

Phenomenology of speech in a cold place: The Polar Eskimo language as “lived experience”

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The first-hand experience of learning an alien language is seldom the subject of a discussion on phenomenology, and yet the insights from fieldwork can be very rich in this regard. Immersed in a very different language culture where the pragmatics of silence, jokes and gestures have to be carefully interpreted to be understood, this article explores briefly a number of issues relevant to the phenomenology of speech such as the arbitrariness of the sign. In doing so, it engages with language, indigenous environmental philosophy as well as ‘ways of speaking and knowing’. These issues are discussed both from the perspective of fieldwork and from that of my informants – the Inugguit of north-west Greenland, a remote community of Arctic pseudo hunter-gatherers. It is shown that an intersubjective, non-Cartesian approach to language shared by this Arctic speaker community leads one to question some of the assumptions underpinning contemporary linguistic research. Further research is encouraged in order to develop a more complete and comprehensive phenomenology of speech whose basis should be the anthropology of experience and a healthy scepticism towards determinate systems of knowledge.

Keywords: Language; Polar Eskimo; Arbitrariness of the Sign; Philosophy of Nature; Semiotics; Linguistic Phenomenology; Semantic Transparency; Morphosemantics; Inugguit

1. Introduction

This article is unapologetically subjective. As its subject matter, it has my own experience of learning *ab initio* a poorly documented dialect spoken in the remote north-west corner of Greenland by 700 Arctic Inuit hunters. This is the last in a string of languages which I have learnt throughout my life, but this time the exceptional context led me to ponder various aspects of what one might call the ‘experience (or indeed the ‘feel’) of language’. With respect to the other languages, the first major contextual difference is that this is the

first language that I have learnt which has no established written tradition (the written norm is Standard West Greenlandic (SWG) – a related language which is used in education, media and that all the Inugguit can speak); other differences are that it is a language spoken in a diglossic context with only 770 speakers and it is a language I learnt over the course of a year, studying intensively *in situ* without ‘leaving the field’, with minimal contact with the outside world and with very few learning materials.¹ All these factors contributed to the formation of ideas pertaining to linguistic phenomenology which I am going to discuss here.

The language has various names, but is known internationally as Polar Eskimo and that is the term that I will use for the purposes of this article (the word ‘Eskimo’ is not pejorative in this part of Greenland). The term that I use to refer to the group of Polar Eskimo speakers is Inugguit which is a self-imposed demonym meaning literally ‘the big people’. They are a sub-group of the Inuit. The language is a member of the Eskimo-Aleut family of languages, which to an extent form a dialect continuum around the circumpolar region, reflecting the previous nomadism of some of the Inuit groups. Polar Eskimo is strictly speaking a dialect of Canadian Inuktitut (North Baffin Island dialect) spoken in Greenland. A significant proportion of the population had travelled in various waves of migration, the last of which was in the nineteenth century, across the Smith Sound from Baffin and Ellesmere Islands in Canada to Greenland (probably for hunting reasons). Reflecting the aberrant phonology of the dialect of North Baffin Island, the language is not typically understood elsewhere in Greenland, and this is one of the reasons which makes it rather anomalous. UNESCO considers the language to be ‘vulnerable’. The language transmission process is intact, but Polar Eskimo has a small number of speakers, and the community *per se* is to some degree threatened by political factors and climate change.

As with many Eskimo-Aleut languages, Polar Eskimo makes use of a small phonemic inventory providing the language learner with the difficulty of a plethora of near-homonyms to distinguish between. In finding one’s way around these, the learner of the Polar Eskimo language is constantly minded of Saussure’s structuralist view that the defining feature of phonemes is how they distinguish themselves from other phonemes (Saussure, 1916). To explain the pronunciation of a difficult phoneme, a Polar Eskimo speaker will choose minimal pairs in two or three near-homonyms, so that the very subtle phonemic difference can be heard as in *anaq* (‘excrement’); *arnaq* (‘woman’);

¹ It is diglossic because there are two related linguistic varieties used in different contexts. SWG, as the ‘high’ variety is the language of education whereas the vernacular language or ‘low’ variety, Polar Eskimo, is used in all other, everyday contexts.

aniq ('woman's older brother'); *anuq* ('dog harness'); *angak* ('maternal uncle'); *anngaq* ('woman's brother's child'); *aanaq* ('grandmother'); *amiq* ('skin, hide'); *amauq* ('great grand-parent'), etc. This is often done with a rather ribald sense of humour, the speaker choosing near-homonyms, one of which typically refers to genitalia.

This article was prompted by living for a year in a society quite different from my own, inhabiting and sharing a kind of existence distinct from the one I knew. Stepping out of my own familiar *Lebenswelt*, I began to wrestle with new questions concerning language, the 'experience of language', epistemology and phenomenology. Living *apart* is a privilege as one encounters unfamiliar ecophilosophies and new perceptual and aural experiences as one embraces the alien sounds of the language one is learning. A new social experience of language can be a sensory rich one and lead to fresh ideas regarding the question of what language actually is, and what is the role of speech as a manifestation of *Being-in-the-world* – the Heideggerian notion that the world and reality are ontologically inseparable (Heidegger, 1990). Working in a predominantly oral culture, the perceptual experience of language became informative for establishing an ontology of language in the context of phenomenology.

Using phenomenology as a framework for couching my thoughts, this meta-level discourse does not constitute an analytical, philosophical approach to language which sees language as a vehicle for exploring logic, truth and meaning. It does not represent therefore an artificial view of language where man is absent. I am instead concerned here with the 'experience of language' as the person's subjective assessment of listening to speech and the sounds around him. Fieldwork is surely concerned with the experience of subjectivity. This article subscribes to the Heideggerian belief that if we reduce our understanding to an objective opinion, bracketing out all prior experiences and emotion, then we ultimately bracket out the meaningfulness of the experience we are trying to explore.

