



There is a language in the landscape: towards an ecology of meaning



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ABSTRACT

The main idea for Jakob Meløe is that our concepts originate in what we do: a toddler's expressions come from the lifeworld and environment of a toddler, and a fisherman's concepts originate in the practice of fishing and a life of seafaring. In this way words are related to a certain practice, but also to a certain place. The landscape that we call home reverberates with our concepts, through our engagement with that environment. This way of thinking about concepts goes against the grain of mainstream cognitivist theories on how human language comes about. Meløe's approach, which he mainly got from Wittgenstein, provides us with an understanding in which humans and environment are not separated, but entwined in an inevitable relationality. By elaborating on this view and connecting it with current works in enactivism and phenomenology, the article moves towards an affective account of perception and concepts. How we make sense of an environment is not solely dependent on knowledge, but also on the ways in which a place and its particular qualities affect us, resonate within us and provide us horizons for meaning. This entails a holistic account in which human language is not separated, transcendent or external to the nonhuman realm, but rather an expression of our affectivity and relationality. Tim Ingold emphasizes this when he notes that the word 'text' contains the original etymology from the Latin *texere*, meaning 'to weave' (2002, 404). Through concepts we create our relations not only *to*, but also *with* the world.

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"Once again, what we say here only applies to originary speech – that of the child who utters his first word, of the lover who discovers his emotion, of the "first man who spoke," or of the writer and the philosopher who awaken a primordial experience beneath traditions." (Merleau-Ponty 2012, 530 n7)

1. Introduction

A question at the core of philosophy: how do our words carry meaning? The answers to this question have generated a vast number of different theories and in a general sense this plethora of ideas mainly reveals the centrality of language in our form of life. I do not see the possibility of an all-encompassing theory that could sufficiently answer this question of

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meaning. However, we might find some clues along the way that reveal some aspects of sense-making, that have gone unnoticed by the mainstream theories in philosophy and linguistics.

In what follows, I will thread on a less travelled path of Norwegian philosopher Jakob Meløe, with the specific aim to articulate how our concepts originate in specific practices, and how they resonate with our environments. The first proposition has gained prominence in current philosophies of language: in Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy, enactivist accounts, American pragmatism and phenomenology. The roots of understanding concepts as situated in practice lead us to Wittgenstein and the linguistic turn that followed his philosophical guidance. Meløe can be seen as one of the clear proponents of this idea, along with others like Avner Baz and Alva Noë. Another tradition with similar aims is Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of language, with current followers like Hayden Kee and Maria Robaszkiewicz. In addition, the legacy of American pragmatism follows the same core ideas, anthropological philosopher Tim Ingold can be seen as its contemporary interpreter. And, most recently, enactivist accounts follow these lines of thought with proponents like Didier Bottineau, Ezequiel Di Paolo, Elena Clare Cuffari and Hanne de Jaeger. What is common for all of these, somewhat disparate, philosophical traditions is the attempt to bring back the question of meaning and sense-making into our everyday experiential life.

This will entail a conceptual investigation through which I will show a common direction for the mentioned theoretical resources. Meløe's work is not empirical in the strict sense, since he did not conduct proper linguistic field research. However, through closely describing instances of our everyday use of language, his anecdotal style aims at articulating certain aspects of language that are common to such an extent that they are hardly detectable. Similarly, phenomenology starts with a close analysis of the structures of subjective experience in order to build a philosophical framework from the bottom up. These approaches aim to reveal what is there in the foundations of our sense-making.

Thus, I do not propose to contribute new knowledge to the language sciences but rather offer some philosophical and conceptual insights which function in support of other more current, empirically oriented frameworks. Neither Meløe's Wittgensteinian approach nor the embodied phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty treat language as something *sui generis*, but rather as an expression of experiential life in general and as an extension of our engagement, orientation and actions. This approach is supportive of and influential for current theories within ecolinguistics, in that the later opposes the *sui generis* status of language in favour of a meshwork approach. By unpacking the reductionist view, that is predominantly present in functionalist linguistic theories in which language works independently of embodied experience and environment, the study of language in ecolinguistics is approached through a plural, multimodal and interdisciplinary methodology (see Li et al. 2020).

Our concepts and their meanings are in this view primarily entangled in what we do, how we perceive the world and our relations to each other. Meløe writes: "This order, and the intelligibility of each of its concepts, collapses if we cut off the links with the practice" (1988, 400). What this entails is that language is not a separate practice latched onto other practices, but rather a part of the continuum of perception, experience and action. More radically put, language does not carry meaning by itself, it is not a separate meaning making practice on top of our ways of seeing, experiencing and doing, but an expression of these. Bottineau articulates this idea as follows: "Speaking does not refer to the world; it causes an experience that happens to coincide or not with the narrow situation or the larger reality such as it is enacted, and has to be mapped against the environmental medium, including the psychological environment" (Bottineau, 2010, 278).

The implication of these philosophical underpinnings that I find important is that linguistic expressions (speech) are not categorically separated from context and environment. Our concepts are ways of establishing relations with the world, with each other and with the places we dwell in. Building on these resources I will firstly elaborate on the importance of the connection between concepts and their use in a specific practice. Secondly, I will extend these notions to also show how our words originate in our relations to specific places. The second claim is less explored in the mainstream of philosophy of language and whereas the resources I have mentioned would not wholeheartedly support this claim, I want to show that there is a clear connection to be made between the understanding of our concepts as situated in practices, and the claim that even human language, in its primary form, is a way of orienting ourselves in a landscape.

2. Acquisition of language?

Some of my son Iggy's first "words" were "haff haff" (imitating a dog), and "bong bong" (imitating the church bells next to our house). What is peculiar about these kinds of onomatopoeic expressions is that they do not simply refer to an external object or subject. They also establish an relation to the elements in the landscape. The church bell chimes, the dog in the park barks, and Iggy echoes these environmental sounds through his expressions that mimic their sonic qualities. What I am getting at here is that when we, as philosophers, think about our concepts as references or abstractions, we forget that from the start they are often not abstract at all. By resounding certain sonic qualities, we acknowledge and pay attention to certain aspects of our environment—emphasize these aspects in relation to others.

