Merleau-Ponty against the project of a universal grammar: logic and language

Merleau-Ponty contra el proyecto de una gramática universal: lógica y lenguaje

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Abstract: Throughout a variety of texts, Merleau-Ponty criticized the Husserlian project which he alternatively called a "universal grammar" and an "eidetics of language", and to which he associated a series of consequences: the claim that universal grammar entails (I) the prior knowability of universal "forms" with respect to natural languages; (II) the univocity with which words in natural languages would be related to their meanings, and the transparency which this univocal relation would present to consciousness; (III) the secondariness of language with respect to thought, and (IV) universal intertranslatability. The French author rejects these consequences and therefore questions the plausibility of the universalistic project in question. However, it is not clear that these alleged consequences are actually entailed by the proposal Merleau-Ponty is discussing, or that, if obtained, they take the specific form necessary for the criticism to succeed. We will try to show that such a criticism ultimately fails.
Merleau-Ponty; Universal Grammar; Language; Logic.

Keywords: Merleau-Ponty, Universal Grammar, Language, Logic.

Resumen: A lo largo de una serie de textos, Merleau-Ponty criticó el proyecto husserliano que alternativamente denominó "gramática universal" y "eidética del lenguaje", y al cual asoció una serie de consecuencias: la tesis de que la gramática universal implica *(I)* la *previa cognoscibilidad* de las "formas" universales con respecto a los lenguajes naturales; *(II)* la *univocidad* con la que las palabras en los lenguajes naturales se vincularían con sus significados, y la *transparencia* con que esta relación unívoca se presentaría ante la conciencia, *(III)* la *secundariedad* del lenguaje con respecto al pensamiento y *(IV)* la intertraducibilidad universal. El autor francés rechaza estas consecuencias y por tanto cuestiona la plausibilidad del proyecto universalista en cuestión. sin embargo, no es claro que estas presuntas consecuencias estén realmente implicadas por la propuesta que Merleau-Ponty está discutiendo ni que, de obtenerse, tengan la forma específica necesaria para que la crítica tenga éxito. Trataremos de mostrar que tal crítica en última instancia falla.

Palabras clave: Merleau-Ponty, gramática universal, lenguaje, lógica.

1. Outline

Our exposition will proceed as follows:

- In §2, we will present Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the project of a "universal grammar" or an "eidetic of language" (terms which, following the author, we will not distinguish) by quoting four texts in which it appears and dissecting in it four different alleged consequences which Merleau-Ponty identifies and attacks.

- In §3, we will discuss the first of these four alleged consequences, *prior knowability*. Following Edie, we will note that there is in principle no reason why the project of identifying certain universal traits of languages should be committed to the claim of prior knowability. However, *contra* Edie, we will also point out that there is no room for a facile conciliation between such a project and Merleau-Ponty's orientation, given the existence of other theoretical commitments which place the French author against it.

- In §§4 and 5, we will discuss how the alleged consequences of *univocity and transparency* and of *secondariness* are treated in some of the specialized literature. We will point out that, although this literature makes philologically justified claims about how Merleau-Ponty identifies these alleged consequences, it fails to shed light on why, exactly, a "universalistic" project concerning natural languages would actually entail them.

- In §6, we will present a possible justification for the introduction of consequence (II): as we will argue, Merleau-Ponty's intention, despite some passages which obscure it, is not to claim that, according to the project of a universal grammar, natural languages *are* systems in which words are univocally connected to their meanings, but simply that, from the point of view of such a project, natural languages can be (methodologically) viewed *as* simply instantiations of the meanings which the project analyzes.

- Similarly, in §7, we will argue that the justification for associating universal grammar with consequence (III) is that natural languages are, from the point of view of that project, viewed *as* secondary *with respect to a theoretical "model"* which lists a series of invariants. In other words, Merleau-Ponty's point seems to be that, in the perspective of a universal grammar, no use of languages can ever *add* any meaning to those which are already present, and introduced by definition, in the corresponding "model".

- In §8, we will introduce consequence (IV), *perfect translatability*. We will see that, among the different "elements" which Merleau-Ponty lists in *Theprose of the world* to attack the plausibility of this consequence, not all are appropriate candidates, insofar as the first

one of them is presented by Merleau-Ponty himself, quite ironically, as a "form of signification" amenable to translation.

- More seriously, we will try to show, in §9, that even the *prima facie* appropriate candidates for untranslatability ("elements" such as the infinitive, the aspect or the "voice" of the verb), which Merleau-Ponty takes up from Vendryès, are simply *not the right kind* of (alleged) "invariances" between languages—that, in other words, Merleau-Ponty is simply imposing a *change of topic* in the discussion. From this point of view, we will question that Merleau-Ponty succeeds in attacking consequence (IV), and, even more crucially, consequence (III). The kinds of words whose untranslatability, or changes in meanings, Merleau-Ponty *should* be able to show are not those on which he actually focuses.

