. In the following period of his work (from the late 1940s to the mid 1950s), he attempted to address the problems revealed in *Phenomenology of Perception* by developing a unified theory of expression able to include language, artistic expression, and bodily gesture in one analytical framework. In this attempt, posthumously published under the title *Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty drew extensively on structural linguistics. Ultimately, however, he abandoned the project of *Prose of the World* and began to work on a "phenomenological ontology", a project ended by his sudden death in 1961. In the manuscript fragment *The Visible and the Invisible,* Merleau-Ponty returned to the problem of embodiment. He now described the fundamental indeterminacy of body-subject and world in terms of an intertwinement, or chiasmus. The relationships between body and world uncovered by phenomenological description are only possible when both partake in the same Being, when they are of one "flesh". Using this kind of "open", "evocative" vocabulary, Merleau-Ponty sought to finally overcome the

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5 See also the passage from Merleau-Ponty 2012, 178, quoted *infra.*

oppositions between consciousness and object, mind and matter, subject and structure, which "thematic", "propositional" language cannot but reproduce. It makes sense to assume that the language of structural linguistics with its tendency towards disambiguation and strict definition is included in this indictment, and that this is part of the reason why Merleau-Ponty ultimately turned away from it. Be this as it may, such disciplinary differences in concern and outlook must be kept in mind when bringing a phenomeno-logical philosopher and a structural linguist in communication with each other.,

Before moving on to a more detailed investigation of concepts, it is worth mentioning another area of possible, this time topical, convergence between Jakobson and Merleau-Ponty. Both exhibited an extraordinary interest in aesthetic and poetic expression and creation. There is general agreement among Jakobson-scholars that avant-garde art constituted a formative influence on his conception of structural linguistics, and provided ongoing inspiration for this scholarly work (see for example, Holenstein 1976a, 23; Pomorska 1987, 2-4). As a young man, when he was a founding member of the Moscow Linguistic Circle, he was a close friend of the poets Xlebnikov and Majakovskij, whose work deeply and lastingly influenced his perspective on language. More than that, under the pseudonym "Aljagrov" he also wrote poetry that he called "supraconscious" (Pomorska 1987, 2), and considered himself as a futurist (Rudy 1987). As a linguist and semiotician, Jakobson assigned the poetic, or more generally speaking, the aesthetic dimension, a central function in human communication. Similarly, Merleau-Ponty was greatly interested in artistic production, which he viewed as a paradigmatic instance of the meaning-producing processes unfolding in experience in general. He placed particular focus on painting to which he devoted a number of essays over the whole course of his career,[6] but references to the arts appear frequently and figure prominently in his works.[7] This shared preoccupation with aesthetics and the convergence resulting from it, provides further basis for a dialogue between Merleau-Ponty and Jakobson.

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6 See the following essays: "Cezanne's Doubt" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, 9-25); "Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence" (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, 39-93); "Eye and Mind" (Merleau-Ponty 1964c, 159-190).

7 See for example the section "The unity of the body and the unity of the work of art" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 152/153).

3 | Jakobsonian Concepts: Poly-functionality, Poetic Function and Structural Dominant

Throughout his career, Roman Jakobson was concerned with questions of poetics, with the defining features of verbal art. In his famous essay "Linguistics and Poetics" (1985 [1960]), he integrated this concern in an encompassing conception of human language as mode of communication. Jakobson's model might already be familiar to some readers, but to present it once more in its outline will make the following arguments easier to follow.

In "Linguistics and Poetics", Jakobson presented the poetic as an integral dimension of linguistic communication, constituting one of six functions of language. These functions are in turn derived from the necessary elements, or *constitutents*, as Jakobson calls them, of any act of linguistic communication: a *sender* (or *addresser*) sends a *message* to a *receiver* (or *addressee*) who interprets it in relation to a linguistic and/or extra-linguistic *context*. Moreover, the message must be in a *code* common to both sender and receiver, and transmitted via a form of *contact* between them (Jakobson 1985, 150).

From each of these six basic elements, Jakobson derives a different function of language. He is also able to show that the various functions correspond to, and are highlighted in, particular language phenomena. In relation to the addresser, the linguistic act has *emotive function*; it expresses his or her attitude towards what is being communicated. The emotive function or "emotivity" of language becomes graspable in the phenomenon of interjections or in the necessary contribution of the tone of voice to the meaning of an utterance. To the addressee corresponds a *conative function* of language that consists in the elicitation of some kind of behavior on the part of the receiver of a message. Linguistic examples of a focus on this function are vocative and imperative forms that, by definition, primarily require a behavioral response. The context-factor is connected with the *referential function* of language, its capacity to transmit information about linguistic and extra-linguistic reality. This function is traditionally regarded as the defining function of language, and as the basis of its role in human cognition;[8] Jakobson, however, while not denying the importance of referentiality, insists that the other language functions make essential communicative contributions.[9]

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8 For an example of this traditional notion see Karl Bühler's Organon-Model of language in his classical *Sprachtheorie* (1934, only translated into English in 1990) to which Jakobson admits to be indebted for his own conception.