This is part of the process of our sense-making. I can gather from his expressions that Iggy finds these specific phenomena—dogs barking and the chime of church bells—as salient compared to other, less significant phenomena. Through being a big part of his life, I also understand why these specific sounds are important for him. The barking is connected to Chica the dog that is part of our family, and through Iggy's relation to her, other dogs have also become a point of interest. Whereas the church bell is constantly present, since the bell tower is close to our top-floor apartment. It often wakes up Iggy

from his daily naps and gives a rhythm to his day. When Iggy starts to mimic these sounds, they tell something about his lifeworld and his connections in the familiar environment.

These first expressions and concepts of a child are an extension of their perception, the “haff–haff’s” and the “bong–bong’s” emphasize what he sees and what he hears, and they also invite us others to join in his perception. This means that Iggy’s expressions belong in, and originate from, a specific environment with a specific soundscape. They are not abstractions or universalising references from the start. In these cases, the expressions are rather enacting certain aspects of Iggy’s experience. They reveal what he perceives and how he perceives. In auditory perception he can mimic the sonic qualities with his voice. This is akin to the act of pointing, when he wants to draw my attention to an aspect in his visual field he simply points toward an object and utters “eeh” to demarcate what he sees and what he wants me to see. Both actions, the mimicking and the pointing, are expressions of a language of perception (see Kee 2020, 919).

Meløe articulates this aspect of language as originating in our lived experience, he notes: “I then remembered, if that is the word, that I learnt to read and to write after I had first learnt to speak, and that much of what I then learnt was matching printed letters to spoken sounds of the sort we call vowels and consonants. The fog lifted, and I saw that the printed words or sentences came alive because the spoken words or sentences were already alive.” (2009, 123).

That is, before our words and concepts take their abstract form in text as universal symbolic signifiers in a formalized system, they are situated in a specific context and a living environment. Ludwig Wittgenstein drove a similar point in his remark: “When philosophers use a word as “knowledge”, “being”, “object”, “I”, “proposition/sentence”, “name” and try to grasp the *essence* of the thing, one must always ask oneself: is the word ever actually used in this way in the language in which it is at home? – What we do is to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use.” (Wittgenstein 2009, §116) When Wittgenstein wrote this remark, he turned against the tradition of logical positivism in which concepts are seen as symbolic referents that primarily originate from axiomatic logical systems. Wittgenstein proposes that what “we” as philosophers should do is to re-situate the concepts in their everyday use, and through this movement again discover their context-dependent meaning¹

This task of returning to the everyday use is the gist of Jakob Meløe’s philosophical project. Meløe describes how a young boy learns to make sense of his environment and his experience of that environment. In a mundane example Meløe lists the environment of sounds of a toddler of 16 weeks called Nikolai: waves beating against the beach, his own crying, barking of a dog, clanking lids, boiling water, bleating sheep, water splashing in the sink, crying seagulls, mother and father talking, etc. Meløe writes: “The people and the animals of this place live in a world that is also a world of sounds. Only occasionally is there no sound to be heard.” (2009, 125) As this sonic environment is constitutive of our experience, an analysis of the toddler’s soundscape can bring forth some important aspects of language acquisition as a process of starting to make sense of the environment. He goes on to elaborate how these sounds are developed into meaning bearing concepts by detecting minute changes in the behaviour of Nikolai.

There are two clear stages in the expressions of the toddler, according to Meløe. The first stage can be understood as a direct expression of experience. When Nikolai is hungry or when he has peed and pooped in his diaper and the pee and poo has dried and become itchy and painful against the skin, he cries as an expression of the discomfort he feels. At a later stage the cry becomes more of a communicative expression. Nikolai has come to know that when he pees and poos in his diaper, it might not at first feel uncomfortable, but rather warm and nice, but he has learned to expect that this will develop into discomfort. He has also learned to associate the sounds connected to relieving him of his discomfort to his mother’s caring reaction on his cry—the steps of his mother walking to him, taking him in her arms and carrying him to the sink that makes a splashing sound when the tap is turned on (as his mother is about to wash his butt). In the second stage Nikolai’s cry is not clearly a direct expression of discomfort, but rather an expression acknowledging the onset of a future discomfort. He has learned that there is a causal² relationship between his cry, the care of his mother, the sound of the running tap, and the relief of the texture of the clean fabric of the new diaper (Meløe 2009, 126–128). In this second stage the cry is communicative and future oriented, an expression of the child interacting with his environment. It is also, not only a reaction to, but moreover, an acknowledgment of the context of the other sonic elements in the house—the cry interacts with the steps of the mother, the splashing of the sink, etc.

The first stage can be described as a primitive expression of direct experience in which the child does not express a propositional content, i.e., a “knowledge” of being in pain—the initial cry is not a concept that refers to an inner mental state—but rather, the cry is the expression of *being in pain* (see Wittgenstein 2009, §246). Merleau-Ponty makes this distinction clear when he writes about anger as a gesture, it “does not *make me think* of anger, it is anger itself” (2012, 190). There is no distance between the experiencing subject and the object of experience. Pain (or anger) is, from a first-person

¹ Developing out of Rudolf Carnap’s *physicalism*, the Vienna Circle aimed at detaching the study of language from the perception and experience of any individual, in order to ground it in the precise universal language of science (see McElvenny 2024, 171). Carnap writes: “Since the terminology of the analysis of language is unfamiliar we propose to use the more usual mode of speech (which we will call ‘*material*’) side by side with the correct manner of speaking (which we will call the ‘*formal*’). The first speaks of ‘objects,’ states of affairs, of the ‘sense,’ ‘content’ or ‘meaning’ of words, while the second refers only to linguistic forms.” (Carnap 1995, 38). By constructing a theory which dismisses all particular and context dependent aspects of sense-making—perception, experience, sense, meaning—the positivists strived at finding the universal signifiers in a logical order of linguistic forms.

² Here the term *causal* is not meant in the strict philosophical sense as a necessary relation between cause and effect, but rather refers to an understanding of the meaningful communication between his expression and the other sounds in the sonic environment.

perspective, something we live through, and the expressions and gestures of pain are entwined in that experience. An expression of pain does not *refer* to a quality of experience, since this form of expression is a manifestation of that quality of experience (see Robaszekiewicz 2024, 148).

The second stage already comes with a developing knowledge of the world—the connection between one's quality of experience and the agency of the other sounds in relation to that state. Nikolai's more developed use of his crying comes with a reflexivity and an expectation of being taken care of before the brunt of discomfort sets in.