- We will briefly recap our conclusions in §10.

2. The criticism: four sources, four consequences attributed to "universal grammar"

In "The philosopher and sociology", a text originally published as an article in 1951, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> At the outset, [Husserl] asserts philosophy's rights in terms which seem to abolish those of actual knowledge. Speaking of that eminently social relation, language, he states as a principle that we could not possibly understand the functioning of our own language [...] unless we had first constituted a schema of the "ideal form" of language and of the modes of expression which must in strict necessity pertain to it if it is to be language. Only then will we be able to understand how German, Latin, Chinese participate (each in its own way) in this universal structure of essential meanings, and to define each of these languages as a mixture in original proportions of universal "forms of signification"-a "confused" and incomplete realization of the "general and rational grammar". (Merleau-Ponty, 1951, p. 21, 1978b, p. 102).

The "schema" in question, then, should be knowable prior to any particular natural language. But this kind of proposal, according to Merleau-Ponty, would have revealed untenable for Husserl himself—which is why in the later work by the founder of phenomenology we allegedly

> no longer find the idea of a philosopher-subject, master of all that is possible, who must first put his own language at a distance in order to find the ideal forms of a universal language this side of all actuality. Philosophy's first task in respect to language now appears to be to reveal to us anew our inherence in a certain system of speech of which we make fully efficacious use precisely because it is present to us just as immediately as our body. Philosophy of language is no longer contrasted to empirical linguistics as an attempt at total objectification of language to a science which is always threatened by the preconceptions of the native language. On the contrary, it has become the

rediscovery of the subject in the act of speaking [...]. (Merleau-Ponty, 1978b, p. 104)

The topic of prior knowability also appears in Merleau-Ponty's course on "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man". In the phrasing of this course,

> The eidetic of language should [...] be established at the very beginning. The empirical study of language should come afterward, directing itself to the relevant facts, clarifying them, and then reconstructing them in the light of the essences already determined. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 79)

Against this initial orientation, according to Merleau-Ponty, Husserl himself would allegedly have reversed his method. In characterizing the later texts by the founder of phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty writes:

> There is no longer any question of starting with a universal language which would furnish the invariable plan of any possible mode of speech, and of then proceeding to the analysis of particular languages. It is exactly the reverse. The language which is present, actual, and effective becomes the model for understanding other possible modes of speech. It is in our experience of the speaking subject that we must find the germ of universality which will enable us to understand other languages. (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 84)

In "On the phenomenology of language", originally presented as a conference also in 1951, Merleau-Ponty critically reconstructs Husserl's passage from the fourth of the *Logical Investigations* which asks about the way different languages express a variety of linguistic meanings (Husserl, 1913, p. 339). According to the French phenomenologist, when "Husserl sets forth the concept of an eidetic of language and a universal grammar which would establish the forms of signification indispensable to every language if it is to be a language, and which would allow us to think with complete clarity about empirical languages as 'confused' realizations of the 'essential' language", he is assuming

> that language is one of the objects supremely constituted by consciousness, and that actual languages are very special cases of a possible language which consciousness holds the key to—that they are systems of signs linked to their meaning by univocal relationships which, in their structure as in their function, are susceptible to a total explication. Posited in this way as an object before thought, language could not possibly play any other role with respect to thought than that of an accompaniment, substitute, memorandum, or secondary means of communication. (Merleau-Ponty, 1978a, p. 84)

We see then that, according to this reconstruction, the project of "universal grammar" would entail that languages are univocally linked to their meanings, and in a way susceptible of transparent elucidation

by our consciousness. Furthermore, language in general would be characterized by a *secondariness* in respect to thought.

Finally, in *The prose of the world*, Merleau-Ponty writes that there are

> two ways, one Platonic and the other nominalist, of talking about a language without words —or at least in such a way that the significations of the words used, once redefined, never exceed what one invests in them and expects from them. The first is Husserl's "eidetic of language" or "pure grammar," which he outlined in his early writings; the other is a logic concerned only with the formal properties of significations and their rules of transformation. (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, pp. 15–16, 1969/1978, p. 24)

This project, however, was, according to the French author, impossible to perform in Husserl's terms: "Husserl forgot only one thing—that to achieve a universal grammar it is not enough to leave Latin grammar, and that the list of the possible forms of signification which he gives bears the mark of the language which he himself spoke"(Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 26). The problem, Merleau-Ponty claims, is that Husserl therefore overestimates the translatability between languages:

> what are we to say, when the science of language […] teaches us that it does not admit the categories of our language, and furthermore that they are a retrospective and inessential expression of our own power of speech? There is no grammatical analysis that can discover elements common to all languages. Neither does each language necessarily contain the modes of expression found in others. In Peul the negative is signified by intonation; the dual in ancient Greek is confused with the plural in French; the aspect in Russian has no equivalent in French; and the form in Hebrew that is called the future is used to mark the narrative past, while the preterite form can be used for the future tense; Indo-European had no passive or infinitive; modern Greek and Bulgarian have lost their infinitives—but still one cannot reduce to a system the modes of expression of even one language. (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, pp. 27–28. Emphasis modified)

Let us take stock. On the basis of these texts, we know that Merleau-Ponty associates to the project of a "universal grammar" a series of consequences, each of which he will deny. Therefore, Merleau-Ponty's criticism may be reconstructed, in its simplest form, as a series of *modus tollens* arguments by means of which he rejects the project in question by denying, in each case, one of the following consequences:

I) *(Prior knowability)* Natural languages are somehow known only *after* we know the outline of a "universal" language—i.e., knowledge of the universal structures is not the result of knowledge of particular languages, but vice versa.

II) *(Univocity and transparency)* Meanings are connected to words in an univocal, non-ambiguous way, and this connection between

meanings and words is susceptible of a transparent discovery by our consciousness.

III) *(Secondariness)* Language is only a "secondary medium of communication" with respect to thought, i.e., our thought "possesses", beforehand, all the meaning which we will be able to find in language.

IV) *(Perfect translatability)* Insofar as the "universal grammar" focuses on such "forms of signification" as *the* negative or *the* existential proposition, which would receive different instantiations in different natural languages, these "forms of signification" remain identical in themselves and allow for exact translations between different languages.

Now, it is *far* from obvious why all these traits are supposed to ensue as necessary consequences of the proposal of a universal grammar—and therefore why, by means of attacking *them*, Merleau-Ponty would be justified in questioning the project of such a grammar. Let us try to approach them in turns, and with a little help from the secondary literature.

3. Consequence (I): on the alleged prior knowability involved in the project of a universal grammar

In spite of the fact that Merleau-Ponty's criticism of the project of a "universal grammar" plays such a central role in his philosophy of language, a *discussion* of the reasons for this opposition is surprisingly absent in most of the literature concerning this area of the work of the French philosopher. In other words, interpreters have quite often taken Merleau-Ponty's claims at face value, without problematizing the soundness of his arguments. A laudable exception to this norm, however, is the series of texts which James Edie devoted to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of language, and which certainly problematize some of the traits which it attributes to the notion of a universal grammar (J. Edie, 1970a, 1970b, 1976, 1987). Let us follow Edie in his analysis of the first of the traits of our own reconstruction: prior knowability.

From this point of view, Merleau-Ponty insisted on the impossibility of establishing certain invariants in language because he focused on the different roles which *experience,* in his reading, would play in the project of a "universal grammar" and in his own, alternative project of attaining a "lateral universal". According to Merleau-Ponty, as we have already seen, the attempt to develop a "universal grammar" would not only be characterized by, precisely, the general claim to uncover certain "forms of signification" which would remain identical through their instantiations in different natural languages, but also, by necessity, by a methodological

orientation according to which the general model of those forms would be knowable *before* natural languages.

Now, *if* the opposition between the project of a universal grammar and Merleau-Ponty's own proposal finally boiled down to this methodological opposition, then we could in all justice criticize the French author for overstating his criticisms: at the end of the day, nothing would prevent a scientific, empirically-oriented approach to language, such as Chomsky's universal grammar, from *concluding* that certain linguistic invariants exist. There is simply no reason to insist that the possibility of such universality in language is to be discarded along with the bet for prior knowability. In this vein, Edie has, in principle reasonably, pointed out that when Merleau-Ponty states that "universality" can only be attained on the basis of an analysis of empirical languages, "he is not saying anything necessarily incompatible with the ideal of Husserl or the claims of transformational grammar"(J. Edie, 1970a, p. 343), which insists on the existence of universal patterns. And this is because of the plain fact that, in order to

> discover the necessary structures of language, on whatever level, it is unnecessary to attempt to transcend experience toward some supposed and hypothetical source. Since these structures can be thematized only after the fact, it is essential to their thematization that there be languages and that there be speaking. In the last analysis the necessary conditions of speaking are as contingent as the fact of speaking itself, since they are the structures of historical speech. Let us grant, by hypothesis, that there are the universal structures of language on the various levels claimed by Chomsky. But there are still the natural languages themselves which employ and exemplify these structures in different ways, and it is possible that no one language exemplifies them all in their total complexity and completeness. The "concept" of language cannot, then, be thematized except through the investigation of the historical, factical expressions in which it is exemplified. Chomsky's approach to language has this in common with phenomenology —that it proceeds on the basis of an empirical, factual situation (the reality of language) to a description of the ideal and necessary conditions for the understanding of this situation. (J. Edie, 1970a, p. 342)