9 In this respect, he can be related to J.L. Austin's theory of performative speech

Code leads to the recognition of a *metalingual function* and comes to the fore in forms of language use in which language itself becomes the theme of communication. This is the case for example in acts of paraphrasing and explaining meanings, as they frequently occur in processes of language acquisition, both of first and second languages (Jakobson 1985, 153). The *phatic function* rests on the necessary presence of a form of contact between sender and receiver, and is accentuated in messages referring to the mode of contact, or the channel of transmission (for example, the question: Are you listening to me?, or the sounds emitted to signal that one is still on the phone).

The *poetic function*, finally, and this is what Jakobson is mostly concerned with in his famous essay, is defined through its focus on the message itself, on its composition and materiality. Poetic function or poeticity is particularly prominent in verbal art, especially poetry, but it also features in all acts of everyday communication in which the attention of the participants is directed toward the concrete form of the message (as is the case in advertisements, or political slogans). It is worth to quote Jakobson at some length on this matter:

> The set (*Einstellung*) toward the MESSAGE as such, focus on the message for its own sake is the POETIC FUNCTION of language. This function cannot be productively studied out of touch with the general problems of language, and, on the other hand, the scrutiny of language requires a thorough consideration of its poetic function. Any attempt to reduce the sphere of poetic function to poetry or to confine poetry to poetic function would be a delusive oversimplification. Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function, whereas in all other verbal activities it acts as a subsidiary, accessory constituent. This function, by promoting the palpability of signs, deepens the fundamental dichotomy between signs and objects. Hence when dealing with poetic function, linguistics cannot limit itself to the field of poetry. (Jakobson 1985, 153, capitalization in original)

In Jakobson's conception language emerges as a multi-dimensional and poly-functional mode of communication. The unity of the speech-act is differentiated into a multiplicity of diverse elements and functions. A struc-

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acts, developed in his *How to Do Things with Words*, which appeared in 1962.

tural hierarchy between these functions determines the identity of the com-
municative act. A specific act is defined by the function that features most
prominently in it, that *dominates* the structural hierarchy, orients all other
functions in relation to it, and in this sense determines the unity of which
they form parts. In the case of the poetic function, its dominance in verbal
art manifests itself in a specific process of restructuration: "*The poetic function
projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of
combination*" (Jakobson 1985, 155, italics in original). This means, instead of
being limited to the process of *selection* between various possible language
elements, similarity/dissimilarity becomes a criterion for the *combination* of
selected elements.[10] Poetic devices like meter and rhyme create a similarity-
relationship between elements in the same line, or between different lines,
and thereby direct the attention, or as Jakobson says, produce a "set" towards
the form of the linguistic message. By restructuring linguistic communication
in this way, the dominance of the poetic function alerts the language user to
an existential, but often forgotten, or should we say, repressed fact: that the
sign is different from the object for which it stands, and that their association
is based on a convention which is always already established. Poetry brings to
our awareness, for example, that the sounds of language, while of course
embedded in the phonological system of a particular language, carry a certain
value for the expression of the meaning of the world:

> Sound symbolism is an undeniably objective relation founded on a
> phenomenal connection between different sensory modes, in
> particular between the visual and auditory experience…..(W)hen, on
> testing, for example, such phonemic oppositions as grave versus acute
> we ask whether /i/ or /u/ is darker, some of the subjects may respond
> that this question makes no sense to them, but hardly one will state
> that /i/ is the darkest of the two. (Jakobson 1985, 169)

These expressive properties of language sounds are not positive, universal
qualities, as naïve theories of sound symbolism and onomatopoeia assumed.
They are inevitably subject to structural relations within phonological sys-

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10 The terms "selection" and "combination" refer to the "Two-Axis-Theory" of lan-
   guage which Jakobson borrowed from de Saussure. For his development of the
   theory and its application to the problem of aphasia, see his important essay "Two
   Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances", in Jakobson 1971).

tems. Empirical languages may positively affirm the symbolic properties of sound, as does Russian when it features a grave vowel in its word for "night", /nоč/ and an acute vowel in its word for "day", /d,en,/; or they may run counter this sound symbolism, as the French does with /jour/ and /nuit/. While such violations often go unnoticed in everyday speech, in poetic language they are brought to the fore, as can be illustrated by the inclination of French poets to surround /jour/ with clusters of words containing acute vowels, or placing /nuit/ in an environment dominated by grave vowels (see Jakobson 1985, 169). In this way, as Jakobson says, the sound meaning nexus becomes palpable to language users.[11]