The structure described above is compatible with the distributed language perspective in ecolinguistics that distinguishes between first-ordered *linguaging*, which is embodied and context-dependent on the environment, and second order *language*, which consists of patterns and proper words as parts of a symbolic order (Li et al. 2020, 5). When the approach to the study of language emphasizes the verb form (linguaging), embodied expression is at the core of our sense-making. A toddler's primitive expressions enact perceptual and affective embodied states without depending on fully-fledged intentional and reflective cognition. Thus, first order linguaging is present in organisms from birth and can be detected also in non-human forms of organic life (see Couto 2014; Cowley 2024). Whereas an emphasis on second order *language* focuses on the substantive and objective perspective on language, in which words, sentences and patterns are fixed types that can be analyzed independently of their embodied embeddedness and environment (structuralist linguistics would be a prime example). Stephen Cowley describes how the cry of a newborn infant in pain stops when the injury is acknowledged by his mother, he refers to Michael Halliday's anecdote about his 12-day old son. According to Cowley this is already communicative expression in the sense that "he inhibits [his crying] and, by so doing, coordinates with his parents' perceiving, acting and, thus, construals of experience." (2024, 91) The cry is sense-making, due to the dynamics between the mother's perception and acknowledgement and the toddler's moderation of the cry. In this sense, the scope of what we mean by language is expanded to include non-discursive, pre-intentional, pre-reflective and embodied aspects.

This does not eradicate the fact that the development into speaking subject requires the skill of using patterns, sentences and words that belong in a given grammatical framework. At a certain stage the child enters a world of conceptual spoken language, when gestures become *linguistic gestures* that belong to a natural language. What I have described above is the form of sense-making which precedes the linguistic stage. The simple point being that sense-making is not activated by proper linguistic communication or built on propositional language, although sense-making does gradually become more communicative, fine-grained and complex when we develop spoken conceptual language.

The importance of acknowledging this distinction is that the second stage would not be possible without the existence of the first. Merleau-Ponty shows how language originates in these primal expressions and gestures, it is because we have an experience of pain, anger and discomfort, etc., that we have expressions and gestures of them. Wittgenstein is making a similar demarcation, when he criticizes the idea of a private language. The expression of pain is not a reference to some internal, and for others hidden, psychological state, the expression *is pain*, not a referential or representational description of pain (2009, §289–292). Only because language, in its initial stage, is enveloped in our experiential life, may it develop toward an abstract, referential and indexical symbolic system. It does not work the other way around; a symbolic system cannot create our experiential life. Tim Ingold develops this point:

In short, language—in the sense of the child's capacity to speak in the manner of his or her community—is *not acquired*. Rather, it is an ability that is continually being generated and regenerated in the developmental contexts of children's involvement in worlds of speech. And if language is not acquired, then there can be no such thing as an innate language acquisition device. [...] In reality, as Dent has pointed out, there can be no mechanisms in advance of experience, since no matter at what point in development the mechanisms are identified, the individual at that point already has a history of interaction with the environment (Ingold 2002, 398–399).

The logic that I stress here discloses the fact that all of these thinkers (Meløe, Wittgenstein, Ingold and Merleau-Ponty) acknowledge that language is with us from the very start in its primal form. A child develops his or her communication, along the lines that Meløe's example reveals. We become communicative speakers as we are cultivated into a symbolic order of signs. However, expression is there from the very start, it develops and takes abstract forms, but initially it is the way in which we resonate in the world and the way in which the world resonates in us³

3. The natural harbour

In what I have covered so far, the topic has been the development of language for a child (learning to speak). However, the more general point about how our concepts are embedded in the perceptual environment is expanded by Meløe as an articulation of the ecology of language.

His project aims at revealing an aspect of language that often goes unnoticed in more intellectually oriented theories of philosophy of language. A very common epistemological question is expressed as follows: how does our concepts latch onto

³ Hartmut Rosa has developed this concept of *resonance* precisely to underscore the aspects of sense-making which precede the modality of propositional language, I will return to the discussion on resonance in the last part (see Rosa 2020, 31).

objects in the external world?⁴ This way of posing the question already builds on an understanding in which concepts and objects are separate entities that somehow have to be connected, and the task of philosophy becomes to explain this connection. However, what I have said above already shows that the separation is a misconception from the start. Our concepts do not originate from beyond the natural world. They are, as Wittgenstein and Meløe have emphasized, embedded in our actions and perceptions, and therefore by necessity co-constituted by our environment. Meløe writes: “What is strange is that philosophers so seldom reflect on this fit between seeing and doing when they write about seeing or doing.” (1988, 390) What we say is resonating with what we do, what we see, how we see and where we do and see.

In his essay *Two Landscapes of Northern Norway*, Meløe describes how our skilful actions are connected to both the environment that we call home and to the concepts we use. For philosophy of language this entails that our concepts cannot be understood as isolated from the surrounding landscapes and that these landscapes are particular and specific. To use an expression by Hayden Kee, our words come with certain “horizons” for our actions (Kee 2020), which in turn give our concepts specific embedded meanings. This idea reverberates with Merleau-Ponty’s statement: “When I am shown a detail of the landscape that I did not know how to distinguish on my own, there is someone here who has already seen, who already knows where to stand and where one must look to see this detail.” (2012, 323) Here Merleau-Ponty discloses a very simple factor relating to discrepancies in our knowledge. Two persons who have the same perceptual capabilities, and whom might, in one sense of the word, see the same thing at the same time, may still not have the same understanding of a landscape. For one who is familiar with a certain place the landscape comes with a saliency and detail that might be inaccessible for a person for whom that place is unfamiliar. The same landscape might come with different horizons of meaning, due to the fact that our perceptual actions might vary.

Meløe’s example shares the same structure of argument, when he writes about certain practices and landscapes in desolate parts of Norway. He poses the question: how can I who am not familiar with the practice of fishing understand the concepts of the fisherman? And his answer is akin to that of Merleau-Ponty. In order to understand what, for example, the concept of a “natural harbour” means, we cannot, according to Meløe, simply look it up in a lexicon. Neither can we simply look at the structures of a certain landscape that is designated as a natural harbour and discern the structural and environmental qualities of the landscape in order to get a sense of the meaning of the concept. Both alternatives are too simple as explanations for how concepts carry their meaning, and they are connected to misgivings of certain philosophical theories of how our understanding of concepts come about.