The approach assumed here is an holistic, (not atomistic) approach to language that looks at 'speech situations' (Lanigan, 1972) derived from the context of certain fieldwork encounters in an attempt to answer Searle's opening (1969, p. 3) question of 'how do words relate to the world?' - or perhaps with Polar Eskimo it is more a case of 'how do sounds relate to the world?' In doing so, I consider words and sounds as the embodiment of the 'lived world'. That is to say, they are existentially significant, part of existence and not detached from it. In the spirit of Austin's linguistic phenomenology of the 'total speech act' that must be seen in the 'total speech situation' (Austin, 1962, p. 52), this is a descriptive paper, applied to a specific language spoken

in a very specific context. It is an article about real situations and contexts in which utterances occur.

2. Phenomenology of language

The phenomenology of language is a subject that has more or less been ignored by the majority of linguists and one that linguists and ‘innatists’ working in the generative framework would actively disregard. Its key ideas have been taken up by a small number of philosophers who work in the tradition of continental philosophy, but the overall impression is that it is a topic that has been on the demise following the premature death of Merleau-Ponty. At the time of his death, Merleau-Ponty was not finished with the phenomenology of language project (Merleau-Ponty, 1964) and it remains incomplete to this day. However, it is a branch of linguistic philosophy that needs to be developed further to save the study of language from the formalists and universalists who are determined to keep man out of the equation when it comes to developing linguistic theory. If Merleau-Ponty had been looking for a ‘deep structure’ in language, it would have been a primordial and not a cognitive one. It is time to return to the mindset that it is acceptable to pursue the study of language in such a perceptual, non-empirical manner, taking one’s inspiration from the phenomenological *lifeworld* and looking at language as more of an inner process rather than a cognitive code. Exploring the vitality of language need not be a literary pursuit either, but is something that should be actively undertaken by linguists, anthropologists and phenomenologists.

Phenomenology is the science of experience or a method of reflective attentiveness that focuses on the individual’s first hand inner ‘lived experience’. The general attraction of phenomenology as a means of framing my thoughts about language following this fieldwork experience was that it represents a desire for a philosophy of language rooted in a description of the experience of beings who are ‘in the world’ rather than attempts at general ‘theories’ or ‘systems’. ‘Being in the world’ means to not simply represent the world as a pure object of knowledge from a point outside the world, but to actively participate in it as one does in long-term ethnographic fieldwork. Phenomenologists want us to return to the ‘immediate experience of the world’ and there can be no better context for doing this than being embedded in an alien culture in a strange place, relating things as they are viewed and perceived immediately before you, and not as science describes them. A key concept of Heideggerian phenomenology is *Mitsein* ‘Being-with- (others)’ and this was perhaps the most important ingredient of my fieldwork, being surrounded by those who shared a different worldview, and perhaps a different concept of what the ‘experience of language’ is. It is perhaps

surprising that phenomenology, the work of Michael Jackson aside, has not been used more in such long-term ethnographic fieldwork contexts.

The language of phenomenology, in the case of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty at least, can be poetic and evocative and in order to develop a phenomenology of language, one needs to have a 'feel' for the language in the same way that a poet does. Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 217) spoke of language as 'singing in the world' by which he meant the relationship between the word and what it signifies is 'motivated' because words express the emotional essence of our encounters in the world. Different cultures express the world differently. However, Merleau-Ponty is concerned with more than the 'word', and embraces instead all the gestural 'significations' of language—phonemes, voice, intonation, gestures, movement of the body, the way the word resonates with its surroundings, etc.

My time in the Arctic was characterized by a distinct sense of poetic thinking which would remain with me throughout my fieldwork, but that is totally absent here in England now that I have lost the privilege of being the 'outsider'. This is perhaps another reason why phenomenology seemed like the perfect tool for framing my ideas. Thinking about language in phenomenological terms does not, however, amount to mere poetic Romanticism. Heidegger thought that the language of poetry took us back to pre-linguistic meaning, the structures of primordial human experience and the essence of phenomenology. Whilst the Polar Eskimos would not consider themselves poets, the plasticity of their language borne from its morphological structure lends a degree of linguistic innovation and creativity which is poetic in nature. This innovation is important as it shows how new lexical constructions bring out the phenomenological meaning inherent in the structures of experience. Not exactly neologisms as new words are not being 'coined' in any way, these lexical innovations are able to designate new realities. With a suffixing morphological structure where there tends to be a one-to-one ratio between form and meaning and where affixes can be combined in creative ways, semantic meaning does not tend to be lost in allomorphy. Moreover, the coalescence of the noises of nature, the Arctic landscape, and the sounds of the Polar Eskimo language are primordial in their appeal, taking us back to the origins of language and poetry in the Heideggerian sense.

Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 84) tells us that 'we must study the subject who is actually speaking' in an attempt to unite language to the lived-experience of the body-subject. By doing so, we are able to focus on the immediacy of speech in a pre-reflective context. Merleau-Ponty believed that one could only get a sense of language by speaking and listening to it, not from reading. It is

not the written word or the codified form that goes hand-in-hand with discovering a new *Lebenswelt* and that is why the title of the article talks of a Phenomenology of Speech (and not Language). As Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 83) put it: 'To know what language is, it is necessary first of all to speak. It no longer suffices to reflect on the language lying before us in historical documents of the past'. This is why we have to get back to the spoken word. Contemporary linguistic research with its overwhelming bias towards syntax, semantics and phonology chooses not to engage with the Merleau-Pontian perceptual experience of language. And yet, it is imperative to appreciate what people 'do with words' in a natural context in order to be able to study language. Fieldwork in maximally 'other' linguistic scenarios is a vehicle for shaping one's thoughts and ideas surrounding language because one cannot 'experience' language in the same way if one does not step outside the familiar conventions and typologies of one's mother tongue language.

Through hearing and speaking an alien language, one experiences the consciousness of the other but it is subjective because it is based on the primacy of perception which is personal, individual and coloured by one's own cultural background. The language of the Inugguit may have sounded primordial to me in the sense of perhaps reflecting the raw sound and movement of the elements, but surely not to the native speakers of the language. In such a fieldwork situation, one embraces a new level of consciousness as one's natural and cultural environment is so new and alien. The awareness of the speaking subject and his language is a perceptual one and is linked to the experience of learning the language as one tries to internalise new bundles of resonances which at this initial stage are still just the fuzzy, indistinct sounds of the language. It is not long before one tries to string these alien sounds together to see if they fit the few pre-established linguistic patterns bouncing around in one's mind. The initial perceptual consciousness of a *new* language is important because it introduces you to the rhythm of the language which becomes a 'determined' framework of sounds for learning the idiom. In learning a new idiom, one can soon appreciate the language at a sonic macro-level or 'immediate value as a whole' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 40). After all, it is when a language is not comprehensible to us, that it has its biggest impact on our senses.

