In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty claims that grasping language at its roots, in the birth of speech, allows language to bear witness to Being. In the same passage, with a nod to Lacan, he writes that perception and thought are “structured as a language,” and it is implied that he includes Being within this structuration.1 If it is the case that Being is structured like a language, and that language considered from its beginnings in speech has the potential to access the movements of Being, then understanding Merleau-Ponty’s view of language is crucial for understanding his late ontology. Merleau-Ponty understands language to be fundamentally diacritical, adopting the concept of diacritics from the Saussurian account of signification in order to indicate the movement by which the world comes to appearance. Applying a diacritical relation to the sensible gives rise to his concept of the écart, by which things come to appear only in their divergence from other things. However, the notion of diacritics does not serve a solely linguistic function for Merleau-Ponty, as he does not reduce the diacritical relation to a merely metaphorical evocation of his ontology of the flesh. Enfolding language with the sensible intertwines the movement of meaning with the movement of Being, and thus poses a challenge to the traditional view of language that would relegate it solely to a virtual realm in claiming that language can refer only to itself. The problem that Merleau-Ponty faces, then, in his attempt to embed language in the world, is whether incorporating speech into language allows it to access the movement of the sensible world, or whether its ideality means that language is incapable of signifying beyond itself.²

By taking seriously Merleau-Ponty’s proposal that tracing language back to speech allows it to bear witness to Being, and by considering Merleau-Ponty’s own use of language as a kind of linguistic figuration, I argue that figurative language is capable of accessing the movement of Being. The ability for figurative language to express the movement of Being is most evident in Merleau-Ponty’s frequent use of vibrational and other sound related metaphors across his later work. Vibration exceeds its own sensorial boundaries, and in so doing, moves beyond the analogical function of a metaphor: it expresses meaning in the same movement by which it expresses the world, and becomes more than a mere metaphor for describing the movement of Being. Furthermore, speech and language, including metaphor and figurative language, are inextricably linked to bodily expression and expression in general. And the expression of language in speech is also inextricable from its vocalization in sound, which necessitates a consideration of the very advent of voice as a sounded phenomenon. Interrelating sound as a concrete phenomenon with language allows literal vibration to become figurative vibration, emerging, upon examination of vibration as an instance of linguistic figuration, as a kind of sounding. Ultimately, Merleau-Ponty’s embodiment of language in the voice, the voice in sound, and sound in the world allows what initially appears to be merely virtual in a metaphor’s connotative power, to traverse the sensible world. But, if we are to be able to interrogate vibration and uncover the nature of its figural applicability for Merleau-Ponty, it is first necessary to disentangle Merleau-Ponty’s project from the general problem of language’s ability to signify the actual world.

1. The Signification Debate

By situating Merleau-Ponty’s notion of language in the context of its development from out of Saussurian linguistics, and contrasting his position with Jean-Francois Lyotard’s critique, we are able to see more precisely where Merleau-Ponty stands. The diacritical and oppositional nature of the
linguistic system has a central role in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, but Merleau-Ponty is not a linguist, and as such his approach to linguistics does not simply take for granted that the grammatical rules of a given linguistic system can account for the whole sense-making operation of language in general. Language is a system that antedates our participation in it; it already has an instituted structure that dictates the limits between meaningful and non-meaningful utterances before we learn how to navigate its rules. To be able to use language and engage in speech, it is not necessary that one know every possible sign or signification in a language, since it is not a matter of merely matching a sign with its signifier to achieve a static signification. Merleau-Ponty articulates the relation between language and the speech act as one of reversibility, such that neither speech nor language on its own can account for the genesis of the other. According to Merleau-Ponty, in order to account for the sense-making operation of language and understand how a complex linguistic system evolves from out of primordial phonation, a study of language must include the speech act.

As Rajiv Kaushik explains, the speech act for Merleau-Ponty is a linguistic gesture that “opens up before it a space in which things are given” as already meaningful, without the need for a speaker to posit a meaning beforehand (Kaushik 2011, 88). Speech transforms language by extending its expressive capabilities, and in so doing, incites its transformation by opening up new avenues for language to continually evolve. To explain signification as it arises from out of the speech act, Merleau-Ponty writes of a “‘linguage’ meaning of language, which effects the mediation between my as yet unspeaking intention and words, and in such a way that my spoken words surprise me myself and teach me my thought” (Merleau-Ponty 1967, 88). The significative intention is a kind of “speech before it is spoken” that unfolds in response to the perceived world from out of “the background of silence which does not cease to surround it and without which it would say nothing” (43). The “speechless want” of the significative intention takes the form of a “determinate gap” which encounters the silence of the sensible world as a “mute presence,” calling for the appropriate configuration of words to express its silent meaning (89-90). The silence underlying speech is the world’s calling to be expressed, but no expression ever exhausts this call. What the speech act actually expresses always exceeds the linguistic sign, as “when, utilizing all these already speaking instruments, I make them say something they have never said” (91). In utilizing the instituted system of signs to form new means by which to express, speech unveiling a latent meaning of the sensible, yet still fails to exhaust the entirety of what can be said. As such, for Merleau-Ponty, “the idea of complete expression is nonsensical, and…all language is indirect or allusive – that it is, if you wish, silence” (43). Language’s silence is the silence of meaning, in that the meaning of the signifying chains in any given language arise from out of the silence—the écart—between signs. As such, language can only mean indirectly, and it is the role of speech to extend the utilization of signs in pursuit of new meanings. Ultimately, understanding speech as the movement of expression in language enables Merleau-Ponty to embed figurative language into the sensible world. But, in order to demonstrate how Merleau-Ponty’s account of speech extends to metaphor and figurative language, it is first necessary to consider an opposing position.