When we ask; “what is a natural harbour?” and “how do we determine that a place is suitable as a natural harbour?” we are engaged in a certain philosophical tension between concept and object. Is it our concept of a harbour projected on to a natural landscape? (Rationalism, Intellectualism etc.)? Or is it a natural landscape that creates our concept of the harbour (Old School Empiricism etc.)? Meløe’s point is that neither of these alternatives is philosophically accurate.

To understand, and to be able to recognize a natural harbour, we have to figure out what part it plays within a certain culture and practice. The significance of an expression or a concept in language cannot be understood as idle (see Wittgenstein 2009, §291). The meaning of a certain place is formed through ways of living, through action, strife, intentions and choices. If we are at a loss with the concept of a natural harbour, then we are probably not part of a seafaring culture.

What is missing in certain theories of how we come to understand certain concepts, according to Meløe, is that this understanding, in a deep sense, is entwined with our relations to certain places and to certain ways of living: “The method of investigating the concept of a harbour, therefore, is this: Situate yourself within the practice that this object belongs to, and then investigate the object and its contribution to that practice.” (1988, 393) When one starts to acquire an understanding of the concept it evolves from engaging with a certain practice.

A natural harbour is: “at least 4 m deep, at low tide, its bottom should be of a material that will hold an anchor even if the wind is pressing against the boat with the force of a storm, and its surroundings of skerries or islands should be such as to make it possible to approach it in most sorts of weather.” (Meløe 1988, 392) This kind of knowledge is not abstract or dependent on purely intellectual processes, it requires action and engagement. This does not necessarily mean that we must become fishermen in order to understand the concept of a natural harbour. It is merely pointing us toward how we, in ordinary life, go about to acquire our concepts. This is how language comes alive for us.

We can acquire knowledge from a lexicon, look up the meaning of “natural harbour” and access some kind of knowledge of these. But when we look at Meløe’s definition (above), it is clear that the qualities listed here “at least 4 m deep”, “bottom of a material that holds an anchor”, are entwined with aspects that are not representable in an indexical way. A wind that has a force of a storm at low tide, surrounding skerries, etc., all of these qualities are qualities of a specific landscape, and whereas the indexical facts (4 m, material of the bottom) are generalizable qualities, the important factor is how these facts are related to an environment and a practice. In order to know how the bottom of the sea interacts with the tide and the anchor during a storm, and how this harbour is placed in the structure of the surrounding skerries in relation to the direction

⁴ We can find a version of this question in Richard Rorty’s analysis of the Lockean concept of knowledge. Rorty shows how the problems in epistemology run deep in philosophy due to two competing and contradictory accounts of what knowledge consists of. He writes: “If (like Aristotle and Locke) one tries to model *all* knowledge on sense-perception, then one will be torn between the literal way in which part of the body (e.g., the retina) can have the same quality as an external object and the metaphorical way in which the person as a whole has for example, froghood “in mind” if he has views about frogs.” (Rorty, 1980, 136) This division between knowledge of the senses and conceptual knowledge is at play throughout the history of epistemology, from Aristotle to Locke to Frege, etc.

of the wind etc., one has to have some experience, or at least some understanding of the experience of being in that specific place during a storm while fishing (or other practices of seafaring). Only then may one conclude if this location is worthy to be understood under the concept of a natural harbour.

Tim Ingold holds a similar view in rejecting the idea that language is either possible through internal human cognitive processes, or its opposite; that language is imposed on us through external social and natural domestication: “My point is that these capacities are neither internally prespecified nor externally imposed, but arise within processes of development, as properties of dynamic self-organisation of the total field of relationships in which a person’s life unfolds.” (2002, 399).

Ingold’s and Meløe’s accounts go against an ingrained dualism within certain theoretical frameworks in linguistics and philosophy of language. On the one hand, formalist theories hold that human language comes with a formal structure of its own, independent of any external factors (Saussure, Carnap and others). On the other hand, even the most logically positivistic theories have to acknowledge that language is expressed and has a function in communication, i.e. that words are spoken in a specific context and that their meaning is, in this sense, not universally determinable. The problematic move is the reductionism through which the ties between the signs in the logical system are treated as detached from their meaning and use in a specific context⁵ The downside of this dualism in these theoretical frameworks is that they fail to describe and account for the relationality that we weave with our environment through our linguistic expressions. Relational and enactive accounts emphasize the reciprocal agency in the human–human and human–nonhuman interaction. In this sense anthropomorphic meaning is not imposed on the external nonhuman world, neither is the environment imposing conditions on the human subjects, but rather the meanings of expressions are co-constituted in a dynamic relation between subject and subject/subject and object. Ingold emphasizes how theories go astray when they are built on assumptions which posit “language” outside of the processes and contexts in which our oral expressions are developed. (2002, 399).

Meløe’s example is fitting for bringing forth these fallacies. The understanding of the concept of a natural harbour is developed with the actions and engagements of the fisherman. This practice of fishing is constitutional for the concept, since if there would be no seafaring and fishing communities, the concept of a natural harbour would not exist (1988, 392). Therefore, the concept of “natural harbour” does not exist prior to the development of the practices in which the concept is meaningful. Neither does the natural harbour exist as a thing-in-itself in the natural landscape before it becomes conceptualized as part of the practice of fishing. To use a term by Iwona Janicka, the concept natural harbour is “coarticulated” (2024, 53) by the structures of the environment and our experiences and ways of living. In this process we witness a “mutual molding” (Janicka 2024, 44). In the practice of fishing a certain landscape becomes articulated as a natural harbour, and the fishing community’s conception of this landscape becomes meaningful under the concept of natural harbour.

The natural harbour does not exist there *a priori* in nature. For a fisherman it is a haven, something that is required for his way of living, a home. For an outsider the same location might be just a bay surrounded by skerries, without any particular practical meaning. For a tourist it might be an aesthetic detail of the archipelago landscape. And between all these different perceptions of that place, nothing has actually changed in what we *optically* can see—the shore, the cliffs, the colours, the depth of water etc., are the same, but *our ways of seeing* and articulating give us widely different relations to what we encounter in a place. In this sense, perception is conceptual, it carries the different grasps through which we are engaged with the landscape. (see Cowley 2024, 94).