Most important for my present argument is, however, the structuralist conception of a hierarchical arrangement governed by a dominating function, or *dominant*. "Poetic function is not the sole function of verbal art but only its dominant, determining function", writes Jakobson; other functions make subsidiary, yet essential contributions to poetic communication. Even the most abstract poetry contains some kind of referential meaning, and the expression of the attitude of the poet towards the message is an important component of many verbal art works. In this manner, Jakobson's poly-functional model allows us to distinguish between different genres of verbal art. The dominance of poetic function is verbal art's overall defining criterion, but for example "epic poetry" can be distinguished from "lyric poetry" by a different arrangement of the subsidiary functions: in the first, poetic function enters a close relationship with referential function ; in the second, poeticity is accentuated by emotivity. Non-poetic modes of verbal communication can similarly be characterized by a difference in the structural dominant, and a corresponding arrangement of other functions. Technical or mathematical language is defined by the dominance of the

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11 In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the expressive properties of language sounds in strikingly similar terms: "If we consider only the conceptual and final sense of words, it is true that the verbal form – with the exception of the inflections – seems arbitrary. This would no longer hold if we took the emotional sense of the word into account, what we have above called its gestural sense, which is essential in poetry, for example. We would then find that words, vowels, and phonemes are so many ways of singing the world, and that they are destined to represent objects, not through an objective resemblance but because they are extracted from them, and literally express their emotional essence" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 193)

referential and, possibly metalingual functions, but that doesn't mean that an expressive or poetic element cannot enter communication in the sciences.[12] In a military boot camp, communication is one-sidedly geared towards the behavioral responses of the addressee, but phatic and referential functions are certainly co-present in commandos and orders.

This may suffice to demonstrate that Jakobson's conception of a multi-dimensional structure governed by a structural dominant provides a heuristically fertile tool to distinguish between, describe and analyze different modes of communication. Summed up in the seminal 1960 essay, this conception was already in place in the 1930s, when Jakobson was a leading member of the Cercle linguistique de Prague.[13] It is noteworthy, and relevant for a dialogue between Jakobson and Merleau-Ponty, that from early on Jakobson regarded his model not as restricted to problems of poetics in the narrow sense. In his 1935 essay "The Dominant", in which he credits Russian Formalism with the original formulation of the concept, he not only claims that it allows a more precise description of processes of literary evolution, through the study of changing relationships between canonic and marginal genres and styles. He also extends the application of the concept beyond the realm of verbal art, and ultimately even beyond the domain of aesthetics:

> We may seek a dominant not only in the poetic work of an individual artist and not only in the poetic canon, the set of norms of a given poetic school, but also in the art of a given epoch, viewed as a particular whole. For example, it is evident that in Renaissance art such a dominant, such an acme of the aesthetic criteria of the time, was represented by the visual arts. Other arts oriented themselves towards the visual arts and were valued according to their closeness to the latter. On the other hand, in Romantic art the supreme value was assigned to music. Thus, for example, Romantic poetry oriented itself toward music: its verse is musically focused; its verse intonation

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12 Karl Bühler (1990, 38/39) mentions the handwriting of the mathematician as an example of the emotivity, or expressivity of mathematical communication. If the poetic dimension wasn't present in mathematics at all, it would remain incomprehensible why some mathematicians are commended for the "elegance" of their demonstrations.

13 For a short synopsis of the stages of Jakobson's career, see Holenstein 1976a, 8-12

imitates musical melody. This focusing on a dominant which is in fact external to the poetic work substantially changes the poem's structure with regard to sound texture, syntactic structure, and imagery; it alters the poem's metrical and strophical criteria and its composition. In Realist aesthetics the dominant was verbal art, and the hierarchy of poetic values was modified accordingly. (Jakobson 1978 [1935], 83)

Many anthropologists will feel a skepticism towards such sweeping generalization of entire cultural eras, just as phenomenologists might feel uncomfortable with some aspects of Jakobson's structuralist vocabulary which makes liberal use of the term "determination", as we have seen. But it needs to be kept in mind that Jakobson is talking about structural relationships, not about autonomous domains or entities. The dominance of one art form, and of one sensory modality is only relative, as is the subordination of the other arts and senses under the dominant. The identification of a dominant is an *interpretive statement*, not an objective one that could be proved by means of scientific demonstration. As we shall see, we encounter the same type of interpretation and understanding in Merleau-Ponty.

In an essay from the same period titled "What is Poetry?" (1934), Jakobson examines the relationships between poetic expression and personal life using the example of several poets, in particular the Czech romantic poet Karel Macha. Jakobson is intrigued by the different ways in which the same events and persons are thematized in Macha's poems and in his private diaries, a difference particularly marked in the treatment of erotic and sexual themes. Jakobson argues that no mode of communication has a privileged relation to reality and truth:

Is it possible that the relation between lyric poetry and the diary parallels the relationship between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit?*[14] Not at all. Both aspects are equally valid; they are merely different meanings, or, in more scholarly terminology, different semantic levels of the same object, the same experience, or, as the filmmaker would put it, two different takes of a single scene (Jakobson 1981, 744).