So, to sum up: reducing, as Edie does, Merleau-Ponty's opposition to the project of "universal grammar" to the status of a methodological, instead of a substantive, point amounts to presenting the French philosopher as guilty of an overstatement. But, at the same time, such an interpretive strategy amounts, quite ironically, to claiming that the distance between the Merleau-Pontyan approach and that of universalist projects such as (to take Edie's example) Chomskyan linguistics is not so great after all—which, from a point of view such as Edie's, amounts to *embellishing* the proposal of the French author, which in this vein becomes compatible with more recent results in the scientific study of human language. This reading,

however, both credits Merleau-Ponty with too much and too little: it views it as compatible with Chomskyan linguistics, at the cost of also viewing its anti-universalistic remarks merely as an exaggeration—not as supported by some other theoretical commitments made by Merleau-Ponty. Nevertheless, we still have to make sense of traits (II), (III) and (IV): if all what the French phenomenologist questions was the claim of prior knowability, we would still need to know what to make of what appear to be other bases for his rejection of a universal grammar. So let us continue our research.

4. Consequence (II): about univocity and transparency

Already in 1966, Philip Lewis commented on Merleau-Ponty's distinction between "the later writings of Husserl" and "the early idea of a fixed, universal language, *susceptible to explicit representation of its total structure*" (Lewis, 1966, p. 38). Whereas it is true that Merleau-Ponty opposes these allegedly different orientations in Husserl's career, no attempt is made here to explain why "the early idea of a *universal* language" would involve that of such an "explicit representation". Why could Husserl not claim *both* that languages share certain universal traits *and* that their content is not susceptible of such a representation? How is the first problem connected to the second?

Yahata, in turn, points out that, within such a universalistic project, "the word only designates a meaning previously fixed on an object, and their relationship is always 'univocal'" (Yahata, 2012, p. 234). The following step of the criticism consists in pointing out that such an attribution of "univocity" is incompatible with the recognition of the phenomenon of "excess" which, according to Merleau-Ponty, would be characteristic of speech. Now again, what is not clear in this reconstruction is *what exactly* links the idea of a "universal grammar" with the claim that the relationship between word and meaning is "univocal". Positing a universal grammar amounts, at least *prima facie*, only to claiming that all natural languages will share a certain range of invariants—which is not the same as claiming that there will exist no ambiguity, no equivocality, in the way in which words in those languages relate to their corresponding meanings. Lacking an *argument* which connects the problem of universality and the problem of univocity, the two remain different—and there seems to be no reason to take Merleau-Ponty's association between them at face value.

The problem appears in a rather disquieting form, in fact, when we face passages like the following, from "On the phenomenology of language", which explores the consequences that would ensue, for the

project of a universal grammar, from the fact that "synchrony is only a cross-section of diachrony":

> the system realized in it never exists wholly in act but always involves latent or incubating changes. It is never composed of absolutely univocal meanings which can be made completely explicit beneath the gaze of a transparent constituting consciousness. It will be a question not of a system of forms of signification clearly articulated in terms of one another—not of a structure of linguistic ideas built according to a strict plan—but of a cohesive whole of convergent linguistic gestures, each of which will be defined less by a signification than by a use value (Merleau-Ponty, 1978a, p. 87. Italics mine).

It is certainly not clear *why* the project of a universal grammar should entail the idea that "the system realized" in a certain moment of the diachronic development of language should be "composed of absolutely univocal meanings", and constitute "a structure of linguistic ideas built according to a strict plan". Why could Husserl not say that *of course* natural languages are affected by equivoques, but that his project is to identify *in spite* of that the realization of a series of common "forms of signification"? We still have no clear answer for this question.

5. Consequence (III): on secondariness

A similar problem emerges when Landes points out that Merleau-Ponty distinguishes "two Husserlian accounts of language", "the first taking language as an external accompaniment of thought", and which would correspond to the proposal of an "eidetics of language and a universal grammar", "and a later one focused on language as an 'original way of intending certain objects'" (Landes, 2013, p. 133). There is no doubt that the French phenomenologist *does* claim, as we saw in §1, that in the context of the project of a universal grammar "language could not possibly play any other role in respect to thought than that of an accompaniment, substitute, memorandum, or secondary means of communication" (Merleau-Ponty, 1978a, p. 84). But, again, *why* would this be the case? And, equally importantly: what exactly do we have in mind when we speak about a "secondary means of communication"?