The important point that is common for the example of the natural harbour and the earlier discussion on a child learning to speak is that in both cases our conceptuality is understood as constantly generated through our actions and perceptions in a specific environment. Building on the phenomenological tradition, Kee has articulated this aspect of language use as similar to the use of tools. Kee’s comparison between concepts and tools is not meant as allegorical or metaphorical, but rather in a straightforward manner: “the comparison allows us to see that certain characteristics supposedly unique to language—such as grammaticality, reference to states of affairs remote in time and space, and diacritical signification—have more rudimentary precedents in our experience of spatiotemporal objects” (2020, 907). Our words are ways of engaging with our environment—tools that fit different ways of seeing the world—and ways of seeing that are embedded in our concepts, providing different grasps on the world. Ingold makes a similar claim based on Wittgenstein, when he notes how everyday speech is tied up in our patterns of activity. In communication we do not pay attention to the words, but to “what the speaker is telling with them” (2002, 407), in the same way that we pay attention to the action performed with tools,

⁵ It is understandable that linguistics needed to become a reductionistic science and that the theories aimed at finding universally detectable structures in human natural languages. Saussure defines the aims of linguistics as: “to determine the forces that are permanently and universally at work in all languages, and deduce the general laws to which all specific historical phenomena can be reduced” (2011, 6). However, when these theorists forget the initial reduction performed by scientists and claim that they have discovered the origins of language in the universal general laws and structures that stem from their deliberate reductionism, something goes awry. Saussure again: “the thing that constitutes language is, as I will show later, unrelated to the phonic character of the linguistic sign” (2011, 7). He goes on to distinguish “language” (French: *langue*) from speech (French: *langage*), and then defines language as a “self-contained whole, and a principle of classification” (2011, 9). The problem is not that linguistics mainly deal with what Saussure here refers to as “language” (*langue*) and aims at discovering its common universal features, but rather that he deliberately severs the connection between speech (which is natural in the sense that it stems from our vocal apparatus and creates a sonic object in the environment) and language (as an intellectual psychological and social process). The reduction would be as problematic if we turn the hierarchy around and emphasize speech (*langage*)—the communicative oral expression—as detached from its context of being expressed in a certain situation by a certain person to a certain listener belonging to a certain culture in relation to a specific environment. In both cases the distinction performed by the theory mystifies the original relationality of sign and signifier/word and object (see Ingold 2002, 408).

rather than the actual tools. These dispositions are meant to demystify the relationship between words and objects. However, there are some intricacies to this relationality that need to be addressed further.

4. Perceptions and concepts

So far, I have articulated an account of the relational understanding of language and environment, while tacitly criticizing certain ingrained theoretical conceptions of language as primarily referential, representative and indexical. However, it is important to note that there is something understandable in our tendencies to distinguish perceptual experience from conceptual language. The difficulty we are dealing with here is threefold:

1. On the one hand, a certain environment looks and sounds the same for different perceivers.
2. On the other hand, the different practices and experiences through which various subjects relate to a place will give at hand a plurality of meanings and conceptions of that place.
3. Thus, how can we establish a common concept to designate the same thing?

In this line of thinking *it might seem* plausible to make a clear categorical distinction between perception and concepts, since we evidently are able to agree on what we perceive on one level, whereas we do have differing conceptions of a place depending on our practical engagement, on another. If we were present in the coastal landscape that Meløe describes during a storm, we could agree on some features of how that landscape appears for us in perception: we all see grey skerries covered with green moss, the bluish grey sea and the white foam of the wave crests. We can feel the wind on our skin and hear it howling. Whereas, we could still have very different conceptions of the environment depending on whether we are insiders or outsiders, fishermen or tourists. How should we understand this discrepancy?

This is a difficult philosophical question and to address it we must clear away some misconceptions concerning the relationship between language and perception. Tim Ingold writes: “we must cease to regard speech as the derivative output of something else – that is ‘language’” (2002, 393). Here Ingold emphasizes how philosophy goes astray when it posits language outside the context of our lived experience. As I have emphasized, the concepts we use are not something external to the perceptual experience of a place. By acknowledging this, we come to understand that the discrepancy at hand is not one between perception and concept. The concept of a natural harbour does not stand in contrast to the primary “field of perception” (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 16) that all of us with functioning senses may perceive, but rather the concept develops out of these primary structures of perception, among other possible ways to grasp this environment.

As humans we have a certain sensory-motoric conditioning that enables us to perceive the world with specific qualities: colours, shapes, timbre, tonality, volume, etc. Due to this condition, we do share a world with distinct features. The place that the fishermen consider as a natural harbour has certain qualities that we all can access⁶. And even if the practices of fishing establish a special relationship and perceptual proficiency in this place, which is not available for an outsider, the features that we all share due to our sensory-motoric perceptual capabilities, stay the same. For example, we all share a structure for our sense-perception which distinguishes left from right, up from down, darkness from light, blue from red, cold from warm, etc., etc. However, if we now focus on the role of these common features, the question is: do these features ever appear independent of any practice, context or habits of perception for the perceiver? Is it possible to have access to a *pure and innocent* view of the world? Remember the example of the first expressions of a toddler. Were they without context or practical engagement with the environment?

Well, they were not. Which entails that there is no perceptual experience that is categorically independent of our grasp on the world (or the worlds’ grasp on us). On a primordial level, the sensory-motoric capabilities, which come with our life-form, are already modalities which engage the environment and are engaged by the environment.

This does not mean that our perceptions always are conceptual from the start, there are perceptions that are yet to be fully formed into distinguishing clearly defined objects with specific qualities. There is an important distinction here, that we should not lose track of. Baz, describes it as follows: “The distinction between the phenomenal world – the world as perceived and responded to prior to being thought, or thought (or talked) about – and the objective world, or the world as objectively construed” (2020, 43). The important point here is that, although the primary pre-reflective modality of perception is different from fully fledged conceptual and skilful perception, the difference is not categorical.