If all modes of expression are related to an underlying experiential core, yet none of these modes provides a privileged access, then it follows that a

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14 German for "Fiction" and "Truth"

pure expression of experience is impossible.[15] What is indicated here is the notion of an existential unity underlying the various forms in which a person expresses himself or herself, a nexus to which all these forms relate but that never coincides with any of them. This is one of the core elements of the conception of human existence that Merleau-Ponty develops in *Phenomenology of Perception*.

4 | Structural Thinking in *Phenomenology of Perception*

The Jakobsonian conception of a poly-functional unity governed by a structural dominant is implied frequently in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and I will discuss three instances in which this implication becomes particularly obvious: Merleau-Ponty's discussion of the relationship between specific symptoms and illness in the case of the brain-injured patient Schneider; the relationship between sexuality and human existence; and the integration of different senses into the inter-sensory unity of the body. Before doing so, however, it needs to be emphasized that the motif of an essentially differentiated unity, or a unified difference, emerges as one of the key themes in *Phenomenology of Perception*. The ambiguity and indeterminacy resulting from this contradictory conjunction has even been claimed as the hallmark of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy in general. Throughout *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty presents unity and differentiation, universality and particularity, objectivity and subjectivity as intertwined with each other; although opposed to each other, no element of the relationship can be thought of without the other. Rather than being an impediment, the partial perspective imposed by one's body is what enables one to enter a world of articulated objects and positional space (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 70/71). Time only becomes accessible to us as a totality through our insertion into a "field of presence" which constitutes our temporal perspective through which the dimensions of the past and the future open themselves (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 438/439). Everywhere in human existence we are confronted with the paradoxical fact that what puts us in contact with reality and truth is at the same time what prevents reality and truth from ever becoming absolute and indubitable.

That said, and the creativity of Merleau-Ponty's adaptation of structuralist ideas notwithstanding, I believe that an explicit application of Jakobson's

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15 In the same essay, Jakobson (1981, 746) writes: "Every verbal act in a certain sense stylizes and transforms the event it depicts".

concepts has the potential to add clarity to some of Merleau-Ponty's discussions in *Phenomenology of Perception*. In his discussion of the case of Schneider, through which he develops important points about the relation between consciousness and motricity, Merleau-Ponty also addresses the problem of the relationship between the pathological unity, Schneider's illness, and the multiplicity of symptoms, through which this unity expresses itself. Merleau-Ponty rejects interpretations that locate the illness one-sidedly in a particular sphere. It is not permissible, he argues, to regard the impairment of Schneider's vision and a resultant loss of visual representations as underlying cause of his other tactile, motoric and cognitive disturbances. Rather, Schneider's behavior must be understood as an existential unity, an expression of his total being and relationship to the world. In the context of this unity, every alteration of a composite element inevitably effects changes in the whole, including all other components. Schneider's loss of vision does not leave his sense of touch unaffected, but modifies it in accordance with an overall structure that *is* Schneider's illness. To describe this existential unity, Merleau-Ponty introduces the term "intentional arc": All of Schneider's behaviors, whether in the motoric, verbal or sexual sphere are characterized by a certain disinterest, inertness and passivity. This style of acting, thinking and experiencing is what connects the various clusters of symptoms with each other; Schneider's illness ultimately consists in a modification of his whole existence. Merleau-Ponty says that his intentional arc has "gone limp" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 137). While Schneider's existence thus constitutes a totality, its differentiation into a multiplicity of self-regulated domains must also be acknowledged:

> …..If consciousness is an activity of projection, which deposits objects around itself like traces of its own acts, but which relies upon them in order to move on to new acts of spontaneity, then we understand simultaneously that every deficiency of "contents" has an effect upon the whole of experience and begins its disintegration, that every pathological weakening has to do with all of consciousness – and that, nevertheless, the disorder each time attacks consciousness from a certain "side," that in each case certain symptoms are predominant in the clinical picture of the illness, and finally that consciousness itself can suffer the illness. By attacking the "visual sphere," the illness is not limited to destroying certain conscious contents, namely, "visual representations" or vision in the literal sense; rather, it attacks vision in a figurative sense, of which the former is

but the model or the emblem – the power of "surveying" or "dominating" (*überschauen*) simultaneous multiplicities and a certain manner of positing the object or of being conscious. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 138)

In other words, the prominence of vision in Schneider's pathology, while not causing the illness, is no accidental ingredient either. In terms of Jakobson, the visual serves as the structural dominant of the illness; more than other senses, sight expresses a power of distancing oneself from the immediate situation, of "surveying" and "dominating", a capacity that Schneider has lost.[16] Other disorders and symptoms of Schneider display the same theme, but vision dominates in that it expresses the lost faculties in a focused and organized manner. Schneider's illness affects all aspects of his existence, but it is concentrated in the visual domain because here the existential transformation that is the disease achieves its most direct expression. As Merleau-Ponty suggests in the above quote, other pathological conditions can be characterized by different dominants. The structural relationships between different modes of communication as conceived by Jakobson can thus be transposed into the domain of clinical pathology.[17]

