THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN THE CONSTITUTION OF THE INTERSUBJECTIVE WORLD[1]

Irina Rotaru, PhD, Post-PhD Fellow SOPHRD/159/1.5/133675 Project, Romanian Academy Iași Branch

Abstract: Our paper aims at analysing the relation between languare and intersubjectivity from a phenomenological point of view. That language is essentially intersubjective, and that intersubjectivity would not be possible independently of a form of language is probably unanimously admitted; this will not be our concern in this paper. We will seek after how language and intersubjectivity support and complement each other in constituting the world, from its most fundamental, natural level, to the highest, cultural level. For that we appeal to the Husserlian theory on consciousness, according to which the world we have access to is never the world of an isolated subject, of a solus ipse, but of an intersubjective consciousness.

Keywords: Language, intersubjectivity, constitution of world, Edmund Husserl.

That language is essentially intersubjective is quite a common sense. Everybody would probably agree that in order for a form of language to appear, it is necessary that at least two souls meet, and recognize themselves as developing internal life. Language stems out from the need of communication. We are born with this need; immediately after birth the infant will signalize her discomfort, crying in search of comfort. She will receive back responses which might at first not ne perceived as such, but she will soon establish a correspondence between signalizing the need and the response received in turn. It is also well known that in the first minutes after birth new born babies are capable of gesture imitation, which establishes a relation of communication between self and other.[2] But let us imagine that the new born would have no animal soul around her, would open eyes in a world in which she is the only living being. She would receive back no sort of answer to her cries, she would experience no sort of exchange with a similar being, she would receive no demands from anyone. Would she continue signalizing her needs? Would she grow to experience other needs than the ones strictly associated to bodily discomfort? We would say that she would not continue to "communicate" her discomfort; it would make no change.

So, even if the need to communicate is innate, in order for someone to develop into a communicative being she must experience others as having internal life, made out of feelings, attitudes, thoughts, evaluations, etc. The content of our internal life is the result of our interest in the exterior, in reality. By means of language we exteriorize, we make our world known to others, having at the same time access to their worlds. The content of our internal life is the result of our interest in the external world. But this interest is mediated by the awareness that there are also others who experience the same world I have access to; would I experience no others, there would be no world outside of me, I would be limited to my basic bodily sensations. It is not only that the others broaden my world, but they make it possible for me to have a world. In what comes, we will analyze how language and intersubjectivity determine the constitution of the world and perception of reality, following the phenomenological analysis of Edmund Husserl.

[1] This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOPHRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the contract number POSDRU/159/1.5/133675.

[2] See in this respect Andrew N. Meltzoff and M. Keith Moore, "Imitation of Facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates", Science, New Series, Volume 198, Issue 4312, (Oct. 7, 1977), 75 -78.

BDD-V21 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:11:30 UTC)

Things are given to us through perception, through experience connections. One of the most fundamental phenomenological facts about perception is that "Is there no empirical consciousness, in which an exterior existence can reflect itself, then appearances that set something as existing in the exterior are also impossible."[3] But, I can directly experience things only in a restricted way. Things are given to me in perception only from a certain perspective, depending on how I am spatially positioned towards them. Only certain sides of a thing are given to me at the same time, and even if I can move around things in order to gain direct access of the sides at first hidden for me, I can never have in direct perception all the sides of a thing. Then, I can approach things only in a certain limited way. Regarding some, like the sun, I can never go near to; others, like the bottom of the sea, I will never see, never experience. The interior of things can be directly given to me only if I alter their shape or unity. Still, I do not perceive sides of things, but things as unities. I do not experience, and I cannot imagine experiencing lack of space or lack of time. How is this possible? How do the idea that there is no appearance where is no consciousness, and the fact that I have perceptions of things I have never had access to stand together?

Every perception can be considered as composed out of two aspects of different natures: one material, while the other one immaterial, respectively the physical existence and the sense attached to it. On the part of the perceiver, to these aspects corresponds the fact that he/she is constituted out of body and consciousness. It is not only that a body without consciousness would not have sense attached to its experiences, but it would not have experiences. To have experiences means to be able to abstract oneself from what is happening to oneself, to situate oneself at a higher level, and reflect upon what is happening. Plants are alive bodies with no consciousness. They do not experience reality, they simply form the fundamental, natural level of reality, they are part of the natural-causal chain, with no possibility to escape from it; having no consciousness, they have no possibility to add an extra level to natural world, a level of sense, a level of experience.