Once these sounds have been internalized, the language learning process becomes much easier even if one does not yet know what the words mean or how the syntax or morphology works. Phenomenology dictates that music precedes grammar and semantics, and that was definitely the case in the experience of learning Polar Eskimo. If you are listening to an alien sounding language in which you understand almost nothing, as was my initial linguistic experience, a language where you simply cannot distinguish when one word

begins and ends, a language which contains sounds that one has never heard before, one is inclined to return to this kind of primordial sense of appreciating language as first and foremost sound and music, and not words and grammar. It is a language's music, rhythm, intonation patterns and combination of phonemes that gives us its appeal and personality. It is these immediate and subjective features which contribute to the phenomenology or essence of language.

Responding to the speech and language you hear is a necessarily subjective practice. As Lanigan (1977, p. 102) notes, 'perception and expression in this dimension are only distinguishable by and to the other person' - the interlocutor will be making his own assessment of the other person's speech. Through speaking comes the consciousness of the person himself: 'a friend's speech over the telephone brings us the friend himself' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 43). Phenomenology represents a 'rediscovery of the subject in the act of speaking, as contrasted to a science of language which inevitably treats this subject as a thing' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 104). If we are to subscribe to the indigenous and Merleau-Pontian view on language, then there are reasons why we should think of the Polar Eskimo language (and presumably language *per se*) as more of a 'being' than a 'thing' or a 'means' (Merleau-Ponty, 1964, p. 43).

Structurally, the language is not static, allowing one to create new words that have never been uttered before, moulding words to precise thoughts through the use of affixation and highly productive morphological patterns. For example, one could take the affix - *lugginnaqtoq* 'in vain, not seriously' and add it to a stem where you might not expect it such as *neri-* 'to eat'. It may seem like an unconventional thing to say 'to eat in vain, not seriously', but the fact that it is a 'potential' word in Polar Eskimo is important. In such a language, one can define the stems and affixes but not all the lexemes (or dictionary words) as one can in English.

One might be inclined to think of the Polar Eskimo language as somehow *alive* as it is almost as if words have some autonomy of their own because in certain contexts the lexicon is not simply used time and time again to the point that they just become arbitrary signifiers. The language is alive with an ontological dimension and open to new shades of meaning through the addition of potentially a vast number of affixes. Words only come alive when stems and affixes combine. This means that language has the ability to surprise, perhaps through the unusual compounding of affixes. Through metaphor, simile and unusual juxtaposition of words, poetry surprises us and makes us stop and think in the same way. Our own everyday language is, however, overwhelmingly conventional and predictable as we use for the

most part a limited vocabulary time and time again.

3. Polar Eskimo and phenomenology of language: The case of arbitrariness

This *lived* ‘experience of language’ that I have been referring to is something one can only encounter as an adult learner of a second language. It is the experience of ‘living and doing culture’ that gives you bit-by-bit access to the distinct ‘semantic deep structure’ (Friedrich, 1979, p. 34) of a language—a meta-domain of semantic categories specific to the culture expressed through the language. This cultural semantic code can only be understood by being in that ‘linguistic world’ for an extended period of time. In the case of Polar Eskimo, this code relates principally to hunting, climate, traditional food, domestic life, what remains of animist thinking, etc.

Gaining a consciousness of language means being introduced to the ‘rhythm’ and phonological structure of a language which is not arbitrary as it is often assumed. The phonological patterns of its speakers are specific, peculiar and shaped by a host of complex cultural, social and environmental factors. One suspects that this is especially the case in the indigenous languages of hunter-gatherers where there has been minimal language contact and where the groups still live in ‘harmony with nature’ such as the Polar Eskimos. Here the sounds of the Arctic hunters’ speech seem to almost merge with the noise of the wind, and the slow rhythm of their speech mirrors the moving soundscape.

There is evidence in language of a non-arbitrary relationship between the physical aspect of a speech signal and its meaning. As an example, words in English beginning with *fl-* often suggest lightness and quickness (*fly, flee, flow, flimsy, flicker*, and *fluid*) and those beginning with *gl-* often refer to light (*gleam, glisten, glow, glint, glitter*, and *glimmer*). Sound symbolism or phonosemantics as this has been called (Jespersen, 1922, pp. 408-11) has been much discussed on and off since the time of Plato. With a few exceptions (Hinton, Nichols & Ohala, 1994), most linguists consider incidences of sound symbolism to be exceptional. Poets are of course aware of this sound symbolism and exploit it in the use of alliteration and other tools, but some speakers of indigenous languages know of this too. Polar Eskimo might look like a phonosemantic language. For instance, most words related to ‘seeing’ begin with *ihii-* (*ihiinnaarut* - ‘television’, *ihiluktoq* ‘has bad eyes’, *ihiggauhoq* ‘is visible’, *ihinnaut* ‘iris’ etc.) and words relating to ‘flowing, pouring’ tend to begin with *kui-* (*kuhiriarniq* ‘drop’, *kuihinniq* ‘baptism’), but this is actually a different issue and what one might call lexical *ex interno* reproduction, i.e. productive stems are engineered to produce new words and phrases using

indigenous stems and words already in the language. Words relating to 'seeing' begin with *ihii-* because that is the stem meaning 'to see' and *kui-* is the stem referring to 'flows, pours'. Polar Eskimo may well be phonosemantic in places, but that is not the same thing as saying that the language is shaped to some degree by the natural environment as in phonosemantics the motivation is a sound symbolic one where groups of meanings cluster around a particular phoneme (and perhaps its reduplication).

Many indigenous people speak of a subtle link between language, the senses and the landscape, reckoning that this bond takes us back to the very foundations of language. The Polar Eskimos speak of the smell of the winds in certain places and believe that their language is shaped by the natural environment. Reciting Valery, Merleau-Ponty would write in *The Visible and the Invisible* (1968, p. 155) of language being everything 'since it is the voice of no one, since it is the very voice of things, the waves and the forests . . .' — a view that would resonate certainly with some of the Inugguit.