1.2 Lyotard and Virtuality

Adherents to the linguistic structuralist tradition, such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, criticize Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to integrate the speech act into language. Lyotard’s critique is instructive for granting insight into the problem confronting Merleau-Ponty’s account of language in his late ontology. According to Lyotard, Merleau-Ponty overemphasizes the speech act and devalues the formal rules of language to such an extent that he is incapable of accounting for the linguistic constraints necessary to ensure the speech act’s intelligibility (Lyotard 2011, 415-416 ft. 5). But the fact that linguistic constraints exist does not impinge upon the speaker’s freedom to form novel
utterances. As Stephen Watson elucidates: “in an ambiguous sense they are condemned to be meaningful,” because the act of speaking itself requires the freedom to explore new meaningful combinations (Watson 2009, 53). According to Merleau-Ponty it is the concrete utilization of these new combinations in speech that institutes conventions and constraints, just as conventions and constraints provide the means by which speech itself makes sense.

Further, in Lyotard’s view, Merleau-Ponty’s invocation of an ontology that claims to allow for the “experience of a meaning where the felt and feeling come together in a common rhythm” must ultimately fail (Lyotard, 15). Lyotard claims that Merleau-Ponty’s attempt to allow the connotative and the denotative functions of language to operate cyclically results merely in connotation. A metaphor, according to Lyotard, can never signify that by which it means, since language can only mean in relation to itself and can never point beneath or beyond itself to account for its own possibility. Each latent unveiling of some aspect of the sensible must necessarily disrupt speech, since Lyotard insists that speech cannot be an “event.” An event, for Lyotard, is an unpredictable, spontaneous occurrence that is other than any available signification that can be articulated in a linguistic system; it is, hence, necessarily unsignifiable in speech. Speech can only speak about the event, and by extension any metaphor, insofar as it is a linguistic signification, is only an attempt to represent the event after the fact, to incorporate it into language. In Lyotard’s view, the sensible can only be signified by an absence of signification (14). Since Lyotard understands figurative or metaphorical language to be signification that has no literal referent and operates solely in a virtual domain, it is thus wholly distinct from the sensible. Thus in Lyotard’s account, Merleau-Ponty’s metaphors serve merely to indicate their own virtuality, rather than to denote the sensible plenum. The question we now have to answer in Merleau-Ponty is whether language operates solely in a virtual realm and can refer only to itself, or whether language is capable of signifying its origins in the sensible world.

1.3 Derrida: Ideality, Analogy, and Connotation

In contrast to Lyotard, Jacques Derrida’s account of language and the sign has the potential to elucidate how Merleau-Ponty proposes to embed language’s ideality in the sensible world. As Leonard Lawlor claims, despite the differences between Merleau-Ponty and Derrida, Derrida’s early account of the sign and signification bears a striking resemblance to Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology (Lawlor 1997, 71). For Derrida, language mediates the “play of presence and absence” that allows for ideality by its very possibility, in that ideality is not something that really exists in the world except through the differences that language manifests in its sense-making operation (Derrida 2011, 9). The substitutive structure of signification describes what Derrida means by “supplementarity,” or “the structure of the ‘in the place of…that belongs to every sign in general’” (75). The signifier, as Derrida writes, “does not first re-present merely the absent signified,” but rather serves to supplement another signifier to continue the signifying chain (75). Derrida writes that “supplementarity is really différance,” in that supplementarity describes the delay in signification and the deferral of meaning in the system of signs which gain meaning through their difference from one another (75). Due to the inherent supplementarity of signs, as well as the necessity that signs signify something, in Derrida’s account, one never reaches the end in signification, but rather, one continually remains at the level of the signifier.

Referring to metaphor, Derrida writes that the very possibility of thinking the origin of sense consists in the “war of language against itself,” which takes place in the system of divergences by which language gains sense (12). The differences at the heart of language—the play of substitution and ideality—is by Derrida’s account the origin of language. As such, différance accounts for the dynamic that Derrida envisions between actual and imaginary language which substitutes one for the
other and vice versa. Since signification is a supplementary act, the substitutive function operates in a virtual realm regardless of whether the signification is a connotation or a denotation, meaning that there is no basis for the separation of the actual from the virtual. Since the structure of the sign is inherently substitutive, “there is every chance for ‘actual’ language to be as imaginary as imaginary discourse and for imaginary discourse to be as actual as actual discourse” (43). Within signification itself, there is no distinction between denoting a concrete reality and connoting a figurative affect or an imaginary occurrence; all that remains in operation is the signifier, which is endlessly repeatable and never exhausts what can be signified.