A consciousness without a body would also have no experiences; it would be an infinite adequacy with itself, which sounds as if we could describe it as an infinite feeling or state of peace, but a pure consciousness could not have feelings and states because these are bodily rooted. So, if we can speak of bodies without consciousness as something alive, we cannot speak of a consciousness without a body as being alive, as existing. A consciousness without a body is simply unconceivable.

We being unities composed out of body and soul, or consciousness, cannot have in perception only the physical or only the sense aspect of a thing. To put it in other words, body and consciousness are always a unity in experiencing, influencing themselves reciprocally, what is physically given being modeled according to the meaning consciousness possesses, while meaning is constantly re-evaluated and re-shaped according to what is physically given. Phenomenology speaks about body and consciousness in terms of levels when it comes to the constitution of reality. The body describes the most fundamental level of the constitution of reality, while consciousness the highest one. They never function independently of one another. There is a fundamental form of consciousness in every bodily existence in the world, while the highest level of meaning is still bodily shaped, though not evidently at the first sight. Let us examine now these ideas more closely.

If I am looking at a chair and concentrate upon my perception and what is strictly physically directly given to me, I will discover that I only see, for example, the seatback of the chair and its rear legs. However, these are not given to me as shapes, as parts independent of a unitary object, and lacking a practical usage. They are actually given to me

[3] Edmund Husserl, Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Erster Teil. 1905-1920. Edited by Iso Kern. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, p. 15. (Hua XIII)

BDD-V21 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:11:30 UTC)

as "the chair" which can be used, for example, to sit on. What happens is that consciousness ads to the direct perception, by means of passive syntheses, sub-conscious associations, the content of previous experience. I know from previous experience that the sides I see compose the unity of different objects, so I actually perceive them according to this expectation. This aspect of perception, namely the constitution of isolated objects, can be explained only by appealing to subjectivity considered independently of intersubjectivity. But we never perceive isolated objects, we perceive them in contexts, and these contexts on the background of the world as a constant infinite unity. As we have established earlier, an isolated subject would not have access to a world, would not be able to constitute a world by himself. So we have to appeal to intersubjectivity in order to explain that space and time are experienced as being infinite, that what is directly given in perception is given as part of a unitary world, with no gaps in it.[4]

Husserl's emphasizes that our consciousness is never the consciousness of an isolated subject. We wake up in a world in which communication is always present, in which people continuously tell us about what they have seen, about experiences they make, about how they experience certain aspects to the expense of other, more relevant for others, or the same aspects experienced by the others, but with different sense. "The surrounding world of people /…/ is not at all just adequacy to consciousness and /…/ experienced universe of realities in the form of spatio-temporality, but it is experienced as expression of human Dasein, as it is from people that it has its sense of existence /…/."[5] The world is never given to us as simple nature. It is always given according to the sense that results from exchanges with the others. When Husserl says that the world is not given to me only according to my consciousness, he means that we perceive what is present to our consciousness according to our sense expectations established by interaction with others.

The first form of communication is the one establishing at the level of the body, by means of bodily expressions. "People are there for one another in the intersubjective surrounding world in which they as mature people in every reflection already find themselves, by means of expression. The most primitive and fundamental of the gradation of foundation is the *expression of Dasein* (*ichlichen Daseinweise*), the personal in the broadest sense, the corporeal body." [6] We do not have to do here with what is normally called body language, gestures that we associate with meaning not consciously controlled. We are talking of the fact that in encountering another human being, or another animal, we perceive it as another living being because it moves by own will. Because the body is the one that first presents to me the other as another soul, as another will, Husserl calls it "the originary organ of the I" (*Urorgan des Ich*). By means of this first recognition of the other as being similar to me, which at this level only means recognizing him as a psycho-physical ego, it is established the first and most fundamental community, that Husserl calls community of nature. It is called community of nature because there is not yet any cultural or personal aspect attached to this level; intersubjective world only means here intersubjective spatio-