There is no doubt that in this corner of the Arctic, the words share the rhythm and lilt of the local soundscape. Language seems to lie at the deep structure of the sensory landscape and for many indigenous people around the world is more than a detached and abstract set of grammatical and syntactic rules. It is surely the Chomskyan theories of language that are disembodied as they rely upon man's metaphysical detachment from the world. As Verhaar (1963, p. 13) puts it, 'linguistics is not concerned with the totality of the human experience, but a phenomenology of speech would surely try to determine the place of speech with regard to this totality of human experience'. Without wishing to romanticize, the *lived* experience of speaking Polar Eskimo is to some degree to speak the sounds of nature.² In the case of Polar Eskimo, sitting in one's hut listening to a story-teller uttering a host of almost indistinguishable palatal fricatives sounding like the wind blowing across the ice sheet, one cannot help but focus on the inner content or the primordial sounds of language. In such a context, there is a convergence of perception and expression where speaking and the *Lebenswelt* are intertwined.

Throughout the fieldwork, it was the 'speaking' that was the essence of consciousness because the voice of the hunter and story-teller was transcendent, reverberating in my head long before I could form a correct grammatical sentence in the language. In such a context, surrounded and penetrated by this originality of speech, one has a chance to overcome the

² In certain Canadian Inuit communities, there is a history of throat-singing which is a form of entertainment which mimics explicitly the sounds of nature (such as the walrus). For no apparent reason, this tradition was, however, never established in north-west Greenland.

bias of dualism inherent in western thinking on language. We are part of it. One cannot have this experience if working with one's mother tongue as the relationship and experience is quite different because the level of consciousness is lower. By going through this experience of 'entering into language and submitting to it' in this Heideggerian way, I found my own poetic voice.

Learning a polysynthetic language such as Polar Eskimo with highly productive morphological patterns, one is exposed to new grammatical algorithms all the time. Being an agglutinative language, words are formed by gluing lots of segmentable affixes together to create what would be sentences in English. The affixes can be single or compound morphemes and have independent semantic and/or grammatical meaning. There are over 400 affixes to learn and every verb can decline potentially up to 700 different ways with thousands of potential compound affixes. With a system of agglutinative affixes, it is possible for words to be at least 50 letters long as in the example below. This is a sentence that one of my informants used whilst telling a story about walrus hunting:

*Aivvaqatauqattarhamamhukkalaanga ilaanni, qanuq agkurniggaa taunna
aavirhuup amir'dahiunguqpagguaqatauqattaramannngitsurruugama
nalorhorruiga*

'Although I have taken part in walrus hunts I don't really know about how walruses are divided up since I haven't taken part in hunts involving many people.'

The penultimate word of the sentence is 49 letters long and can be parsed as follows:

amir'dahiu-ngu-qpaggua-qata-u-qattar-rama-nngitsur-ruu-gama

'because I have not taken part in (hunts) many involving so many people'

Many (verbal quantifier stem)-be (infix 'to be' after double vowel)-greatly (quantifier infix)-participant-be-repeatedly (iterative aspect affix)-have (perfective)-not (negation infix)-intensifier-1sg. causative

Working with a language such as Polar Eskimo, one is minded of the issue of form-meaning arbitrariness which Merleau-Ponty engages with in his discussion of Saussure. Merleau-Ponty does not find the linguistic sign arbitrary in the same way that Saussure does because he sees the movement

of the body in making the sounds of language as a form of 'motivated' embodiment. This is part of his gestural theory of language where speech sounds are integrated into bodily behaviour. The Saussurean opposition between the 'sign' and the 'signified' is less relevant to Merleau-Ponty because language (gesture) and its meaning are interwoven and not two opposing realities. As with the Heideggerian ontology, he sees the perceptual act and linguistic expression emerging from silence and his philosophy of language focuses on *parole*, the 'signified', or meaning which is enacted in a verbal and non-verbal sense but which is inseparable from it, and not *langue* which refers to the total structure of 'signs'. Unlike Saussure, Merleau-Ponty does not subordinate speech to language and does not reduce language to something contingent on thought.

In the Saussurean sense of the word, one finds 'arbitrariness' in all natural languages, but it would seem that in such a rich polysynthetic, agglutinative language, there is relatively less arbitrariness. Arbitrariness is normally discussed at the level of the word, but there is the question of what arbitrariness means vis-à-vis words, when the words we are talking about represent what are sometimes known as 'phonological words' or long concatenations of morphemes. The 'signifier' 'table' is often given as an example of arbitrariness, i.e. there is no inherent reason why we should use the word 'table' to refer to the four-legged object on which we place things, but over time the reference 'table' becomes automatic and the sense of arbitrariness is forgotten.

In Polar Eskimo, the significant morpho-semantic plasticity provides scope for the creation of new 'phonological words' all the time to express, as we have seen, what would require a full sentence in English. In Polar Eskimo, one does not just take down words unthinkingly from the mental shelf and reproduce them. Sometimes, one does that. But often, one thinks about 'the realities we talk about' (Austin, 1962, p. 182) and then shapes the word exactly to the thought, by adding a variety of semantically transparent affixes, creating a very specific meaning through the process of compounding. This is once again the experience I had of learning the language, but it is presumably quite different for the Inuguit who do not have to stop and ponder complex lexical formulations. One can mould the extended phonological word to the reality one endeavours to describe. For example, in the word:

haaviniarru'dluuarhinnaqtorleqahoqqahortuuhaaqihor'dluhoq

'and so he had probably begun to be completely deprived of anyone to turn to'

haag-vvik-niar-erut-'dluarhinnaqtoq-leqahoq-qqahoq-tuuhaaqihor-lu-hoq

'turn to' (verbal stem)- 'place' (nominaliser infix)-future (future tense infix)-'deprive of'- (verbal infix that follows future tense infix)'completely' (compound adverbial infix)-'has begun to' (verbal infix)-perfect (perfect tense infix)-'probably' (compound adverbial infix)-'and so' (enclitic)-3rd ps. sg. indicative.