The différence that structures ideality speaks to the conflict that drives signification to operate at the level of connotation, since it is not clear that denotation can exist for him at all in language. Like Lyotard, Derrida’s account would suggest that language for Merleau-Ponty can only connote; but unlike Lyotard, on a Derridian reading the reason that Merleau-Ponty can only connote is that there is no distinction between the connotation and the denotation, such that only connotation occurs in signification. Thus, it would appear that for Derrida, every sign has the potential to be an analogous signifier for any other sign. But if this were so, it is not clear how Derrida would account for the possibility of meaning at all, since if every sign were merely analogous there would be no possibility for either the deferral of meaning or the differing between signs that makes up the structure of différence. The homogenization of discourse within a merely analogous system seems rather to be what Derrida is seeking to prevent, even as he recognizes the possibility that language could collapse into mere analogy. Derrida writes: “If language never escapes from analogy, even if it is analogy through and through, it must, having reached that point, and at this very point, freely take up its own destruction and cast metaphors against metaphors” (12). This conflict between seemingly analogous signifiers in the attempt to signify, as Derrida indicates, is language’s attempt to destroy itself, and to remake itself, as in casting metaphors against metaphors, signification guards against collapsing into homogeneity. Metaphors – even if, as Derrida says, language cannot escape analogy – are the attempt to break down analogy, to introduce openings for new absences in the ideality of the differences that, Derrida claims, exist only in language. Like Merleau-Ponty, then, for Derrida, language and signification are diacritical: they mean through divergence as signs mark out the differences between themselves and other signs to allow for meaning to arise in their difference.

1.4 Merleau-Ponty: Actual/Virtual Connotation/Denotation

While Derrida’s account of language can help us understand Merleau-Ponty’s, we must also note that Merleau-Ponty does not accept that language is merely capable of connotation. Lawlor’s reading of Derrida’s early work alongside Merleau-Ponty’s late work elucidates that the precise difference between the two is that whereas Merleau-Ponty conceives of language as part of an ontology of circularity, Derrida conceives of language in a relation of supplementarity (Lawlor, 72). Envisioning language as supplementary allows language to remain open and creative, but the relation applies only within the signifying structure of language itself. But the language that Merleau-Ponty envisions operates “by virtue of a natural intertwining of [...] meaning, through the occult trading or the metaphor – where what counts is no longer the manifest meaning of each word and each image, but the lateral relations, the kinships that are implicated in their transfers,” through which the allusive character of a linguistic expression is able to signify beyond itself (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 125). If we recall that language means only indirectly, and thus by way of silence, then the lateral kinships and transfers that describe the movement of metaphor can also be understood as operating indirectly or allusively in the movement toward expression. Merleau-Ponty writes that “language lives only from silence,” and it is in response to an inner silence which manifests as a need to express that accounts
for “the birth of speech” (126). The circularity of language, then, for Merleau-Ponty, originates from
the silence of the sensible to which it also returns through bodily phonation in the sounded utterance.
The difference between Derrida and Merleau-Ponty can thus be explained as the difference between
the relation of speech to language, and the relation of speech to Being. Understanding speech as a
response to the mute presence of Being that calls for expression leads Merleau-Ponty to the claim
that: “born at this depth, language is not a mask over Being, but... the most valuable witness to Being
(126). The kind of language that is capable of bearing witness to Being is operative or creative language,
which would include metaphorical and figurative language, and which is exemplified by the birth of
speech from the depths of bodily phonation.

2. Merleau-Ponty: Figured Philosophy and Linguistic Figuration

In his analysis of Merleau-Ponty’s figured philosophy and his extension of figuration to include
the linguistic figure, Rajiv Kaushik gives an account of the kind of language that enables Merleau-
Ponty to utilize metaphors while going beyond the merely metaphorical. According to Kaushik,
Merleau-Ponty uses the figure and figuration to “grasp at and disclose the very movement of being
itself” (16). Kaushik claims that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the figure “is not meant to oppose ground,”
and rather than using “figure” to refer to a representation of matter, he traces it back to its Greek
equivalent (plassein/plattein), “which means ‘to figure’ or ‘to form a figure’ in the sense of...’to model’
or ‘to sculpt’” (17). In “Eye and Mind,” Merleau-Ponty makes reference to a “figured philosophy” as
that which is most appropriate for the task of displaying the genesis of the sensible’s originating
movement, modelled on a painting’s ability to display the basic movement of vision in demonstrating
the process by which an object comes to appear from out of the sensible. The meaning a painting
evokes arises from a deeper resonance with the world that echoes beneath our conceptual expectation
of meaning. Precisely by remaining at the level of originary appearance, the artwork shows the basic
movement of figuration by which things distinguish themselves from other things as they take on their
own contours. But by Merleau-Ponty’s own account of the “figured philosophy,” it initially appears
that he does not consider language to be capable of figuring the sensible.