Another important point concerns the ontological status of structural-phenomenological concepts like "intentional arc" or "existential style". Here, too, Jakobson's phenomenological structuralism has the potential to add clarity to Merleau-Ponty's arguments. Just as the poem itself cannot be identified with the structural analysis of poetic function and other functions of language, so the concrete existence of the patient can never be equated with the description of a certain existential style. Both types of analyses are interpretations that necessarily introduce transformations into their objects; in other words, they remain models and must not be confused with reality. It seems to me that Merleau-Ponty, in his own development of his philosophy in later years, especially with the concept of "hyper-reflection" in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968, 38) has moved in this direction.

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16 One of the symptoms that Merleau-Ponty (2012, 107) discusses is Schneider's inability to project himself into a "virtual situation". He has, for example, great difficulties to execute the gesture of a military salute upon request and is only able to do so when he adopts the full bodily stance of a soldier, thus by making the situation immediately present to himself.

17 Jakobson himself has applied his structural approach to pathological phenomena in "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" (1971).

In *Phenomenology of Perception* the concept of a differentiated unity also plays a prominent role in the chapter "The Body as a Sexed Being". In a now familiar manner, Merleau-Ponty presents the relationship between sexuality and human existence in terms of ambiguity and indeterminacy. On the one hand, an individual's life always expresses itself in his or her sexuality, and sexuality can thus never be regarded independently from its insertion into an existential totality. The expression of existence in sexual behavior is not direct and equivocal: a dictatorial will to power can correlate with ascetics, as well as with promiscuity. The significance of sexuality can only be deciphered within the existential context.

On the other hand, however, no manifestation or domain of existence is completely autonomous from the sexual sphere. Sexuality is a continuously present "atmosphere", comparable to an "odor or sound" that emanates and diffuses from its origin (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 171):

> There is osmosis between sexuality and existence, that is, if existence diffuses throughout sexuality, sexuality reciprocally diffuses throughout existence, such that it is impossible to identify the contribution of sexual motivation and contribution of other motivations for a given decision or action and it is impossible to characterize a decision or an action as "sexual" or as "nonsexual" (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 172).

Nevertheless, there obviously must be a way to distinguish between situations that are more sexual and those that are less sexual. Here Jakobson's concept of a plurality of functions governed by a structural dominant provides us with an elegant solution. Sexual situations are those in which "sexuality" is the dominant, structurally determining existential dimension, just as a work of verbal art is defined by the dominance of "poeticity". Implied in this use of the term "sexuality" is a distancing from its meaning in everyday language that connects it exclusively with the genital sphere. As Merleau-Ponty makes clear in his discussion of psychoanalysis in *Phenomenology of Perception*, sexuality must be understood as a way of being-toward-the-world, paralleling the psychoanalytic concept of libido (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 161).

But just as dominance of the poetic function does not exclude the contribution of the other language functions to the work of art, so the dominance of sexuality, or of any other existential domain, never becomes exclusive. Even in sexual situations so defined, the "economic", the "political"

and the "religious", to name just a few conventionally recognized dimensions of human existence, will make themselves felt with varying degrees of clarity and urgency. One only needs to think about the sexual encounter between a client and a sex worker, in comparison to a pair of lovers engaging in consensual, non-commercial sex to produce an example of a different structural arrangement between the sexual and the economic. As feminist scholars have argued convincingly, the political-economical is not absent from the private sphere and intimate relationships, but the quality of its presence certainly varies for both cases. From the perspective of the sex worker the business aspect of the encounter may outweigh the sexual aspect, leading to a shift in the dominant of her experience. If that is indeed the case and the same shift does not occur in the client's experience, it might not be justified to say that both are sharing a situation. Such instances, however, occur in all types of social relationship and might thus be much more frequent than usually acknowledged. Therefore, a further question would be how people orchestrate their behaviors when their experiences are governed by different dominants, a topic that was, for example, treated in depth in the work of Alfred Schütz (Schütz 1967, Schütz and Luckmann 1973).

This is just an example for how Merleau-Ponty's reflections can be extended towards concrete empirical phenomena by bringing them into conversation with concepts developed by Jakobson.