[4] In what regards the contribution of subjectivity and intersubjectivity to the constitution of the world we must keep in mind, as in the case of body and consciousness, that we are not talking about processes that take place in objective time, but of processes that participate to the constitution of time, that are constantly at work in fundamenting experience. Consequently, it is not the fact that up until a point in our lives subjectivity functions alone in shaping perception, whereupon intersubjectivity enters the scene and completes the work. Subjectivity and intersubjectivity here are considered as fundamental conditions of possibility for experience. Subjectivity is a more original condition of possibility for experience, which does not mean that it ever functions independently of intersubjectivity.

[5] Edmund Husserl, Die Lebenswelt. Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916-1937). Edited by Rochus Sowa. New York: Springer, 2008., p. 345. (Hua XXXIX)

[6] Ibidem, p. 346.

BDD-V21 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:11:30 UTC)

temporal world.[7] In recognizing the other as being a psycho-physical unity, just as I am, my psychic and my body couple with the psychic and the body of the other, my perspective on the world is joined by the other's perspective on the world, as it is given to me. This means that every natural object that is given to me in perception will receive an appresented layer, corresponding to the possible perspectives of the other. Space and time broaden with the perspectives of the other, fact of which I am not aware as such, but which unthematically determines my perception of the world.

We kind of borrow these experiences and perceptions from them, broadening our consciousness beyond our direct experiences and perceptions. Due to empathy, things are not given to me only according to what I can directly experience regarding them, but also according to what I could have or could experience if I put myself in the place of the other. These appearances, of which I find out by means of communication, become characteristics possible to be experienced by me, adding to the characteristics I directly experience. The limits of my consciousness flow do not coincide with the limits of my direct experiences or with the limits of my life. The existence of the others broadens my experience of time in at least two aspects. First of all, if we represent time by drawing a line, this line is prolonged to infinity by the time of the lives of people that lived before me and will live after me. But time also has depth. The concomitant lives of the others, with their stories that intersect with my stories, deepen the experienced time.

My consciousness tends to infinity, because it is prolonged with the consciousnesses of fellow people. But my consciousness does not exist independently of world, so the world given in consciousness is infinite due to intersubjectivity. "When I «experience» myself and all the others as members of this world, this *world* is not only *correlate* of my outer experience, it is not only set as my outer world, but it is correlate of my and everyone's experience and, consequently the identical [world] contained in all interior and exterior worlds of all subjects, or the cover unity that unites all [individual worlds] with one another. /…/ [T]he true world is for all subjects in all these forms identical as being communicatively determined in truth."[8] The true world is not simply determined by looking at nature and describing it. What is considered to be the true world is the result of a communicative process. We are not talking here of the true world described my mathematics or physics, but about the truth in the light of which we experience the world on a daily basis. And that truth is a practical one, is the truth of our interests. Our interests do not envisage the world as simple nature, but the intersubjective world of sense.

"We people are with one another a unity in a communicatively experienced subjectivity, connected in a *community of experience*. *It grows so with intersubjective outer experience*. In this the strange subjecitivity also belongs to me (the strange personal I, the strange experiences, the strange body, and to the others my subjectivity)."[9] This means that we never have access to a world devoid of all intersubjective sense. The objective world we experience is the result of intersubjective communication. We can make abstraction of the intersubjective layer of the world to theoretically determine the existence of a physical, natural world, existing before and independently of all intersubjectivity. But we could never experience such a world. In the end, we can only experience the world that is the result of the communication process. We cannot give up intersubjectivity, we cannot eliminate it

[7] One shoulod not understand that these levels correspond to temporal periods in our life; they are delimited according to a transcendental analysis, that is interested in conditions of possibility for experience, and facts that shape our way of experiencing. Levels delimited by this analysis are constitutive to experience; they do not function independently of one another, and they do not stop functioning once by means of them sense aspects have been established. They are constantly at work in our experiencing, throughout our entire life.
[8] Hua XIII, p. 468, Beilage LII.
[9] Ibidem, p. 469, Beilage LII.