Merleau-Ponty had already argued, in *Phenomenology of perception*, against viewing language "as an external accompaniment of thought"—but, as we will soon see, appealing to *this* kind of secondariness in order to understand the polemic against universal grammar will turn out to be a red herring. According to the book from 1945, if we saw language in this light,

we could not understand why thought tends towards expression as towards its completion, why the most familiar thing appears indeterminate as long as we have not recalled its name, why the thinking subject himself is in a kind of ignorance of his thoughts so long as he has not formulated them for himself, or even spoken and written them. (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 206)

In fact, interpreting the "secondariness" which is at stake in the context of criticism of "universal grammar" as the same kind of "secondariness" to which Merleau-Ponty referred in this passage of *Phenomenology of perception* seems to have the advantage of placing us in a well-known ground. Indeed, the thesis that language is consummatory with respect to thought, and not only an external accompaniment, is commonly attributed to Merleau-Ponty—by those who *endorse* such a claim, on the basis of an argument based on personal experience (Kwant, 1963, p. 51; Lewis, 1966, pp. 23, 27), or at least the experience of "writers and artists" (Kee, 2018, p. 417); those who *reject* the claim, on the basis of its incompatibility to attributing thought to animals and infants (Priest, 1998, p. 169) and those who simply take note of the fact that, "since 1945", Merleau-Ponty claims that "thought is not autonomous" with respect to language (Roux, 2016, p. 281); that, for the author, "conscious thought occurs through the medium of language" (Haysom, 2009, p. 651), signs are not a mere "notation" of thought (Foultier, 2013, p. 129), "the supposed silence of inner life is derivative upon speech" (Landes, 2013, p. 91), and "the meaning is in a certain way immanent to the expression itself, it is not given to it from the outside, as something that has already been constituted prior to expression" (Escribano, 2000, p. 177). But again: if the relevant model of "secondariness" were the one at stake here, *why*, exactly, should the project of "an eidetic of language and a universal grammar" entail that language is a "secondary means of communication" with respect to thought—that is, that language is limited to the task of "translating" *pre-linguistic thought*? In fact, what does the idea of a universal grammar even *have to do* with the question whether there is such a thing as a ("complete", "entirely determined") pre-linguistic thought? The opposition between language as the consummation of thought and language as its "external accompaniment" is quite different from the opposition *between natural languages as presenting irreducible differences with each other and natural languages as the instantiation of a universal grammar.* We still do not know why the two oppositions would be related, and how, as a consequence, showing that language is no "external accompaniment" of thought somehow undercuts the project of a universal grammar.

6. A possible justification for the introduction of trait (II)...

Now, it appears that a charitable reading will be able to justify the introduction of these new traits with a suitable argument—although, at the same time, the argument will show why Merleau-Ponty's proposal ultimately fails. The reason why the project of a universal grammar is, in his reconstruction, associated to the traits of secondariness, univocity, and transparency is not that, *in itself,* the claim that there exist invariants throughout human languages somehow entails all that. The reason seems to be, instead, that *the motivation* for positing those invariants is the attempt to regard languages *in a specific light,* to view them *from the perspective of* their instantiation of certain universal "forms of signification". The point is not really that, say, the words in every natural language must, in normal conditions, "transparently" "show" their meanings; the point seems to be, instead, that when we approach words in natural languages from the point of view Merleau-Ponty is describing, *all we want to find in them,* and easily end up finding, are precisely the meanings we have stipulated.

To take an example: a universal grammar, according to Husserl, is interested in *the* negative, and it will thus find in a given sentence the way in which it instantiates the kind of meaning which is represented in logic with the symbol "~" and thoroughly analyzed by the corresponding truth-table and the rules for the introduction and elimination of this connective. This seems to be what Merleau-Ponty has in mind when he makes explicit that what is at stake in these projects is the attempt to "*create* a system of precise significations which would translate everything in a language that is clear and thus *constitute a model* to which language can add only error and confusion" (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 16, 1969/1978, p. 24. Italics mine). In other words, Merleau-Ponty is *not* claiming here that, according to some (very naïve!) proponents of a universal grammar, languages *really are* systems of signs each transparently and univocally linked to its meaning, and that, in fact, the empirical evidence concerning languages show that they are far more chaotic than that. His point is, instead, that the project of a universal grammar consists in *viewing* languages *as* instantiations of certain "forms of signification" (*the* negative, *the* existential proposition), that these "forms" can be analyzed *in themselves* (when they are part of "a model") in a "transparent" way, *even if,* when they are instantiated in natural languages, appear in a more "opaque" manner. In a way, the project would consist in claiming *precisely* that—claiming that *of course* natural languages *are not identical* to the "model", but what

distinguishes them from this "model" is "only error and confusion", and not some kind of positive contribution.