However, Kaushik argues that Merleau-Ponty’s figured philosophy is capable of accounting
for both the figuration of vision in painting and linguistic figuration. He demonstrates that language
can figure the sensible by establishing a concrete link between language and the sensible that embeds
the ideality of language in the body, and therefore, in the world. According to Kaushik, for Merleau-
Ponty, figurative language is ideal, and operates self-referentially within its own virtual domain, but,
its virtuality does not mean that it can be separated from the sensible. To form a figure in language,
Kaushik writes, “is to form a representation of a thing that just is the representation of a signifier and
nothing else” (61). The figurative use of language works by diverting the “everyday or quotidian”
meanings into new forms of expression that make sense only within language (61). Thus, the referent
of the words themselves cannot be directly denoted, since the meanings that figurative language tries
to express have yet to gain direct signification. Figurative language is not constrained within a system
that only allows it to signify what can be directly denoted, but rather is free to play with virtual,
connotative meanings in the attempt to discover new forms of expression.

Kaushik further demonstrates that the connotative functioning of figurative language allows
it to become linguistic figuration, since it figures the sensible by figuring discourse and signification
itself. Thus, Kaushik writes, “the figure implies an extra-linguistic structure that is not simply the use
of language in discourse but rather the very condition for communication” (62). By diverting quotidian
meanings into new forms of expression, and employing connotative means to indicate gaps in what
language is able to signify, figurative language reveals the contours of “a sensible field that moves in
such a way for meaning to become established from out of it” (64). And as Kaushik further explains, the movement that allows meaning to become established in language follows from the deep, sublingual processes by which the human produces the sounds that “convey the expectation of meaning,” even before they become a meaningful system of signs (88). Language, then, is capable of figuring the sensible since it is itself figured by the same movement within the sensible that calls for expression and allows meaning to manifest. Thus, for Merleau-Ponty, metaphor and figurative language are interwoven with Being’s possibilities to such an extent that it is no longer clear what is actual and what is virtual, what is metaphorical and what is concrete, since neither is wholly distinct nor completely coincides.

2.2 Toward Sound: Body, Language, Speech

Since, as Kaushik demonstrates, the ideality of language gains sensible organization in speech, and speech begins in the bodily production of voice, even the most complex linguistic utterances belong to the movement of the “flesh” in Merleau-Ponty’s ontology. Language, for Merleau-Ponty, begins in the movements beneath the voice, such as the breath, the lungs, the larynx, and the vocal chords; in short, all “those movements [that] end in sounds,” which take on significance in inflection and tone, or accompany the silent expressivity of the face, to their ultimate end in a meaningful utterance (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 144). These inner bodily workings belong to a deeper movement of the genesis of sense, and as such, they exist beneath the system of sense and referent. This gestural significance constitutes a “silent” language, of the kind that James Edie refers to in discussing how words “never completely lose that primitive, strictly phonemic, level of ‘affective’ meaning which is not translatable into their conceptual definitions” (Edie 1976, 129). Language at its most primordial is inseparable from the body, and the body is inseparable from the sensible, such that despite language’s virtuality and the linguistic figure’s lack of denotative meaning, a language’s very formation relies on its actualization in sounded utterances. In the inseparability of a word from its utterance, even conceptual language must take its place as a node in the dynamic matrix of the sensible’s call for expression, existing not apart from, but fully embedded in the literal processes that grant language its ability to figure the sensible. However, apart from a few references in the final pages of “The Intertwining - The Chiasm,” and some of the working notes, Merleau-Ponty offers only a brief discussion of voice and the concrete sounding it relies on for its vocalization. Thus, to supplement Merleau-Ponty’s account of the significance of his final ontology being structured like a language, and to allow for a thorough discussion of his metaphors, specific attention must be given to recovering the dimension of sound from out of its obscurity.

2.3 Ihde on Sound: Listening to the Invisible

Don Ihde’s project in Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound, is to give an account of sound as a concrete phenomenon. By applying Ihde’s insight into sound and voice to Merleau-Ponty’s account of voice and hearing in his late ontology, it is possible to establish a clear link between the advent of voice as a sonorous utterance vibrating out of the silent inner depths of the body and the expression of the silent invisible depths of the world. In establishing sound’s ability to configure space, Ihde extends the notion of space beyond the visual, embedding sound concretely in the sensible despite its invisibility and intangibility. The visible and audible dimensions are not separate realms complete in themselves; rather, the visible and the audible intersect to allow each a mode of access into the other’s horizon. Ihde claims that seeing must also be listening, as: “It is to the invisible that
listening may attend’ (Ihde 2007, 14; emphasis Ihde’s). The mute object stands outside of the horizon of sound by virtue of its muteness, but it is present and accessible to vision, and as it were, “speaks” to vision via its muteness. Concretizing sound allows the auditory dimension to intersect with the visible within the horizon of silence, as the silent crosses the boundary into the visible in the muteness of visible presence. This intersection in turn opens up the possibility for other sensory entanglements, since in a tangible encounter between mute surfaces, the audible rings forth and breaks the silence, resounding in an echo that traverses space, and reveals its unseen dimensions in their presence to more than one sense.