If we remember the example of Meløe’s description of the two stages of the toddler, Nikolai’s both cries were expressive of perceptual experience. The more primitive cry was one of direct perception (cry out of pain caused by the itch), whereas the cry at the later stage was an expression of the experience of pain that came with expectations, intentions and a strategy for action (cry earlier to get my mom to act before the pain becomes severe). We could say that the first stage was one of perceptual experience, but pre-reflective and yet to be formed into clear intentions, whereas the second stage was one involving intentionality and reflection, i.e., more clearly conceptual compared to the first. Here it would be understandable to call the first stage perceptual and the second stage conceptual. However, the later stage requires the first, conceptuality is not something categorically different from direct sense-perception, rather it is something developing out of this more

⁶ Given that our eyes and ears etc., are functioning in a normal manner, exceptions would be blind or deaf persons, but even in these cases there would be some level of overlap between the sense perceptions of subjects.

primordial modality of experience—enriching and contextualizing the perception *without becoming something other than perception*⁷

Concepts disclose our *ways of seeing* and our approaches to doing things (see Baz 2020, 12n13). When we talk about perception, it comes with this ambiguity between *what* we see (colours, shapes, light, shadow etc.) and *how* we see (this landscape is a natural harbour). When we emphasize the later aspect—the *how*—we come to understand concepts as our ways of engaging the world. Alva Noë shows how this grasping and being grasped also involves the conceptual:

“What needs to be appreciated [...] is that there is a nonrepresentational way of thinking about concepts. Concepts, in this nonrepresentational view, are not so much categories or sets, or prototypes, as different philosophers have held. Nor indeed are they *senses*, as in Frege’s view. They are rather skills for taking hold of what there is. To say that perceptual experience is *conceptual*, from this standpoint, is to say that perceptual experience is *skilful* grappling with what there is.” (2012, 35)

Here Noë emphasizes the modality of our perception that carries with it our conceptuality, which in turn is the entry point for our conceptual spoken language. In Meløe’s example, the words of the fishermen are not representative of the qualities of the landscape, but rather expressions of a skilful engagement with a potentially dangerous environment of being on a boat on a stormy sea. These words are not able to add any features to the physical world: the green moss does not become blue, or the bottom of the ocean does not change its quality to a more favourable compound for anchoring, when we call it a “natural harbour”. Words are not magical; they are tools by which we grapple with the environment. The environment does not yield to the intensions of the perceiver without effort and agency. What is shared by both skilful perception and verbal expressions of conceptual language is their embeddedness in context, engagement and action.

For an outsider who is unable to acknowledge the practices in which these concepts are embedded, the expression “natural harbour” is *merely* a word. As Wittgenstein points out, our concepts find their meaning as instruments for a “particular use”, whereas, if concepts are purely representational, they become “idle” (2009, §291). This is connected to what he meant with his anti-essentialist statement in which he encourages philosophers “to bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (2009, §116). We might look up the concept “natural harbour” in a lexicon, understand it intellectually, discern which qualities can be seen as essential for the natural structures of this kind of place, and apply it correctly in a sentence, without having acknowledged its situatedness in the practice of the fisherman: the way in which the concept is pregnant in the skilful perception of someone who navigates perilous waters in a storm. This abstract use of language when taken to its extreme is when, according to Wittgenstein, our words become idle and language goes on holiday: “And *then* we may indeed imagine naming to be some remarkable mental act, as it were the baptism of an object” (2009, §38).

A similar critical strand of philosophy of perception is detectable in phenomenology. Kee notes how perception brings with it a “horizon of the object”: “Perception of the object, we see, involves certain habitually structured expectations about the perceptual features of objects and the kinds of sensorimotor projects I can undertake with them” (Kee 2020, 908). This way of describing perception emphasizes the experience of perceiving—how it comes with potential avenues for action and engagement. The critical edge here is similar to that of Wittgenstein. Baz describes the phenomenological project of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty as an effort “to counteract our tendency to focus on the objects of perception, as objectively thought about and understood, and to overlook our experiencing of them—to overlook, that is, how those objects actually present themselves to us, and how we relate to them, before we begin to reflect on and theorize about perception from the perspective of the natural sciences.” (2020, 27) Again, this is not to say that all perceptions are conceptual, but rather an acknowledgement of the continuity between perception, expression, concepts and language. Both for Wittgenstein and Merleau-Ponty, the words we use originate in our experience, our lived life, and our engagement with the world, in contrast to theories that propose that words carry their meaning due to their placement in a logical system of naming and indexing the world from a position independent of particular subjective experience (see Saussure 2011; Carnap 1995).

To be clear, both assumptions about language are correct. We do use words to categorise, as reference and index, this is not something we need to refute. The point is simply that even this practice is rooted in our experience and engagement with the world, i.e., perception. Merleau-Ponty writes: “it is starting from perception and its variants, described as they present themselves, that we shall try to understand how the universe of knowledge could be constructed” (1968, 157). It is not wrong for theories in the philosophy of language to focus on our use of concepts as referencing, indexing and categorizing objects and phenomena, but when they neglect the way in which our words originate in a plethora of other practices alongside the practice of referencing and categorizing, they overlook important aspects of the way in which

⁷ This articulation goes against the philosophical background of empiricism, that starts with Locke’s distinction between primary and secondary qualities. In this view, the primary qualities are objective in the sense that they are qualities of the object that are determinate beyond the experience of any singular subject. Whereas the secondary qualities are interpretations and judgements based on these objective qualities, that may vary due to the different experiences of different subjects. (see Locke 1999, 117–118). In the phenomenological view (which Avner Baz follows and connects with Wittgenstein’s philosophy of perception), there are no qualities prior to experience. This entails that “objectivity” comes to mean qualities that are commonly established by different perceivers, through refined intellectual reflection, i.e. objectivity is developed out of assessments about perceptual experience, thus not beyond or prior to experience and subjectivity, but rather a development based on these. Merleau-Ponty articulates this clearly: “the precise and completely determinate world is again first presupposed, certainly no longer as the cause of our perceptions, but rather as their immanent end” (2012, 33).

language becomes meaningful. We could imagine a proficient Carnapian linguist visiting the fishing village in northern Norway and disclosing important semantic features about the concepts the fishermen use in order to relate them to similar concepts in other languages and find logical relations between these. But this would not amount to an objective, all-encompassing definition of the meaning of the concept of “natural harbour”, since his practice would have a very different aim than the actual practice in which the concept is used.