It is interesting to note that Merleau-Ponty himself went in this direction, in a long footnote appended to the sexuality-chapter dealing with historical materialism. Just as psychoanalysis presents an existential approach to sexuality, so historical materialism must be understood as an existential approach to history:

History has no single signification; what we do always has several senses, and this is how an existential conception of history is distinguished from both materialism and spiritualism. ….The conception of law, morality, religion and economic structure are co-signified in the Unity of the social event, just as the parts of the body are all co-implicated in the Unity of a gesture, or just as "physiological," "psychological", and "moral" motives intersect in the Unity of an action……But one of the orders of signification can be considered dominant in each case, one gesture can be considered "sexual", another one "loving," and still another "warlike," and even within coexistence, some period of history can be considered as above all cultural, or primarily political or economic. To ask whether our current history has a

primarily economic sense and whether our ideologies give nothing but a secondary or derivative sense of it is a question that not longer comes from philosophy, but rather from politics. It is a question that will only be resolved by researching which scenario fits the facts more completely, the economic scenario or the ideological one. Philosophy can only show that resolving the question is possible by starting from the human condition. (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 178)

While the meaning of words like "sexual", "loving" and "warlike" remains vague, the affinity to Jakobson's concepts is not to be denied here. There is reason to hope that further study in this direction could uncover ways to formulate more precise distinctions between different existential "functions", in analogy to the language functions posited by Jakobson. Such an under-taking would be particularly fruitful for anthropology where the concept of "total social fact" developed by Marcel Mauss addresses similar relationships between unity and differentiation.[18]

Perhaps the most obvious and, at least from a cultural anthropological standpoint, empirically most promising example of structural thinking in *Phenomenology of Perception* is provided by Merleau-Ponty's portrayal of the relationship of the different senses within the unity of the sentient body. In his typical dialectical style, Merleau-Ponty first shows that "each sense has its world" (*Ibid.*, 230), meaning that the single sensory modality functions as a mode of communication with the world that cannot be fully substituted by or translated into other modalities. He then demonstrates how the various senses are embedded into a structural whole, and how any impairment or loss of sensory faculty implies a restructuration of the totality: "The blind person's world and the world of the normal person differ not merely in the quantity of the matter available to them, but moreover in the structure of the whole" (*Ibid.*, 233). From this, it follows that the senses must be able to inter-communicate, that they are distinct, yet not separate from each other. In other words, the relationships between them are again of the type already encountered between the multiplicity of symptoms and the entity of disease, and between various existential dimensions and existence as a whole: a totality whose internal differentiation is essential to it.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates the distinctness and interconnectedness of the different senses by discussing studies with congenitally blind persons who gained eyesight after surgery. He opposes interpretations that accept state-

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18 Compare for example Mauss 2011, 3, 44/45

ments of the patients that "they had not known what space was before they could see" as proof that spatial experience was grounded in sight. Rather, such statements must be acknowledged as confirmation that touch and sight, while both being spatial, articulate spatiality in specific ways. A spatial concept like the simultaneity of perceptual objects, for example, is not alien to touch, but originates in the tactile sphere in what finds itself at arms' length, and can be touched at the same time with different hands. By extra-polating from this origin, a blind person is able to form a concept of simul-taneity between objects that lie at greater distance from each other. In sight, however, this extended concept must not be constructed, but is immediately given in sensory experience. It is the astonishment over this immediate intuition, according to Merleau-Ponty, that the formerly blind express.

The difference between the various sensory modalities can again be described in terms of a changing dominant in the sense of Jakobson. For Merleau-Ponty, the senses themselves are poly-functional – each of them gives us access to the world as totality, all of them unfold experience in the dimensions of spatiality, temporality, objectivity and subjectivity, etc.[19] But the phenomenological dimensions shared by all senses are arranged in particular ways in the specific sense, as we have just seen for spatiality in sight and touch. By enabling us to speak of a relative structural dominance of one or several of the phenomenological dimensions (spatiality, temporality, etc.) in a particular sensory register, Jakobson's structuralist concepts allows us to distinguish between the different senses; at the same time they allow us to uphold their necessary integration into a bodily-existential totality. Put simply, the phenomenological dimensions are treated in analogy to Jakobson's language-functions: while one dimension, or a combination of dimensions is dominant in one sense (e.g. a certain kind of positional spatiality in sight), that domi-nance cannot be taken to mean that other dimensions (e.g. a more situational understanding of space, as is accentuated in hearing) are absent. Like the non-dominant functions in Jakobson's model of linguistic communication, the secondary phenomenological dimensions play subsidiary roles in the sensory communication between body-self and world. Of course, much descriptive and analytical work remains to be done to clearly identify the relevant pheno-menological dimensions of sensory experience. It is more than likely that lived experience cannot be reduced to "constituent elements" in the bold and elegant manner in which Jakobson did this for language. But an application

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19 For a congenial conception of sensory plurality, see Erwin Straus, 1963

of Jakobsonian concepts has, in my opinion, the potential to lead to a less reductive, hence phenomenologically more adequate portrayal of the structural processes that organize sensory experience. In this way, the relevance of Jakobson's structuralism goes beyond a clarification of certain aspects found in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* and extends to phenomenology in general.