Considering Ihde’s project to establish the auditory dimension as a dynamic mode of access to the world by concretizing sound, the problem of language’s lack of access to the actual can be understood to result from the tendency to privilege vision over the other senses. The tendency to privilege the visual affects our understanding of what counts as actually present versus what is merely virtual. Language’s relegation to a virtual domain that has no bearing on actual space implies that sound is an inadequate mode of access to the world, since things are ordinarily mute in their presence. That is to say, since presence is thought to be primarily visual, and since the visible must be seen rather than merely heard or felt, a visual mode of access would be most appropriate to expressing what is actually present. But as Merleau-Ponty seeks to show, the sensible’s presence is not merely visible; the visible barely touches the surface, and has as little access to its origins as language apparently does. The processes by which things come to appearance operate beneath vision, beneath every sense, such that each sense opens only another perspective on the world. Seeing is the possibility of multiple perspectives on a thing, and seeing, too, must be seen; touching, must be touched; hearing, must be heard, such that no sense exists in isolation and each is caught in a relation of intertwining. Visible and tangible things make sounds, and all three together speak to different dimensions of the thing’s presence.

Ihde claims that, “there is a deep sense in which all things have voices,” but these are often overlooked because “perception itself is reduced to the visual” (190). When we engage in careful listening, the silence of a landscape suddenly reveals a multitude of subtle vocalizations. While material things are preponderantly mute in their presence, they can be given voice, and “made to sound…in duets or more complex polyphonies” (190). A mute object “does not reveal its own voice,” it must be given voice; and echoing Merleau-Ponty’s call to make the sensible speak, Ihde looks to the encounter when one object strikes another to discover how a voice can be given to the thing (67). The vocalization occurs in the mutual resounding presence of one thing to another, one surface striking and the other struck, distinguishing themselves as what they are by what they sound like. But the sound arising from the encounter between objects is not a voice in the sense of a linguistic utterance, as it is not intentionally directed by the thing itself. When a rock falls from a mountain and strikes the ground, or falls into the river, the ensuing sound is not a meaningful utterance in the same way that the human voice responds to an intent to signify. But in falling and making a sound, the rock proclaims its presence as well as its material constitution. Ascribing voices to things on the basis of their sonority speaks to what voice is in a more general sense that embeds things as more than visible presence.

3. Language: Reflexivity, Reversibility, Articulation

The voice and the body, like Merleau-Ponty’s other reversibilities, are reflexive: “there is a reflexivity of the movements of phonation and of hearing; they have their sonorous inscription, the vociferations have in me their motor echo,” which, considering flesh as expression, inserts speaking
and thinking into the sensible’s silence (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 144). The resonant surroundings of the sensible embed the auditory firmly in the world, as the virtual conflation of sound felt both internally and externally exemplifies the reversibility, the “inside of the outside and the outside of the inside,” in the movement of Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of the flesh (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 356). For Merleau-Ponty, “I do not hear myself as I hear the others, the sonorous existence of my voice…vibrates through my head rather than outside” (148). Voice is definitive in that it arises from an inner vibration, and we hear it simultaneously from within and without as we make an utterance. But as Renaud Barbaras notes, the utterance, in leaving my body and realizing itself in expression, is the precise act by which “vocal flesh erases itself as body” (Barbaras 2004, 281). My voice is no longer, strictly speaking, mine; the identity it had as an inner vibration becomes difference once it externalizes itself in expression. In speech, the voice becomes caught up with the movement of identity in difference that is the movement of the flesh as expression, allowing the voice to erase its embedment in the body which then allows it to return to the body as a heard voice. Understanding expression in this interdependent way leads us to the necessity of grasping expression as articulation, and articulation as the distinguishing factor between voice and primordial utterance.