In situations such as this, one might be inclined to reconsider the Saussurean notion of arbitrariness which Merleau-Ponty took issue with. Whilst it is not the case that single morphemes are 'motivated', in the case of certain words in Polar Eskimo which are made up of a stem and multiple affixes where there is little allomorphy and a high degree of morpho-semantic transparency, the 'word' as the object of Saussure's writings on arbitrariness, does not look very arbitrary. Considerations of onomatopoeia and sound symbolism aside, the word in the context of an agglutinative language such as Polar Eskimo is in fact a non-arbitrary collection of arbitrary, but transparent morphemes (once one knows the phonological assimilation rules). Polar Eskimo is of course not exceptional in this regard. There are a large number of such polysynthetic, agglutinative languages in the world. With regards to arbitrariness, semantic transparency is, I think, key to the discussion here.

For example, one might assume the same principle would apply to compound nouns in German, but it is not quite so. Every native German speaker can tell you that *Geschwindigkeitsbegrenzung* 'speed limit' is a compound of the two nouns *Geschwindigkeit* 'speed' and *Begrenzung* 'limit'. But, the German speaker will not be able to tell you what *-keit* means. It is just a nominalizing suffix. In Polar Eskimo, there is a higher degree of transparency, and thus in a Polar Eskimo speaking environment language and meaning seem to almost sit on top of each other giving the sense that language is perhaps less of a detached object. With gesture acting as an important form of communication in this community too, there is more the sense of 'generating the world' (Lanigan, 1977, p. 84) from the verbal and non-verbal language you use, or at least there appears to be a 'sharpened awareness of words to sharpen our perception of phenomena' (Austin, 1961, p. 182). This would have certainly been the case historically when the community was pre-Christian and when it was believed shamanic language had a certain power, the shamans being able to 'do things with words'.

One might argue that Polar Eskimo represents simply a different way of packaging the same linguistic content that, say in English, would be spread over a sentence. That is indeed the case, but I would still claim there is relatively less arbitrariness in a language such as this, and that is worthy of comment. Whilst there is inevitably arbitrariness of the sign in the Polar Eskimo language, there is much that is linguistically arbitrary in a European

language, but not in this language. It is not arbitrary because the morphological transparency which one finds in words that refer to even basic count nouns is apparent to everybody. 'Phonological words' are not lexical symbols in the same sense that lexical words are. They are semantic compounds which may act as fixed units, as in the following examples:

If one takes the example *nerrivik*, it is not just a 'table', but is literally a 'place where you eat' coming from the stem *neri-* 'to eat' and *-vik* the nominalizing suffix meaning 'the place' (i.e. 'the place where the food is eaten'). We might take the Saussurean example which he uses to make his point about the arbitrariness of the form-meaning relationship, the word for 'chair', *igguavik*. This comprises the stem *iggu-* 'to sit down' followed by the suffix *-vik*, 'the place where one sits down'. Similarly, the word for 'bed' is *hinigvik* which is made up of the stem *hini-* 'to sleep' and the same suffix *-vik*, meaning therefore 'the place where you sleep'. The word for 'refrigerator' is *ni'dlataaqtitsivik* meaning the 'place where it is rather cold' with the same affix added to *ni'dlataaqtoq* 'is rather cold'.

These words are not arbitrary, but are motivated at the level of the 'word' (and not morpheme). The phonemes chosen to represent the word for 'chair' may well be arbitrary, but the composition of morphemes selected to articulate this are not arbitrary. Unsurprisingly when it comes to loan words, one witnesses arbitrariness in Polar Eskimo. Bloomfield used the example of 'horse' when talking about arbitrariness of the sign. The Polar Eskimos have never had horses but would use the West Greenlandic word *hesti* which is a Greenlandicised version of the Danish loan-word *hest*. Based on my knowledge of Polar Eskimo alone, it would seem that a language shows relatively less arbitrariness of the sign in the absence of language contact. In the case of Polar Eskimo, there are words that are non-arbitrary, but this does not necessarily make them phonosemantic. Native speakers are very much aware of the non-arbitrariness of their words and break them down morpheme-by-morpheme when explaining the meaning of such words. It is this point which seems significant.

Reading back through a year's worth of field-notes, I found time and time again scribblings about the Inugguit having apparently no concept of the 'abstract'. Despite my best efforts, I found it impossible to engage my informants with abstract thoughts. Abstraction is expressed in dreams and other media, but not verbal expression. The Inugguit dream all the time and spend much time talking about their dreams. The dreams are perhaps a condensation of these 'signifiers' which are not expressed verbally. In terms of speech at least, what matters to the Inugguit is first-hand information of the world based on personal experience. They believe that you cannot know

something unless you have experienced it. If asked about something they have not experienced, they would typically answer with *nalorrhorrugia* 'I don't know' (which one hears all the time), answer tangentially or give you contradictory information. And, yet, I discovered towards the end of my stay that there is a word for 'abstract'. The word *erqarhautainaq* means literally 'just a thought' and comprises the stem *eqqar-* 'to think about' followed by two derivational affixes. The people told me the word followed by its literal meaning. Once again, it is clear a high degree of semantic transparency is still very present in their conceptualization of language. When affixes have a compound meaning that is equal to the sum of the parts, as is often the case in polysynthetic languages, collectively and sententially this morphological semantic transparency seems to challenge the conventionally arbitrary nature of the signifier/signified relationship.

The lack of historical linguistic contact with speakers of other language families means that the language has a pure, primordial feel to it, and surely explains in part the pervading morpho-semantic transparency. If the language of north-west Greenland had been heavily influenced by the colonial language, Danish, which is not the case, it could not have the same sense of lack of arbitrariness as lexical composition in Danish does not have the same transparency. It is possible to create this semantic transparency, but in an artificial context. In doing so, the languages that are subject to these policies (Icelandic, Hebrew and Finnish for example) have a different 'feel' because the purism is contrived and sometimes the result of lexical or morphemic recycling. The Icelanders have a puristic language policy which replaces incoming English words with Icelandic neologisms based on recycled Norse roots. These words tend to be semantically totally transparent. The word for 'telephone' is *sími* which comes from the Norse word for 'thread', and the word for mobile telephone became *farsími* or literally 'travelling bit of thread', the *far* morpheme coming from the verb 'to travel'. The logical appeal of these neologisms explains in part their success. To some extent, Polar Eskimo and the other dialects of Greenlandic work like this too, but this is more for reasons of lack of contact and takes us back to the primordial conception of language. In the dialects of Greenlandic, the transparency is grammatical as well as semantic.