Lastly, there is one more important aspect of the way in which concepts and perception are connected. In one sense, our words are objects of perception, since verbal expressions are auditory, they have sonic qualities: timbre, volume, pitch and temporality. Thus, they appear in auditory perception as sound-objects among other non-discursive sound-objects. Kee writes:

“The fact that speech is, in this sense, perceived might seem too obvious to be worth explicitly stating. And yet, it has been constantly overlooked within both the dominant tradition of post-Fregean analytic philosophy of language and within the phenomenological tradition, for reasons that are, as we will see in a moment, quite understandable. The tendency has been to speak of concepts, sense, meaning, and reference, but to ignore the special achievement of the perceived word as the bearer or vehicle of these semantic and logical properties of the word.” (Kee 2020, 914).

With this in mind the understanding of language, words and concepts, as something solely anthropomorphic, transcendent and unique, starts to crumble. The soundscape is more-than-human in its constitution (see Abram 1996, 90).

5. Turning the tide: the environment's grasp on the speaker

So far, I have worked toward establishing the way in which perceptual experience is the origin of our concepts. Whereas most examples in this article have dealt with our use of concepts as ways of engaging with the environment, there is another direction to explore in detail: the way in which the environment has a grasp on us.

Due to our embodied nature the environment affects us and works as an agent that moves us in different ways. How we, as humans, act and behave is not solely put into play by our intentional and cognitive capacities, furthermore our behaviour is predicated by how the world conditions our sense-making. Here we could just think of how we orient ourselves in an extremely cold environment and how our body is prone to behave in such a circumstance to keep warm by moving, finding protection and cover. When I claim that our conceptuality originates in perceptual experience, it entails that also this grasp of the environment will play a role in how language is established. This aspect of sense-making goes beyond what we can find in Wittgenstein's philosophy of language. The thread I have followed within Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach does however address this affective connection between meaning and environment. This step is radical in the sense that it puts into question the whole idea of the anthropocentrism of language. When following this line of thought we may understand that we as humans are not isolated in a cage of propositional language, our ways of sense-making and communication are not solely determined by an anthropocentric order (see Abram, 1996; Cowley, 2024; Ingold, 2002).

Influenced by Kurt Koffka and Jakob von Uexküll, Merleau-Ponty makes a distinction between the “geographical environment” and an “environment of behaviour”. When we approach the world through *cognition*, we treat it as an object for our senses—“as a closed world where external stimulations appear to it as outside of it” (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 167)—whereas our behaviour is always affected by how nature acts on us and within us. In this way the sensitivity of the body is the power by which we correlate with the environment, rather than an “affective state” enclosed in the interior of the body (Merleau-Ponty 2003, 217). For Merleau-Ponty, a geographical understanding of the environment is an approach through which a spatial relationality is established, in which the cognizing subject interprets the objective world⁸ Whereas, when we approach the environment as a reciprocal relation of behaviour, we do not posit the human subject as external to an inanimate nature, but rather as a nexus which affects and is affected by the encompassing environment. Merleau-Ponty articulates the concept of nature: “It is our soil [*sol*] – not what is in front of us, facing us, but rather, that which carries us” (2003, 4). Robert Kirkman follows this line of thought: “I perceive the world only because the flesh of my body intertwines with the flesh of the world” (Kirkman, 2007, 21). In this sense, a certain kinship, rather than a categorical distinction, between human and nonhuman is a precondition for perception and affectivity. (see Merleau-Ponty 1968, 138).

To extrapolate some insights relating to the questions on language from these ontological remarks, let me return to what Hartmut Rosa under the influence of Merleau-Ponty, refers to as “resonance”. When we approach language from the perspective of resonance, i.e., the aspect of language as an auditory phenomenon, we enter an understanding in which the subject-object dichotomy is less clearly defined. The way in which the human body is resonating with the sonic landscape of the environment annotates the relationality that precedes our intentional relations with the natural world. In auditory perception sounds enter our body and resonate within it. There is an agency of the sonic landscape that precedes our intentional control and our actions (Rosa 2020, 31).

The notion of resonance is not limited to the auditory sense. A closer examination of human vision reveals how the eye works as a mediator that resonates with the quality of light. The natural light of the sun—its rays reflected and refracted by

⁸ Akin to the classical cartesian logics of establishing a categorical distinction between the immaterial realm of consciousness (*res cogitans*) and the material extended objective realm (*res extensa*).

the structures and qualities of the environment, with its play of light and shadow—creates paths for my perception. In Merleau-Ponty's words light “penetrates everywhere, explores the field promoted by our gaze and prepares it to be read” (2003, 43). This means that my visual perception is structured by the fabric of the environment, and the play of light and shadow also enter my body through the cornea. Building on this notion, our eyes are moulded and activated by the rays of light; they reflect and refract light, and through this dynamic sensory-motoric process our experience of the world takes form. Our eyes are not an external mirror to the world but rather the power by which we enter into correspondence with the world (see Ingold 2018, 30). Merleau-Ponty describes this as *communion*, referring to the theological meaning of the word. The sharedness is given to us by grace: “Nothing other than a certain manner of being in the world that is proposed to us from a point in space, that our body takes up and adopts if it is capable, and sensation is, literally, a communion” (2012, 219). We are not bystanders or detached observers of a categorically nonhuman world, but rather our “relationship with the earth is intercorporeal” (Lieberman 2007, 44).

This notion goes beyond the ideas of language as situated in a practice that I outlined above, since resonance demarcates the way in which the landscape acts upon us. Rosa articulates how landscapes may address us and call upon us (2020, 32). And in these instances, the human subject is not the autonomous agent that is controlling or determining the process of meaning, but rather the entity that becomes affected by the external world. One can get goose bumps from experiencing a magnificent view or sonic soundscape, and in this moment the body is altered by something that carries a poignant significance. If we call this an event of the landscape speaking to us, we would be using a metaphor, since the landscape does not communicate in an anthropomorphic propositional language, but still it *does communicate* since affective change occurs in the subject, which is not initiated by the intentionality of that subject. With Merleau-Ponty we can say that “I understand the world because I am situated in the world and because the world understands me” (2012, 430).

The logical point that I want to push here is that we could not have what we call language without these aspects of sense-making that precede fully developed propositional statements. Sense-making originates in our embodied experience, perception and practices⁹ This direction is, as I have shown, detectable in a variety of current theoretical frameworks of phenomenology, enactivism, pragmatism and Wittgensteinian philosophy of language and ecolinguistics.