A mere utterance or a resonant encounter is sensible and has a sense, but its sense is inarticulate, and thus, remains indistinctly meaningful. As Merleau-Ponty writes: “Like crystal, like metal and many other substances, I am a sonorous being,” but, as opposed to the things which must be struck to make a sound, the human voice resonates both within and without, responding to a self-reflexive intention to produce a meaningful sound (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 144). Thus, our harnessing of our sonorous being in the endeavor to produce an articulate meaning allows the sound to enter into relation with the conventions of the linguistic system according to which its meaning can make sense. Articulation is not a mere matter of one sound joining with a cacophony of other sounds, but rather, to articulate means to enter into the possibility of sense in its attempt at sense-making. Conceived as such, Merleau-Ponty’s claim that the sensible is diacritical (“‘structured like a language’…articulation before the letter”) points to the sensible plenum, to that silence between the movements of being, as itself the very possibility of sense (126). Merleau-Ponty’s ontology, then, operates in an open movement of an essentially diacritical relation, wherein things only become themselves by leaving themselves, and hence, dis-articulate in order to become articulate. In granting the sensible a diacritical structure Merleau-Ponty establishes it as that which articulates prior to and makes possible, the verbal attempt at articulating. As such, in order to form an articulate utterance, the utterance must transcend the relation of sign and signifier, and allow the expression to evoke a sense beyond what can or has yet been said. The work of language is virtual, but its ideality is incarnate in the utterance upon which it relies for its articulation, and every articulation it generates remains incarnate by virtue of the silent process that grants it sense: the inarticulate articulation before the letter whose opacity gives language the freedom to explore its ideal potential.

4. Beyond Metaphor: Destroying the Analogy

The concept of metaphor and the ability to access the inarticulate articulation remains a contested notion between Ihde, Merleau-Ponty, and Derrida, and requires further elucidation in order to demonstrate Merleau-Ponty’s use of metaphor as linguistic figuration. In Ihde’s view, from the initial perception of something strange, to our expression of it in language, metaphor engages a process of experimentation by which we attempt to identify the unfamiliar through the use of analogy. But as Derrida shows, reducing the metaphor to mere analogy dissolves the possibility of difference. According to Ihde, assigning a metaphor is a step on the way to making something familiar, toward conceptualization or sedimentation. Metaphors, he claims, “serve to identify and guide,” but they do
not arise arbitrarily; rather, the precise metaphors we choose work to “take in certain rather than other directions” in the interest of expressing the most appropriate meaning (186). Any metaphor is only one variation among many possible variations which would domesticate the unfamiliar into the familiar, but Ihde’s description of metaphor appears to be the kind of analogous circuit that Derrida’s account seeks to undermine.

For Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, metaphor operates laterally, allusively, indirectly, and in its endeavour to express, it intertwines with gestural and established meaning. Thus, even if metaphor does effect the transition from the initially obscure sensory realm to the conceptual, it arises in response to obscurity and never fully transforms into the concept. As such, metaphor also speaks to that which escapes conceptualization. This is not to say that a metaphor is an intermediate position on the way to abstraction in the concept; rather, metaphor retains access to its affective origin in gestural meaning to a greater extent than denotative or conceptual speech, such that the very possibility of metaphorical discourse has the capacity to display how language’s ideality has sensible origins. Ihde’s account of metaphor is too reliant on analogy for it to adequately portray Merleau-Ponty’s project to figure the movements of his ontology of the flesh. Even for Merleau-Ponty the notion of metaphor is inadequate to describe the sensible’s movements; in a working note from November 26, 1959, he writes: “There is no metaphor between the visible and the invisible... metaphor is too much or too little: too much if the invisible is really invisible, and too little if it lends itself to transposition” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 221-222). This statement illustrates the problem with relying on analogy in the use of metaphor: the visible cannot be an analogue for the invisible if they are incommensurable, and if everything in the invisible has its equivalent in the visible, then the analogue would ultimately say nothing.

The metaphors that Merleau-Ponty uses, then, must be more than analogies in the sense that Derrida discusses; in their ability to war against each other, destroying the analogy as each vies for expression in their work to continually open up new possibilities for expression. Derrida’s emphasis on supplementarity, as opposed to Ihde’s metaphors that serve merely to identify or guide, reflects the deeper notion of sense from which Merleau-Ponty’s metaphors arise. Far from serving to locate analogous variations on meaning by which to identify the latent unfoldings of the sensible, metaphors for Merleau-Ponty work to figure the sensible by opening new latencies to appearance. His metaphors work in the manner of voyance, following Mauro Carbone’s elucidation as: “seeing farther than one sees” (Carbone 2015, 3). In the intertwining of the visible and the invisible, voyance renders the absent, present, “not simply by presentifying it, but rather in creating it as a particular presence which, as such, had never been present before” (3). The notion of voyance extends as well to the context of the reversibility between sound and hearing, since to see farther than one sees means to access beyond vision, which includes what is heard, or felt, in the “movement” by which the sensible seeks expression. Thus, in order for a metaphor to evoke the sensible’s organization, it must transfer itself across, beyond, and beneath the limits of each sensorial horizon.