4. A way of speaking and knowing

To understand the world of the Inugguit, you need to speak their language, the spoken and the unspoken and to negotiate your way between the expressed and the unexpressed. This raises the question of what it means 'to speak their language' from the perspective of the indigenous people. The Polar Eskimos have clear views about what is 'their language' and what is not.

Certain phonemes have particular salience in language, acting as identifying agents. If one cannot get certain basic sounds right, it cannot be considered that one is speaking the language of the Polar Eskimo irrespective of how good one's vocabulary is. One such sound is the uvular plosive, written typically as /q/. Initially, my rendition of the uvular plosive was too harsh. I was told repeatedly that it was a soft, subtle popping sound and not a harsh, guttural sound. Another Polar Eskimo phonemic identity marker is the glottal stop followed by a plosive where a lateral fricative is found in Standard West Greenlandic. These identity markers have particular salience in Savissivik, a settlement of 40 hunter-gatherers living in an extremely remote community in the southern part of the region that the Inugguit occupy. Despite the size of the community, it is genuinely bi-dialectal as some hunters have come north from Kullorsuaq, the northern most settlement of the Upernivik archipelago to settle there. These people speak a dialect of SWG which is quite different from Polar Eskimo.

Being exposed to a new and completely alien language rekindles a sense of linguistic and intersubjective surprise because unfamiliar words once again become representations of familiar meanings. Words regain their agency because the ready-made-meanings are not yet known. This deinstitutionalisation of speech is deeply refreshing and fills one with a sense of wonder that is normally reserved for children. Hearing their language brought a new dimension to the overall linguistic experience: the long silences were a window onto the primordial, inner world with all its unspoken words and thoughts; the link between the 'way of speaking' and the natural, sensory environment. Silence might mean that the hunters were listening to the 'language' of the animals; the mind of the animals and humans are inextricably linked in these communities and previously it was believed that they shared the same language. Knowledge is encoded too in non-linguistic modes of *Being-in-the-world*. In the world of the Inugguit, animals are on the whole treated with respect, as equals. Unlike in the West, the assumption does not always prevail that *human* language is primary. Integrated into their landscape, listening and silence have traditionally been essential to the Inuit.

My impression was that they did not see silence as 'negation' or 'non-talk' in the way that we in the West might, but instead it was non-verbal communication just as gesture is. Hunters would wander into my hut (nobody knocks), sit down silently and say nothing for what seemed like (initially at least) an unfeasibly long period of time. Two hunters meeting on the sea ice in the remote white wilderness might say next to nothing to each other, brew a cup of tea and only then begin to exchange the news. As I came to uncover the meaningful gaps and threads of silence in their language, it also became

apparent to me that the language of the Arctic hunters expresses as much by what is between the words as what is in the words themselves, i.e. silence is meaningful.

Learning to understand the dynamic of this ‘non-talk’ became important and reminded me that getting to know a language is always much more than just learning a list of words. Another form of non-talk is gesture. Merleau-Ponty (2002, p. 213) said that language is gesture and that could be no more true than in this community where it is the living use of language, the un-writeable that gives the spoken utterance its illocutionary force. Voice quality and facial gesture are an important means of ‘embodied’ linguistic meaning in this community. Raised eyebrows means ‘yes’, pinching one’s nose at the top means ‘no’, and the ubiquitous shrug of the shoulders means simply ‘maybe’. Language is particularly full of gesture when it comes to moral evaluation.

A language is a collection of statements about the world delivered in a multitude of voices set to a background of music. There is a difference between being able to speak a language fluently and to speak a language like a native. The latter requires first and foremost a mastery of the language’s paralinguistic features – in the case of Polar Eskimo, a rich and never random repertoire of sighs and groans and a specific mix of intonation patterns and gestures accompanying particular words and phrases. Certain bundles of these features are used when one listens to a story being told: the particle *ijaii* has no specific lexical meaning, but is a cue to the story-teller that the listener is engrossed in the story and that he should continue; a very soft, breathy and drawn out *hunaa* is a mild expression of surprise and a certain two-pitched low-high groan means ‘oh, I see. Is that the case?’ Stories are related with eyes lowered and told using a distinctive ‘way of speaking’, an earthy, creaky voice that speaks in a slow, steady rhythm in an authoritative, un-interruptible tone. It is a way of speaking and a primordial voice that takes you back to the rootedness of human language, to the interiority of words as if the *nuna* (‘local cosmos’) is speaking through them. The speech of the Polar Eskimo is guided by his environment, and no more so during story-telling. When the Inugguit speak, they are listening at the same time to the sounds of nature. Speech is therefore used in a careful, measured way. Speech is not just verbal noise, but words are listened to. Sitting in hunters’ homes, hunters might tell me they could hear the breathing of the walrus.

In story-telling, it is the act of speaking in a ‘storied’ way that is as important as the content. Story-telling is a social, humanising occasion and it is the familiar heavy, nasal voice and way of speaking that brings people together after the hunt. The storytellers’ voice conjures up the Arctic environment outside from which the hunters are seeking refuge, sitting together and

enjoying the warmth and the coziness of the hut.

Each language of the world requires a different voice and a phenomenology of language is concerned with getting inside this voice. To be able to speak a handful of languages as a native, you have to be able to act and act well, reproducing exactly certain collocations of words to the rhythm, gestures, flow and timbre of its speakers. This is always more important than just having a large vocabulary or putting the verb in the right place. But in the instance of Polar Eskimo society, one has to learn a different way of speaking and knowing too. In this part of the Arctic, lived practical experience represents in fact a better way of knowing than that which is spoken. Here, actions really do speak louder than words and this fact underpins their ontology of language. Engagement with things produces knowledge, not language alone. Polar Eskimo is a metaphorically weak language with almost no proverbs, and is a community where ways of learning and knowledge are experiential. A father will construct a sledge in silence with his son watching, but will not tell him how to do it. Children are hardly ever instructed to do anything, and coercion of any kind appears not to exist. In fact, there is opposition to spoken instruction, and it might be that the Inugguit subscribe to the belief that linguistic constructs place boundaries on thinking.