As already alluded to in the previous paragraph, the concept of structural dominant is also relevant for the description of the relationship between the senses in the unity of the body. Merleau-Ponty leaves no doubt that the various modalities of sensory experience, what we commonly refer to as "seeing", "hearing", "touching", etc. do not exist autonomously from each other, at least not in lived experience in the "natural attitude":

> There is but a narrow margin available to sensory experience: either the sound and the color, through their own arrangement, sketch out an object – the ashtray, the violin – and this object speaks directly to all of the senses; or at the other extreme of experience, the sound and color are received in my body, and it becomes difficult to restrict my experience to a single sensory register: it spontaneously overflows toward all the others (*Ibid.*, 236).

Experience is primordially synaesthetic and communicates with the total thing; each sense is ultimately nothing but a particular way to articulate the same perceptual object. The senses intercommunicate in relation to an intersensory world, enabled by a synthesis that is always already achieved.

Yet, as we have seen, Merleau-Ponty regards the fact of differentiation as equally essential as the fact of synthesis: "the unity and the diversity of the senses are truths on the same level" (*Ibid.*, 230). This, however, raises the problem how concrete modes of natural experience are to be distinguished from each other. Some phenomenological anthropologists have indeed suggested that on the pre-objective level, sensory modalities, for example hearing and seeing "are virtually indistinguishable from each other: vision *is* a kind of hearing and vice versa" (Ingold 2011, 245). Using again the concept of structural dominant we can arrive at more precise distinctions between modes of lived experience. While the synaesthetic nature of experience is guaranteed through the conception of

the body as a multi-sensorial, i.e. poly-functional unity, a concrete experience, or mode of experiencing can be characterized through a careful description of the *dominant sensory register.*[20]

Philosophical and anthropological debates about the hierarchy of the different modalities in the human sensorium have often suffered from claims of an *absolute* sovereignty of the dominant sense. Merleau-Ponty's conception of an intertwining of the senses in a primordially synaesthetic experience rejects such claims, reducing absolute to relative dominance. The famous thesis of Western modernity as an age dominated by vision (see Levin 1993) can thus be qualified and revised. Taken by themselves, Merleau-Ponty's formulations of the problem in *Phenomenology of Perception* remain, however, too abstract and general as to allow for a satisfactory treatment of empirical realities like, for example, the preference for visual methods of representation in the sciences. In this respect, complementing Merleau-Ponty's with Jakobson's thought has considerable heuristic value. The same applies to cultural anthropology where in the field of "sensorial anthropology" far-reaching claims have been made recently regarding the varying organization of the sensorium in different cultures: "….There is nothing to prevent the ear or the nose from being any less tyrannical than the eye in some other cultural formation of the senses" (Howes 2003, XXII). Taken in an absolute sense, such statements are clearly untenable phenomenologically, if only because of the importance of human language in *all* cultures, which is indubitably grounded in a nexus of hearing and sight (see Jakobson 1971, 701). The power of any sense to achieve a "tyrannical" dominance is thus limited by the universal presence of human language, which emphasizes a specific combination of senses. But to reject the absoluteness of a claim is not to have solved the problem posed, in this case the cultural variability of sensory experience. From an anthropological perspective, the combination of Jakobson's structuralist thinking and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the body opens up interesting paths of exploration. For example, the question of dominance of one sensory mode can be qualified by that of the relation between the dominant and the "auxiliary" or "secondary" modes. Following Merleau-Ponty it is clear that all cultures must be synaesthetic on the pre-objective level; in a culture in which "sight" serves as the structural dominant, "hearing", "touching", "smelling" and "tasting" nevertheless possess cultural significance and contribute to the production of meaning. A careful appli-

20 For an effort in this direction in the field of ritual studies, see Leistle 2006

cation of the concept of structural dominant has the potential to raise the discussion to a higher level, even if we accept the everyday meaning of the term "sense".

5 | Conclusion – The Poeticity of Language

Usually, the structuralist study of language and the phenomenological investigation of existence are perceived as vastly different preoccupations. The former aims at understanding the relationships between empirical (linguistic) facts, the latter sees these facts as a means to move beyond the empirical into a transcendental realm, even if it is aware that it can never leave the empirical behind. This difference in orientation poses problems for any inquiry into the possibilities of conceptual exchange between structuralism and phenomenology. If this project is to be undertaken, Merleau-Ponty and Jakobson are extremely suitable representatives of their respective sides. In the preceding pages, I have concentrated on how certain themes of Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* can be read through the lens of Jakobson's structuralism, in particular his concepts of poly-functionality and structural dominant. I have argued that this reading has the potential to clarify some of Merleau-Ponty's thoughts, making them more applicable to empirical questions, as they are posed in disciplines like cultural anthropology. I would like to end this essay by showing how Jakobson and Merleau-Ponty agree regarding the essentially poetic quality of language.