4.2 Sound, Silence, and the Rhythm of Being

Merleau-Ponty’s frequent use of vibrational, musical, or otherwise sound related metaphors gains particular significance in Jessica Wiskus’s analysis of rhythm in The Rhythm of Thought. Wiskus interprets Merleau-Ponty’s account of the structure underlying expressive utterance and the movement of the silent sensible as a rhythmic motion analogous to language’s use of metaphor, in that through both rhythm and metaphor “there is the recovery of the unsaid and the recasting of something that is known...metaphor discloses the lacuna...as generative” (Wiskus 2013, 10). But her use of rhythm to elucidate the space of silence is itself a metaphor, and as such, the rhythmic
movement of the sensible cannot operate merely analogously to metaphor in language. Wiskus takes up rhythm from a musical perspective, for which the importance of rhythm “is not the meter or the tempo, but the expression of silence that holds each articulation together,” and silence is that which strings articulations together in the rhythmic space beneath the melodic utterance of the musical idea (10). The movement of the sensible in the silent lacunae between “breaths” proceed rhythmically, and she describes the silence as the “relationship between inhalation and exhalation,” thus implicating the bodily act of vocalization in the expression of Being as a piece of music (41). We can find evidence for Wiskus’s point that Being finds life in the space of breath in Merleau-Ponty’s account. He writes: “what we call ‘inspiration’ should be taken literally. There really is inspiration and expiration of Being, respiration in Being” (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 358). Thus, Wiskus’s account of the rhythm of Being recasts Merleau-Ponty’s view of expression as a “singing of the world” as having both a literal and figurative articulation. Being really breathes because beings really breathe, and the life of each “inspires,” as it were, and vibrates forth in a resonant expression.

With the metaphor of Being as an endlessly unfolding piece of music, meaning manifests itself as a silent resonation in the gaps between words and the excess beyond signification, or the silent expressivity of the evocative gesture. The rhythm of Being unfolds in the silent, invisible depths in accordance with the sensible manifestations that it articulates, and that implicates it in the melody of the unfolding. Grasping a meaning metaphorically “strikes a chord” within the body, as it bubbles forth from its figurative resonation into literal resonation and erupts in a voiced word; or, in another example, as it continues its silent resonation from the canvas of a painting and “trembles around it like a wave of heat” (Merleau-Ponty 1967, 55). Merleau-Ponty frequently invokes radiance and vibration to describe the meaningfulness of a work of art, as a painting makes for itself “a movement by vibration or radiation,” allowing the configuration of lines and colours to vibrate within the painting, evoking depth from the flat surface in the immobile radiance of its symbolic space (Merleau-Ponty 2007, 374). In the immobility of the painting, the silent movement of meaning radiates outward, figuratively vibrating with meaningfulness.

4.3 Merleau-Ponty’s Ontological Vibrations

Thus, it is ultimately vibration that provides Merleau-Ponty with the reflexivity his ontology needs to justify the reversibility of figurative meaning with the actual sensible. Between the vibration internal to the body, as well as the sounds internal to the world, and their external vocalization, as Kaushik writes: “vibrations allow for sound in general to pass through the atmosphere and provide a source for a continuity between human and being” (Kaushik, 89). Understood simply, our ability to produce sound results from an inner vibration of the vocal chords, and our ability to hear sound relies on the vibration of tiny bones in our ears. As such, vibration accounts for the origin of language, both literally and figuratively, which is precisely why its invocation is appropriate as a metaphor for Being. But vibration as a metaphor for Being extends even further into the depths of the sensible than the origin of language, in the very way in which vibration literally manifests in the world. Vibration itself intersects the sensory apparatus in that it is equally visible, audible, and tangible, but vibration cannot elucidate one sense in lieu of the others despite (or precisely due to) its intersensory manifestation, and likewise, no one sense is adequate to discerning vibration. This intersensory intertwining arises in Merleau-Ponty’s phrase “the awesome birth of vociferation,” referring to the generative expressive process prior to the expression from out of the depths of the movement of Being (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 144). As Kaushik notes, the birth of vociferation “describes the very occurrence of sound from which there is neither merely an established meaning nor merely that from out of which meaning is established” (Kaushik, 89). The sensible thus emanates through a vibration.
in sound and voice that is not only correlative, but manifests as the same vibration felt across the entire space.

Merleau-Ponty’s frequent use of vibrational metaphors, as in radiation, reverberation, rhythm, or the echo, act as moments of linguistic figuration, as he employs metaphors that break down their analogical function precisely in their description of both a literal and a figurative movement. Saying the word “vibration” is only possible by virtue of a vibration, and hence, the movement of vibration is simultaneously figurative and literal, just as the movements of signification are always concrete and ideal. Vibration begins in silence and emanates throughout the atmosphere, penetrating into the depths of the sensible and the body, and erupting out of each into sounds that evoke meaningfulness even in their most primordial reverberation. And, since describing the movement of meaning as “vibration” echoes the meaningfulness of the sensible even before we feel it resonating deeply within us, the intersensoriality of vibration proves equal to the task of evoking the sensible’s organization. As the flesh of the world folds over, enveloping the flesh of the body and language in a continual intertwining, meaning echoes out in a silent call, resonating deeply as a need for expression before vibrating out in a sounded utterance. As this sounding persists even beneath the structures of the sensible, originating from within as a vibration prior to its resonant eruption, the reverberation in its depths can finally effect the entwinement of the literal in the figurative, the actual in the virtual, and vice versa. Thus, vibration’s intersensoriality justifies the reversibility of language with meaning and with the sensible, as the rhythm of the silent articulation of the sensible’s diacritical structure effects the movement of Being in the silent resonances between breaths, and the emanations that echo in its respiration.