It is true that socio-cultural experience is constructed, transmitted and performed through the filter of storytelling, but a more significant medium of instruction and relaying knowledge today is through actions themselves. My intention had been to develop an Ethnography of Speaking, but I soon realised that this was a naïve ambition. The discovery that language was of secondary value turned the project on its head. Elderly people told me in plain, matter-of-fact fashion: 'there was not much need for language in the olden days'. By this, they meant that language was used directionally, 'I am going out hunting', 'I am doing this or that', but there was little debate or discussion about anything. This is only beginning to change now with the discussions that they have on the local radio (Kap York Radio). The radio plays an important part in the lives of the Inugguit, bringing effectively one family together. Entering people's homes, the radio would normally be on, often for much of the day. Male visitors to my hut would often come in, take their boots off and then walk into the living room and turn the radio on.

5. Language and the philosophy of nature

When one looks back at the examples of the deeply complex constructions from the Polar Eskimo language, one cannot help but think that the view of certain scholars that primitive languages lack precision was flawed (Bauman & Briggs, 1990, p. 62). It might be that it was the complex morphology which

was considered to make the language 'primitive'. However, this 'precision' is achieved through considerable morphological complexity involving rules of phonological assimilation, affix ordering and compounding which makes the composition of such words anything but straightforward.

The Eskimo language has evolved to a remarkable precision, reflecting the relationship people have with their land in all its subtlety. This precision was a matter of survival. As Jenkins (2005, p. 64) tells us, the Copper Eskimos had no generic word for fish, but there were distinct words for 'Arctic Char', depending on whether the speaker meant Arctic Char that were running upstream, Arctic Char that were moving down to the sea, or Arctic Char that remained all year in the lake. It was believed that one could not survive in this society without being able to speak the Polar Eskimo language as there is so much knowledge bound up in the language. There are of course many other examples of this such as all the words for ice formations, but once again no generic word for snow. The Inugguit differentiate between *aput* ('snow on the ground') and *qaniit* ('falling snow'). There are a large number of words for different types of seal, such as: *uuttoq* 'seal that has crept up on the ice to bask in the sun'; *qakiqitoq* 'seal that has crawled up onto the ice'; *puigaqtoq* 'seal that has come up to breathe'; *ippigaqtoq* 'seal that dips its head down while the rest of its body remains on the surface' etc. The Inugguit do not tend to have categories or concepts, but words referring to very specific things.

It is felt that the language of the 'white man' was ill-equipped to survival in such a place because it is vague, imprecise and not shaped to the natural environment. However, language and nature are for the Inugguit intertwined. Whilst the *kadluna* ('white man') draws boundaries between the Self and the world, at times they are for the Inugguit almost inseparable. The use of the word, *hila*, meaning consciousness, mind and weather is indicative of this Polar Eskimo refusal to separate mind and nature. When the weather was bad '*hila naammangitsoq*' which in their terms typically meant when there was mist, fog (*pujoq*) or low-dense cloud giving a feeling of oppression or closeness, people would often complain of head-aches. For the *inuk*, the natural environment is an extension of the human mind. My perception of their place expressed in terms of wilderness, vacuity and vastness was surely shaped by the Cartesian 'detachment' from the world which, phenomenologists aside, characterizes Western thinking. Conceptions of nature are socially constructed and I was trying to project my dualistic notion of the universe as an ontological paradigm. The diametrically opposing ontology of an existential man-nature enmeshment or intertwinement is, however, characteristic of the *inuk* and other indigenous Arctic hunter groups. In their mindset, nature is not entirely separate from or subordinate to humanity. For the Inugguit, the conceptual distance between nature and

humanity is in fact very narrow and the environmental crisis is a philosophical crisis. Their mindset is a challenge to the anthropocentrism of the West, and questions the supposed moral superiority of human beings over other species on the planet. This philosophy has had a distinct appeal for the occasional outsider.

In the months of May and June last year, I was living in Siorapaluk — the northern most permanently inhabited settlement in the world with a population of 59. As I say, it is in these remote Arctic communities, the natural environment or *pingortitaq* determines mindset and thinking. *pingortitaq* comprises the stem *pi-* 'to realise, to objectify', *-nngor-*, the infix meaning 'making of' and the affix, *-titaq* meaning 'the process of becoming' and thus means literally 'that that has been created'.

During my stay in the settlement, I spent many an afternoon chatting to a Japanese man who had come to north-west Greenland as part of a scientific expedition forty years ago. Ikua Oshima was in his twenties at the time and he decided there and then not to return to his homeland, choosing instead the life of an Arctic hunter. One afternoon, he popped round with a gift of some fresh musk-oxen meat and over a cup of coffee, I asked him why he chose to stay. He looked out of the window, eyes fixed on his dog team skulking on the sea ice and after an unfeasibly long silence, Ikua uttered one word with a great sense of purpose, *ihumaninahorjamahunga*. The word *ihumaninahorjamahunga* comprises the stem, *ihumani*, meaning 'thought' followed by 3 derivational affixes and 1 inflectional affix, *-na-* means 'in order to', *-hor-* 'open to', *-jama-* means 'want' and *-hunga*, the 1s sg. indicative. He was telling me that he chose to live in the Arctic wilderness because he wanted his mind 'to be open to thoughts'. As there is no dictionary for Polar Eskimo and because it is essentially a sentence expressed in one phonological word, there is little chance that the word would be found in any Greenlandic dictionary. We, native English speakers, are used to working with such a heavily codified norm that if we cannot find the word in a dictionary, we assume that it does not exist and is therefore an incorrect form.