When we now move further away from the idea of language as a solely anthropocentric order, we can find additional resources in indigenous wisdom traditions. Biologist and Native American activist Robin Wall Kimmerer writes about the indigenous understanding of language as originating from the entwined relationality between humans and animate nature. She describes how some of the words in her native language have a verb form for concepts that usually would be nouns in the English language:

“To be a hill, to be a sandy beach, to be a Saturday, all are possible verbs in a world where everything is alive. Water, land, and even a day, the language a mirror for seeing the animacy of the world, the life that pulses through all things, through pines and nuthatches and mushrooms. *This* is the language I hear in the woods; this is the language that lets us speak of what wells up all around us [...] The language reminds us, in every sentence, of our kinship with all of the animate world.” (2020, 55–56)

The philosophical question that arises from these kinds of descriptions is whether we should regard them as anything more than poetic metaphors. I cannot understand what it would mean to “be a hill” or “be a sandy beach”. However, on the bases of what I have said, I do accept that hills, sandy beaches, seagulls, natural harbours etc., affect me and resonate with me through my perceptual experiences, and are thus a part of the agency which forms the meanings which I utter in speech. And these elements are not “hills”, “beaches” or “natural harbours” in general, when I learned some of these concepts for the first time they belonged in a relation with a specific “hill”, a particular “seagull” and a certain “natural harbour”, furthermore these words were given to me by specific persons that accompanied and guided me in my orientation in the environment. They do not stem solely from concepts positioned in a universal symbolic order, but also from our sense of specific places, subjects and things in the world.

The perspective that Kimmerer offers is not necessarily to be read as a mystification of our relationship to the environment, but rather as an acknowledgement of how places and the animate nature in them act upon us and address us. She describes how the hissing of the wind in the needles of the pines, water trickling over rocks and mosquitoes in her ear, address her in a language that is not her own, and she considers this as a form of primordial language: “After the drumbeat of my mother's heart, this was my first language.” (Kimmerer 2020, 48) Even though these sounds are produced by something that is more-than-human, and even though they are not expressions of propositional discursive language, the meaningfulness of these sounds hinges on whether we consider them as merely sonic waves produced by objects or if we acknowledge them as expressions of the agency of the more-than-human realm. The concept of resonance is explanatory here since it does not presuppose animistic explanations, it merely articulates a reciprocity in which the agency of the environment and the agency of the human subject co-constitute our affectivity and meaning.

Although we should be wary of explanations that claim that nature speaks to us, due to the fact that there are important differences between human propositional conceptual language and the affective agency of the environment, the agency of nonhuman nature does create affective change within the subject. To imagine language without this movement caused by the environment within the subject, would make it difficult to explain how language comes about.

⁹ This standpoint is close to what enactivist theory refers to as “participatory sense-making” (see Di Paolo et al., 2018, 73–75).

As I noted from the start, when we speak, we express aspects of our relationality with the environment that we are attuned with. The first words of toddlers do not solely initiate them in the process of cognition and knowledge, furthermore they express the affectivity and emotions of the child. The cry being the first expression of such affectivity, denoting the vulnerability of the body in relation to external or internal agencies. As in Meløe's example with Nikolai, the first quite purely affective scream of his discomfort develops toward a more conceptual cry which carries the original sentiment that additionally incorporates discursive elements that carry strategies for action. When the subject and her speech develop, this affective aspect of sense-making does not disappear or develop into something different (than affect) but stands there as a background for the sentiments of the words we use. Speech is an event of addressing the world and being addressed by the world.

When we acknowledge the sensibility of the body and its openness to affective change, we also understand that the body is capable of “emotional discrimination” (Jonas 1971, 508), which is an underlying modality for discursive and conceptual differentiation that we perform in speech (see Fuchs 2025, 7). Hans Jonas writes about an animal modality of perception that is also present in human animals, which builds on intuitive (rather than inferential) distinguishing between something being familiar or unfamiliar, noteworthy or negligible, threatening or less threatening (1971, 509). These aspects of relations to the environment are felt rather than cognized. Although Meløe does not elaborate on affectivity directly, we can expand his example and see that the concepts of the fishing culture are clearly determined by the affectivity of its subjects: the strife and challenge of orienting one's behaviour in an environment of storms, icy waters and treacherous rocky coastlines. Imagine a fisherman at sea shouting “we need to find a natural harbour!” A lexical definition of the concept of a natural harbour is void of the affective elements of freezing in an icy storm, fear of running aground on a shoal or capsizing on a rogue wave, whereas the concept as it is used in its proper practice is pregnant with these sentiments. These affective qualities are co-articulated by the environmental agencies of heavy winds, rogue waves, cold weather and rocky coastlines. And the way in which these elements affect the behaviour of the body of the fishermen is instrumental for the emotional discrimination which partly forms the meaning of the concept of the natural harbour when it is expressed in speech in its proper context. *This* concept of a natural harbour stems from an affectivity that is conditioned by the ecology of a specific event, in relation to a specific practice, place, body and environment.

What I have alluded to in this last part is that this revaluation of the categorical distinction between objects and concepts opens a path for questioning the anthropocentric interpretations of the origins of human language. Furthermore, the broadening of our understanding of sense-making and the inclusion of the role of affectivity, practice and perception as constitutional for our linguistic modalities, goes against essentialist frameworks in the philosophy of language. Ecolinguistics, enactivism, phenomenology and pragmatism are committed to a decentralized understanding of language: “Language has no abstract, self-standing theoretical centre, but is instead a *concrete open totality* embedded in networks of material, biological, and sociocultural codetermining relations” (Di Paolo et al., 2018, 107). In order to arrive at this acknowledgement, the categorical distinction between concept and object has to be dismantled. The important implication is that language—in the meaning that Merleau-Ponty and Meløe emphasize—is rooted in a specific place; it belongs in a particular ecology (see also Abram 1996, 90). Our words are originally formed with specific beings and specific places through specific soundscapes. My aim has not been to propose these notions as stark refutations of the more intellectualistically oriented theories of language, but rather as reminders of what often perhaps has been sidestepped and forgotten about the processes through which we make sense of and orient ourselves in the world.¹⁰

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Antony Fredriksson: Writing – original draft.

Conflict of interest

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