Although Merleau-Ponty uses speech and the voice as metaphors to describe how Being calls for expression, if we follow through on tracing the birth of speech through the depths of bodily phonation it becomes clear that in his philosophy, the relation of speech to Being is not merely a metaphorical relation. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s project to account for a movement within the sensible that implicates the actual in the virtual and the virtual in the actual requires him to utilize language that exceeds the metaphorical. It follows that if Merleau-Ponty’s language, and particularly his use of figurative language, is to have any bearing on the actual sensible world, his theory of language must be one in which language and the silent matrix of the sensible are not incommensurable, but rather, intertwine. To establish a link between language and the movements that account for its possibility, Merleau-Ponty introduces the necessity that language be traced back to its origins in the birth of speech that arises from the silence of the attempt at expression. Speech is a necessarily bodily vocalization, and thus acts as a hinge between virtual meaning and the actual utterance, which opens up a way to think the virtual domain of language as simultaneously ideal and concrete. Thus, in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy, it is not the case that language is merely virtual and refers only to itself. Rather, due to its reliance on speech and the deeper processes of phonation, language, and most especially figurative language, retains access to the movement which grants it sense. Furthermore, examining the metaphors that Merleau-Ponty uses to describe the movements of Being, most notably those metaphors that retain their connection to the birth of speech in sound and vibration, demonstrates how he actually employs linguistic figuration in his late work. By reading Merleau-Ponty’s figurative use of vibration, voice, and sound according to his theory of how operative language gains meaning, it becomes evident that his use of vibrational metaphors reveal the extent to which language can figure the sensible, and demonstrate how language can have bearing on the actual world.

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Endnotes

i “But, because he has experienced within himself the need to speak, the birth of speech as bubbling up at the bottom of his mute experience, the philosopher knows better than anyone that what is lived is lived-spoken, that, born at this depth, language is not a mask over Being, but —if one knows how to grasp it with all its roots and all its foliation — the most valuable witness to Being, that it does not interrupt an immedation that would be perfect without it, that the vision itself, the thought itself, are, as has been said, ‘structured as a language,’ are articulation before the letter, apparition of something where there was nothing or something else (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 126).

ii Saussurian linguistics considers langue, the study of the structural formation of the formal rules of language (langage), as the appropriate object for linguistic science to the exclusion of parole, the expressive act of speech.

iii Reversibility is a term used to describe the relation between a seer and things in the sensible world in Merleau-Ponty’s late ontology of the flesh. In order to see or touch, one must also be able to be seen or be touched, as both seer and thing must be mutually present to one another in the same world. And the reversibility modelled on the relation between the seeing/visible body and what it sees extends also to the manner by which things become visible from out of the invisible, or the sensible, which Merleau-Ponty refers to as dehiscence or écarts, and which I imply through my discussion of Merleau-Ponty’s use of the diacritical relation. For a more extensive account of Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis, see M.C. Dillon’s Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology.

iv “[T]he event in its initial alterity cannot arise from the world to which we are attuned in meaning. The discordance cannot come from a spoken word” (Lyotard 2011, 17).

v “…what defines the voice, as opposed to the cry, is that it is articulated.” (Barbaras 2004, 289).

vi Since some sound results from bone conduction, “most writers” concur that even highly deaf individuals can to a degree, ‘hear’ by a general vibration (Ihde 2007, 44). As such, this paper envisions the intersensoriality of vibration as a ‘sounding,’ to account for divergences in how sounded phenomena is experienced in its manifestation.

Bibliography


Ontological Vibrations in Merleau-Ponty: Metaphor, Voice, and Linguistic Figuration

This paper contends that Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s use of metaphor and figurative language to describe his late ontology has a philosophical purpose that is not reducible to allusion or analogy. Reading Merleau-Ponty’s account of sense-making in language alongside the genesis of the sensible world establishes the relation between language and Being as more than metaphorical. Merleau-Ponty’s account of language and expression, with explicit regard to the speech act, demonstrates why it is necessary for Merleau-Ponty to go beyond metaphor. Addressing the problem of metaphorical language’s arbitrary relation to the sensible world, this paper examines whether incorporating speech into language allows it to access the world, or whether it is incapable of signifying beyond itself. Since Merleau-Ponty locates the root of language in bodily phonation, all language gains intelligibility in its concrete sounding. Using examples from music and visual art in a general sense, alongside Merleau-Ponty’s specific sound related and vibrational metaphors, this paper claims that vibration acts as a linguistic figure in Merleau-Ponty’s late philosophy. Ultimately, since vibrational metaphors connote and denote both meaning and Being, they serve to indicate a mode of access to the movement of Being, rather than merely alluding to its abstract properties.