7. …and of consequence (III)

In a similar vein, it appears that we can make sense of the trait of "secondariness". Merleau-Ponty's point, seen in this light, is not that according to the project of a universal grammar language is "secondary" *with respect to a pre-linguistic thought*; in spite of the superficial resemblances with *Phenomenology of perception*, his adversary when he discusses the project of a universal grammar is not the theory that thought, in general, does not owe anything to language, and that language, as a consequence, is only a "vehicle" which makes available to others what is already a clear thought of an individual, silent subject. What is at stake now is, instead, whether or not all language can be viewed, without loss, as "secondary" *with respect to the "model"*—that is, whether or not there are uses of language which can *incorporate new meanings* to the already available corpus, to "instituted language". It is in terms of *this* kind of secondariness (secondariness-with-respect-to-a-model) that the continuation of Merleau-Ponty's passage from *The prose of the world* makes sense:

> But no one dreams any more of a logic of invention, and even those who think it is possible to express, by means of an arbitrary algorithm, every well-formed proposition do not believe that this purified language would exhaust everyday language any more than it could be absorbed by everyday language. For how should we attribute to non-sense everything in everyday language which goes beyond the definitions of the algorithm or of a "pure grammar," when it is precisely in this alleged chaos that new relations will be found which make it both necessary and possible to introduce new symbols? (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 16, 1969/1978, pp. 24–25. Italics mine)

The situation now is: *if*, Merleau-Ponty says, we take all the meaning which is expressed in real uses of words to be *already present* in the "model" we have made for them—in particular, already present because it was present in our *definitions*, as the passage clarifies—, then we will need to claim that these words cannot acquire new *meaning*; that is, that anything *new* they incorporate will not be meaning: the meaning of the symbols can only be that which we have introduced by definition, and anything which "goes beyond" such definitions must be "non-sense". But *this*, Merleau-Ponty goes on, is an untenable consequence: even the most rigorous form of human thinking, mathematical thinking, shows us that new *meanings* appear when we put our linguistic terms to *work*. When we introduce, by definition, a notion such as that of "integer number" or that of "triangle", there is no explicit reference to the new relations which the

mathematical investigation will subsequently discover; no reference to the fact that—to take Merleau-Ponty's favorite example—for a series of . integer numbers, the sum of the members of the series will be equal to $(n/2).(n + 1)$; the fact that integer numbers have this characteristic can at most be *incorporated* to our definition of what those numbers are, but was certainly not there *ab initio*. We could only escape from this uncomfortable situation if we could avail of a "logic of invention", that is, some kind of guidelines which anticipate beforehand what the rational research will find—but this, insists Merleau-Ponty, we do not have. Therefore, meaning cannot be reduced to what is initially instituted by means of definition, and thus the proposal for some kind of "model" which exhausts the meanings of a given language is untenable.

So far, our attempt to justify the introduction of traits (II) and (III) as consequences of the proposal of a "universal grammar"—an attempt which, at the same time, has shed some light on why, according to Merleau-Ponty, those consequences should be rejected and therefore the proposal which entails them should be rejected as well. Having interpreted Merleau-Ponty in this way, we believe that his strategy is certainly misguided, but the reasons why it is are connected to a discussion of consequence (IV), perfect translatability, so let us introduce it before returning to a critical assessment.

8. Consequence (IV): perfect translatability

At this point, it should be clear why Merleau-Ponty believes that, according to the project of a universal grammar, languages should be perfectly intertranslatable—and why it counts *as an objection*, as we saw in the quote from *The prose of the world* in §1, to show that some "elements" present in some languages are not present in others. Languages should, in this project, present this trait because what counts as meaningful in each one of them should be what they *instantiate* from a universal grammar—and therefore what they *share* with each other. If, on the contrary, we find meaningful "elements" in some languages which are simply not present in others, then the grammar in question was not "universal" after all. Bearing this in mind, let us return to our passage from *The prose of the world*.

Let us begin by Merleau-Ponty's remark that "In Peul the negative is signified by intonation". Now, this sentence is just baffling: given that Husserl had asked precisely how *the* negative is expressed in different languages, thus clearly acknowledging that the same "form of signification" can correspond to *different* linguistic resources, it is not easy to understand how pointing out that "the negative is signified by intonation" in a particular language possibly counts as an argument *against* Husserl's proposal. If we associate *the* negative ("*la*

négation", in the French translation of Husserl) with a certain intonation, this only means that *the same* "form of signification" which is expressed in English with "not", in French with "ne... pas", in Spanish with "no" and so on, is conveyed in Peul "by intonation"— *simply another linguistic resource for the same meaning*. This is *precisely* the kind of situation which a proposal such as Husserl's would make us expect. So, in order to identify something which can actually function as a *criticism* of that proposal, we need to focus on something closer to some evidence of *untranslatability* between languages.