BDD-V21 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:11:30 UTC)

from our experiencing in order to experience the world solipsistically. We can only understand that, were we a *solus ipse*, the world given to us would have been a different one. "The world is, as bodily-spiritual, as human and animal world an intentional construction of community, relative to a unity of subjects communicating with one another and exchanging with one another their outer experiences /…/."[10] I do not see the exterior world only through my eyes, but through the eyes of all the others. Or, to put it in another way, my eyes are not my solipsistic eyes, but kind of contain in them the eyes of the others.

The existence of the other establishes the possibility of a different experience of the same object. "Just as the single subject has its surrounding world with open horizons, the communicative subject multiplicity has a common surrounding world as its own. Each individual has its sensuality, its apperceptions and lasting unities; the communicative multiplicity has correspondingly a sensuality, a lasting apperception, and as correlate a world with an indeterminate horizon. I see, I hear, I experience not only with my senses, but also with the senses of the others, and the other experiences not only with his senses, but also with my senses."[11] This describes how our consciousness functions. Namely, that my sensual life and the sensual life of every other orients itself according to *our* experience, and not only according to *my* experiences.

The world as unity of the communicative community establishing at the level of our senses is the most fundamental layer of the world, namely its physical layer. It supports and is a way of access to higher level communities, constituted by means of genuine language use. This higher layer is the layer of the community of persons, of social beings, the world of culture. At this superior level two types of communities can be differentiated. First of all, there is the universal community of all human beings, all having the attribute of culture. Then, in this universal community, sub-cultural communities are shaped, based on the differences between groups of people, groups delimited according to the different time period or place in which people live.

Each spatio-temporal sub-community is divided on its turn into sub-sub-communities, delimited according to different aspects of social life. The entire cultural layer of reality is a communicative construct. Each sub-community and sub-sub-community has its own language, corresponding to specific attitudes toward the world and to specific interests. The natural world is absolutely, unconditionally accessible to everyone, as it is the result of out fundamental embodiment in the world, of what we share without differences. In contrast, the accessibility of the cultural world is bound to certain conditions, as it is constituted by means of different attitudes toward the world. In everyday attitude it is given through the languages of different communities. "Starting from what is most generally understandable he must first open up ways of access to a sympathetic understanding of broader and broader strata of the present and then of the historical past, which in turn helps him to gain broader access to the present."[12] What Husserl calls here the most general understandable, is the natural world, is the fundamental layer that holds everything together. But again, this nucleus does not exist as such on its own, did not exist as such early in our life; as we have already said, this layer is transcendentally delimited as condition of possibility for the existence of the world. It does not reveal itself to us as such, but according to our belonging to a certain culture, or language, according to our education and personal development. Objectivity, or the reality of our everyday encounters and interests, is the result of intersubjective, communicative agreement.

[10] Hua XIII, Beilage LII, p. 468.
[11] Edmund Husserl, Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität. Texte aus dem Nachlass. Zweiter Teil. 1921-28. Edited by Iso Kern. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, Text no. 10, p. 197. (Hua XIV)
[12] Edmund Husserl, Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology, translated by Dorion Cairns, Springer, 1960, § 58, p. 133.

BDD-V21 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:11:30 UTC)

Literature:

Edmund Husserl, *Die Lebenswelt. Auslegungen der vorgegebenen Welt und ihrer Konstitution. Texte aus dem Nachlass (1916-1937).* Edited by Rochus Sowa. New York: Springer, 2008.

Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität.* Texte aus dem Nachlass. Erster Teil. 1905-1920. Edited by Iso Kern. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973.

Edmund Husserl, *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität.* Texte aus dem Nachlass. Zweiter Teil. 1921-28. Edited by Iso Kern. The Hague, Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973.

Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations. An Introduction to Phenomenology*, translated by Dorion Cairns, Springer, 1960.

Andrew N. Meltzoff and M. Keith Moore, "Imitation of Facial and Manual Gestures by Human Neonates", *Science*, New Series, Volume 198, Issue 4312, (Oct. 7, 1977).

BDD-V21 © 2014 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.142 (2026-11-14 18:11:30 UTC)