Given its linguistic structure, the lack of codification and the experiential nature of society, the value of language is inevitably quite different in this community. Not only is the philosophy of the Polar Eskimos non-Cartesian, but their conceptualisation of language is such that they might not recognise it as a separate ontological category because it is not objectified to the same degree as it is in Western societies. Its tendency for such semantic specificity and lack of generic concepts means that the language is interwoven into the landscape and natural environment, and therefore does not stand apart. This view is enforced by the fact that the absence of a standardised written norm

for the language they speak means that the language cannot be pinned down and boxed up in a reified form, but instead floats above other phenomena. This indigenous ontology is once again a reflection of the phenomenological approach to language which is based on the paradigm that rejects the subject-object division. In a society where many children are considered the embodiment of their ancestors and thus assume the deceased's name and kinship term, one might even speculate as to whether the language they use is their own or not. It might be that the reborn ancestors have the requisite knowledge at birth, hence there being no need for instruction and language even being perceived as an epistemological interference.

Our experience of language as a written code leads us to objectify the world around us. Language as an ontological category in the west has a tendency to isolate human awareness, to make language a container for our thoughts. I was reminded by my informants that this was not the right approach to learn their language, but of course that was the only way I knew. When I would try and write down their words, the Inugguit would shake their heads. They wished me to prioritise the ear and learn their language without resorting to trying to write words down which is a nigh impossible task for somebody steeped in academic learning and a written tradition. For some, there was a distrust of writing; the ultimate symbol of the Western way of thinking, an exterior façade for the inner sonic reality of spoken words. The feeling was that it was the *spoken* word that represents the mental experience, the written word objectifies language, creating a Cartesian gap between language and the speaker who is placed beyond the realms of the Heideggerian *Being-in-the-world*. And thus once again I was attracted to phenomenology and its focus on the spoken word, and the enmeshment of language and *Lebenswelt* which is so prominent in the indigenous philosophy. But in this pseudo-oral culture, the interface between the spoken and written word is complex and because of the imposition of a written norm, it might be the case that the Inugguit relationship to language is changing. They used to 'inhabit' language, but the sense that they are immersed in language might be fading with the establishment of a written culture, even if it represents a different norm. This means that the primacy of speech is perhaps not what it used to be. Previously, and certainly for some still today, there is an isomorphism between language and landscape in a place where language might have been seen as 'shaped breath' (the words for 'breath', 'wind' and 'spirit' all come from the same stem, *aniri-*) and where the air is full of the noises of nature, animals and humans. Now, with just the remnants of animist beliefs left and with the codification of language, the Inugguit see language increasingly as a human construct, but 'by linking language to breath, and breathing to sound, the vibrational intonation of sound patterns is practiced in all cultures as part of the ritual towards transcendence' (Wautsicher, 1998, p. 9).

Working in the context of a language with no strict written tradition, one cannot help but focus on the 'user of language, the speaking subject', moving away from the notion of language as something static and objective to the experience of the *spoken* word as a 'lived experience'. Merleau-Ponty makes the distinction between a spoken language and a speaking language. The spoken language is the acquired linguistic meanings that I have at my disposal, whereas the speaking language is the expressive gesture which engenders language. From a linguistic perspective, *Being-in-the-world* means becoming part of and internalizing the sensory-perceptual observations that one makes with reference to the 'speaking language'.

6. Conclusion

Phenomenology complements an holistic, fieldwork-based approach to language that engages with the *lived* experience. A phenomenology of speech lends itself to this Arctic pseudo-hunter-gatherer society (and presumably others) for the following reasons: language is not objectified by the Inugguit; gesture and silence which are central to Merleau-Pontian phenomenology are important features of this language culture; there is still a degree of enmeshment between language and nature in the Inugguit psyche.

A phenomenological approach to language allows one to grasp the dynamic of language, going beyond the ethnocentric formalist approach to language, but also enables one to capture the manifold character of *lived* experience. Critics will say that phenomenology lacks rigour, but the 'rigorous' framework that the generativists wish to employ impoverishes our understanding of what 'real' language is and ignores entirely the essence of language. It is the language we use (not the idealised language of Chomskyian theories of syntax) through which we construct reality and this is perhaps the most important lesson of all from long-term fieldwork. Language is not an objective, but an intersubjective phenomenon enabling one to experience the other as a subject and not object. Phenomenology leaves the window open to indigenous views on what language is. Those views put forward by linguists and anthropologists sympathetic to phenomenology are ultimately those of outsiders pitched in an alien environment. Some indigenous speech communities with strong oral cultures regard speech as the primary focus of meaning. It would be going too far to say that the Polar Eskimos view their language as emanating iconically from the sounds of nature, but the resemblance of the hissing, palatal fricative sounds with the sounds of the wind are in their view not coincidental either.

It should be noted that it was immensely difficult to gauge indigenous perspectives on language. The reluctance to engage with any such abstract

views and discussions meant that the only way to solicit answers to such questions is through long-term ethnographic participant observation. In this community, one gets at best tangential answers to direct questions. If one really wants to know what language means to the indigenous population, one has to simply listen and observe and gradually piece the jigsaw together. Having done so, my best conjecture would be that their indigenous phenomenology of language is one that is unlikely to embrace the Saussurean arbitrariness of the sign. Instead, I think they would perceive the relationship between form and meaning to be more one of intimate symbiosis. Historically, when animist traditions, taboo beliefs and shamanic language still prevailed, and when the bond to nature was even closer, I think the role of language would have been more evocative than it is today. More evocative still would have been the mnemonic landscape, the contours of the land, the smells of the winds and the sounds of the creaking ice. Living so close to nature, the Inugguit's extraordinary memory, olfactory sensitivity and proximity of sensory pathways might seem almost synesthetic to us.

In a society where gesture is as important as words, where speech trumps writing, where sitting in a hunters' hut on the sea ice in a gale, the sounds of the storyteller's voice merge with the sounds of nature, one begins to see language as more than just a set of arbitrary symbols and that is one of the many lessons that I took away from the fieldwork. In Polar Eskimo society, sounds relate to the world in the Searlian sense because they are a primordial reflection of the natural environment that embraces them. It is clear then that the Inugguit are phenomenologists in the purest form, having always lived within a non-Cartesian framework of thinking where man and nature are largely co-extensive, where language is not an object but part of this man-nature enmeshment.

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