And indeed, the text does offer that kind of evidence: as we have seen, along with the astounding sentence about Peul, Merleau-Ponty lists, following Vendryès (Vendryes, 1921. Merleau-Ponty refers to pages 106-134, i.e., the pages about 'Les catégories gramaticales' (tense, number, gender, 'voice', etc.)), a series of linguistic resources which vary from language to language. In this vein, then, "elements" such as the aspect or the infinitive *cannot* be said to reappear in different languages, only varying, as in the case of negation, in the way they are expressed—there is simply *no* such a thing as an infinitive in modern Greek and in Bulgarian, and therefore *no* resource in those languages to translate "the" infinitive which we find in, say, French or English. So the claim of perfect translatability seems to be false.

9. Is Merleau-Ponty looking *at the right kind* of (alleged) invariances?

However, the problem at this point is whether phenomena such as the infinitive or the aspect are *the right kind* of linguistic invariants. Indeed, it is quite shocking to see how, starting from Husserl's enumeration, Merleau-Ponty simply seems to *change the topic*. Husserl certainly did *not* refer to these kinds of linguistic phenomena (except from the case of negation, about which we have already seen that Merleau-Ponty's remarks certainly do not *contradict* his proposal), his list included *others*, and none the less Merleau-Ponty shifts our attention to problems such as how different languages express time, "voice", aspect, and so on. Therefore, in order to tackle the question "Are there linguistic invariants, as Husserl claimed in his *Logical Investigations*?", it looks like we need to tackle, first, the question "Which *specific* alleged invariants should we look for in language?". And, indeed, Merleau-Ponty does little to justify that *his* list is relevant—in particular, more than Husserl's.

Up to this point, what we have found in Merleau-Ponty's attempt to refute the Husserlian positing of a universal grammar from the point of view of the problem of intertranslatability is:

- a reference to *negation* which simply does not contradict the universalist Husserlian project, but only shows that a "form of signification" can be expressed by means of a variety of resources (in the case mentioned by Merleau-Ponty, *intonation*);

- a reference to other linguistic phenomena (such as the aspect or the infinitive of verbs) which highlights the fact that some languages simply lack resources to express what other languages *can* express—but which lists phenomena of no obvious relevance for Husserl's purposes.

But the situation is even worse. It is not simply that the phenomena listed by Merleau-Ponty following Vendryès are of no *obvious* importance. If we return to the passage we quoted in §1, we will recall what *Merleau-Ponty himself* defined as the purpose of logic, and the way in which he assimilated logic and "universal grammar": according to that passage, logic was "concerned only with *the formal properties of significations and their rules of transformation*" (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, pp. 15–16, 1969/1978, p. 24). But acknowledging this amounts to admitting that, from a logical point of view (and probably from the point of view of at least part of the interests of a "universal grammar") *all* what matters is a series of, yes, "*formal* properties" which are sufficient to obtain certain "rules of transformation". In *propositional* logic, all we need to show how we can legitimately transform certain propositions into others is to uncover their formal structure in terms of atomic propositions and truth-functional connectives (negation, conjunction, disjunction, material conditional). Other, non-truth-functional, aspects of meaning, are simply deemed irrelevant. In predicate, or quantificational, logic, what we add is only the distinction between universal predicates and constants referring to individuals, along with quantifiers for existence and universality. If we move to the realm of modal logic, to account for Husserl's reference to expressions of possibility, we add operators to express the notions of "possible" and "necessary". For Merleau-Ponty to show that languages are not intertranslatable *in the relevant sense*, he should have focused on *these* kinds of "elements", instead of diverting our attention to a series of irrelevant particularities of natural languages.

Furthermore, we know today, thanks to the publication of the notes for Merleau-Ponty's course on *Le problème de la parole*, that it is doubtful whether he correctly understood the notion of "logical categories", and thus whether he had solid grounds to suspect that they are not independent from the *different, non-universal,* grammatical categories which pertain to different groups of languages (e.g., Indo-European). Near the beginning of his notes, Merleau-Ponty questions himself about the possibility of becoming conscious "of the facticity of our own language (*langue*)" (Merleau-Ponty, 2020,

p. 44)—that is, the possibility of overcoming our "naïve linguistic consciousness", our condition of "ignoring language" in a form of "egocentrism" similar to that of the child who ignores herself as a conscious subject, thus confusing her lived experience with being itself. Now, when Merleau-Ponty asks how this overcoming is possible, he immediately adds:

> Is it by simple reflection, by returning to my thought below my language? But my thought is so attached to my language that it retains grammatical categories under the name of logical categories, and the very desire to pass from my language to a more general logic of which it would be a particular case still manifests the preponderance of my language. (Merleau-Ponty, 2020, pp. 44–45. Italics added)

The passage is rather clear: our language determines our thought in such a way that even our allegedly *logical* categories are, in fact, (non-universal) *grammatical* categories in disguise. And these remarks are not isolated: when, some pages below, Merleau-Ponty wants to dispel the appearance of skeptical relativism which might be associated to "this idea of the inherence of our logical categories in our language" (Merleau-Ponty, 2020, p. 48), he takes pains to deny this specific consequence, but makes it clear that the "inherence" in question actually holds. The fact that our thinking is conditioned by our language does not operate, according to Merleau-Ponty, as an insurmountable barrier which prevents us from accessing truth. His point "is not to say that all thoughts are false and particular because they are linked to a contingent language (historicism), but that they are all true in a sense because each language draws from the source" (Merleau-Ponty, 2020, p. 49).