I have mentioned previously that throughout his career Jakobson was interested in questions of art and poetics. More than just pursuing an interest, he regarded aesthetic problems as central to the study of language in general. What is the reason for this persistence, and how can it be justified against charges of arbitrariness? What makes the poetic function special among the language functions? As an answer to these questions, Jakobson has pointed towards the reflexivity of poetic language and its capacity to make the connection between sign and object, as well as their dichotomy, accessible to consciousness. In the essay "What is Poetry?", he asks the consequential question of why such consciousness is necessary:

> Because besides the direct awareness of the identity between sign and object (*A* is *A1*), there is a necessity for the direct awareness of the inadequacy of that identity (*A* is not *A1*). The reason this antinomy is

essential is that without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship between concept and sign becomes automatized. Activity comes to halt, and the awareness of reality dies out. (Jakobson 1981, 750)

The reflexivity of poetic function thus allows language-users to grasp the process of signification itself, thereby reaffirming language's crucial faculty to create new meanings. While this is an important point, as an explanation for the privileged role of the poetic function it is also somewhat tautological. Poetic function is important because it does what poetic function does. At this point, I feel that Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language can complement Jakobson in meaningful ways. In the famous language-chapter of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty (2012, 202/203) introduces the distinction between *speaking speech* and *spoken speech* to characterize the relationship between expressive act and linguistic structure. In speaking speech, the language system reconfigures itself following an "unknown law", producing a new and unanticipated expression that could not be predicted by previous states of the system. But once performed, speaking speech becomes part of the universe of significations, "constitutes a linguistic and cultural world" (203); in other words, speaking speech becomes spoken speech, and can be repeated as an already available signification:

From these acquisitions, other authentic acts of expression – those of the writer, the artist, and the philosopher – become possible. This ever-recreated opening in the fullness of being is what conditions the first speech of the child and the speech of the writer, the construction of the word and the construction of concepts. Such is the function revealed through language, which reiterates itself, depends upon itself, or that like a wave gathers itself together and steadies itself in order to once again throw itself beyond itself (Ibid., 203).

In the concrete life-world, language is always already constituted; the creative speech act ("speaking speech") and the language system ("spoken speech") are thus dialectically interwoven. The creation of new meaning is only possible through taking up already existing significations, including the structural relationships between them. But the very existence of these significations and structures depends on the ever-present possibility of original,

creative speech. Even in its structural aspects, language must, therefore, be conceived as essentially open to transformation, a "wave that gathers itself together and steadies itself in order to once again throw itself beyond itself", as Merleau-Ponty puts it evocatively. The speaking subject is not in control of this movement of transcendence in language. Rather, it appears as the location in which the process of taking up and rearranging structures happens. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty conceives of the linguistic subject as the capacity to engage in this process, just as he regards the body-subject as fundamentally synonymous with the perceptual faculties to bring the world of perception to appearance.

A parallel understanding of language and of the role of the linguistic subject underlies Jakobson's conception of the poetic function: in the poetic register, language transcends itself, it opens itself to its own transformation, a process that is inconceivable through a static understanding of structure. Seen from a poetic perspective, language structure presents itself as inherently dynamic, as movement of transcendence; poetic function is the means of language to "gather itself in order to throw itself beyond itself". In it, language becomes reflective, but this reflection is not grounded in the conscious activity of a reflecting subject. Rather, it is language structure itself, through an alteration of its basic operations of selection and combination that enables speaking subjects to get a sense of the process in which they are simultaneously immersed.[21] Only in language's poetic dimension do we catch a glimpse at the constitutive operations and compositional principles of language. Only here are we able to gain a cognitive hold of the very processes that structure our speaking and thinking, however partial and fleeting that hold may be. Insofar as we are poets even in our everyday speaking and writing, we can change language, can connect with the source of our thinking, create new meaning. This is only possible when the existence and centrality of the poetic function is acknowledged. In other words, language wouldn't be language if it wasn't originally poetic.

Merleau-Ponty's conception of language in *Phenomenology of Perception* echoes Jakobson's emphasis on poeticity. Moreover, by inserting language

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21 The limits of the subject's ability to control the poetic process are addressed in "Subliminal Verbal Patterning in Poetry" (Jakobson 1971, 136-147). The analysis of unconscious structuration processes present in the poetry of Xlebnikov provides a good example of what Holenstein called Jakobson's "extended notion of subjectivity", see above.

into the existential context of bodily gesture and expression, Merleau-Ponty shows that human experience in general, verbal and non-verbal, reflective and pre-reflective is essentially poetic. In this, he provides an important complement to Jakobson, who, although sometimes concerned with problems of general semiotics, approached his topic from the vantage point of verbal language. His philosophical assumptions remained mostly implicit in his theoretical and empirical research practice. Although Holenstein has designated Jakobson's philosophical outlook as Husserlian, rather than existentialist, this article has shown that Jakobson's structuralism and particular his poetics are compatible with basic themes of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. A reading of Merleau-Ponty in Jakobsonian terms, and a reading of Jakobson in Merleau-Pontian terms seems not only possible, but fertile and worthy of further exploration.

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