But what is it, specifically, that Merleau-Ponty is dealing with when he insists on this allegedly continual influence of our particular natural languages on our *logical* categories? Never in the course notes does Merleau-Ponty show *which* allegedly "logical categories" are actually grammatical. In fact, when the French phenomenologist claims, allegedly following Bröcker and Lohmann, that "our logic" "reflects" "our language" (Merleau-Ponty, 2020, p. 48), what he is explicitly referring to seems to be an *ontological* problem rather than a logical one. His point is that "*[a] being* is, for the Greek, everything which is capable of playing the role of subject in a phrase with the verb 'to be'" (Merleau-Ponty, 2020, pp. 47–48). This might indeed shed light (or not) on the way in which the ontology of classical Greek philosophy came to be constituted, *but this is not a logical problem*, unless it could be shown that a different categorization of what counts as "a being" somehow leads to an impossibility to apply contemporary logic to some particular language—from which would ensue a collapse of the universality of logic as a tool for analyzing

human reasoning, which Merleau-Ponty never showed in concrete terms.[1]

This collapse, by the way, would also *contradict Merleau-Ponty's own references to the possibility of identifying universal "laws" of human thought in general, such as the principle of non-contradiction.* In his 1951 course, Merleau-Ponty speaks about "the nonsense of anything that violates a principle of thought, such as the law of contradiction" (Merleau-Ponty, 1964a, p. 50, 1975, p. 9), in terms rather similar to those employed in the *Phenomenology of perception* when referring to "the laws of our thought" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, pp. 455–456, 2002, pp. 397–398); he takes up the problem of the principle of non-contradiction in his course about psycho-sociology of the child (Merleau-Ponty, 1964b, pp. 207–208). Nowhere in these three texts does Merleau-Ponty commit himself to the (implausibly strong) tenet that there *cannot* be universal laws such as the principle of non-contradiction, $\sim(p \wedge \sim p)$, because the very notions of "negation" and "conjunction" required to formulate it are not "universal". But that is *precisely* what he should say in order to stick in a coherent manner to his rejection of the possibility of universal "forms of signification".

Considerations about the relevance of the *kind* of invariances Merleau-Ponty is analyzing can also be applied, crucially, to consequence (III). If we understand, *following Merleau-Ponty himself,* that the *formal* elements of a language (such as the logical connectives) are those in which we will be interested with the purpose of analyzing the transformations of propositions, and those which we need to attribute to every natural language if logic is to function as a tool for analyzing human reasoning, then what Merleau-Ponty should be able to show is not that terms like "number" or "triangle"—let alone "rogue"! (Merleau-Ponty, 1973, p. 12, 1969/1978, p. 19)—can change their meanings. He should be able to show, instead, *that terms such as "not", "and", "or", "exists", "all"* change their meanings. It simply makes no sense to begin by showing that Husserl posits a series of invariances *for a rather restricted area of natural languages* and then forcing a convergence between this discussion and the one about whether or not there exists, *concerning other kinds of elements,* a "speaking language" endowed with the power to create new meanings. Merleau-Ponty may very well be interested in showing the "creative" character of "parole parlante"— but this does not authorize choosing any polemical terrain for deploying this thesis.

10. A conclusion: on the implausible overtones of Merleau-Ponty's rejection of "universal grammar"

Let us recap. Merleau-Ponty's rejection of the possibility of a "universal grammar" or "eidetics of language" *is*, indeed, misguided. But not simply in the sense that, as Edie proposed, the French author might just take into account the fact that universality can be attained as the *result* of an empirical, inductive, investigation. The problem is, instead, that his insistence on the alleged limitations of a search for invariant structures throughout languages does not point at *the right kinds* of "meanings". In order to be able to respond to Husserl's claims about the universality of "forms of signification" such as "*the* negative" or "*the* existential proposition", simply shifting our attention to *other* linguistic phenomena will simply not do.

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Notes

[1] In fact, we can meet Merleau-Ponty's merely schematic indications about allegedly logical problems with an equally schematic response: from a logical point of view, the fact (highlighted by Merleau-Ponty's preferred source in this point) that in Georgian we can distinguish "visurveb", "I desire", from "msurs", "desire is in me" (Vendryes, 1921, p. 123), something which we cannot do in other languages, is, again, irrelevant: in both cases we will represent the proposition as

stating a relationship between a universal predicate ("having desire") and an individual ("I").

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