

Linguistic Relativity Revisited through the Lens of the Welsh-Speaking Subject and the Affective Inhabitations of Languages

Daniel Southall

southalld@cardiff.ac.uk

Cardiff University

Research Article

Keywords: Linguistic Relativity, Merleau-Ponty, Affective Inhabitations, Welsh-Speaking Subject

Posted Date: September 9th, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-10828290/v1>

License: © ⓘ This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.

[Read Full License](#)

Additional Declarations: No competing interests reported.

Title Page: **Linguistic Relativity Revisited through the Lens of the Welsh-Speaking Subject and the Affective Inhabitations of Languages.**

Abstract: This paper aims to open new phenomenological lines of enquiry into Linguistic Relativity, primarily rooted in the embodied and reflective-affective dimensions of language from the perspective of the Welsh-Speaking Subject. This paper will reshape the debate by using a phenomenological account of the speaker to frame the discussion from the perspective of the irreducible linguistic experience of Welsh-Speaking Subjects. Subsequently, I present embodied languages from the perspective of the Welsh-Speaking Subjects as irreducible, deeply intimate, 'Affective Inhabitations'.

This paper is split into three sections. Section Two will deploy Charles Taylor's reflections on Linguistic Relativity, as presented in *The Language Animal* (2016), to situate the discussion and provide a point of departure for my phenomenological account of the speaker. Here, I argue that Taylor's account of the Constitutive function of language doesn't go far enough. Section Three will draw on Merleau-Ponty's 'Speaking Subject', which offers a rich phenomenological account of language, to develop the concept of the 'Welsh-Speaking Subject'. I argue that this type of Speaking Subject reorients the discussion on Linguistic Relativity because their lived linguistic bodies are attuned to distinct and, in my view, irreducible traditions of Spoken Speech. This will be shown by deploying the Welsh example of the *ti/chi* asymmetrical form. Section Four will emphasise the reflective-affective dimension of language by using the case of the Welsh-Speaking Subject and the difficulty in presenting the *ti/chi* example. This Affective Inhabitation of language emerges from the Speaking Subjects' reflective awareness of their embodied and affective experience within distinct languages.

Key Words: Linguistic Relativity, Merleau-Ponty, Affective Inhabitations, Welsh-Speaking Subject.

1. Introduction

I had just started at a Welsh-medium secondary school, and during an English lesson, we were given the all-too-familiar task of recounting ‘what I did in summer’. Eager to impress, I rushed my work and was keen to have it marked. Before I could brace for impact, the teacher picked up her dreaded red pen and began to work in front of my class, the jury for the day. I tried to read her facial expressions and noticed she was smiling, which I took as a good sign. She even started laughing, leading me to conclude that this was yet another flawless victory...

As the whole class eagerly awaited judgment, waiting to hear what sort of sentence the judge would serve today, she said, tight-lipped, “Well, that was interesting.”

I stood by her desk, bemused by the brief feedback. Surely that can’t be it, I thought despairingly. Where was my praise, my moment of smug clarity? As confusion subsided and disappointment dominated, she reached to hand back my book but withdrew it at the last moment and delivered a playful slap over my head. With it, she laughed, “...but next time, try it in English.”

Although somewhat exaggerated, I frequently reflect on this moment when Welsh began to be beaten out of me. To replace the shame, I started translating my story from Welsh to English as soon as I got on the school bus. What was supposed to be a ten-minute task still hasn’t been completed to this day, and in many ways, cannot be.

Why was it that when I consulted the dictionary and translated each word to its English equivalent, pinpointed precisely where each pause and assonant rhyme should be, and employed the techniques and rhetorical tricks, I still felt something was changed or missing in the meaning? It felt to me then, as it does now, that the story belongs in Welsh, in contours and creative deviations that are invisible to even my English eye. Why would my teacher, who is bilingual in Welsh and English, also feel that this English version isn’t quite right?

This paper aims to pinpoint, through a phenomenological account of the speaker, exactly where this affective sense of incommensurability is housed in the Welsh-Speaking Subject. This will conclude by presenting embodied languages from the perspective of Welsh-Speaking Subjects as irreducible ‘Affective Inhabitations’, a reflective-affective capacity outlined in Section 4. This will reshape the debate surrounding Linguistic Relativity by framing it from the perspective of the irreducible linguistic experience of Welsh-Speaking Subjects. This should motivate the idea that what is missing in the act of translation in the anecdote above is the affective experiences housed in the speaker.

To accomplish this, the paper will be divided into three main sections. Section Two will deploy Charles Taylor’s reflections on Linguistic Relativity, as presented in *The Language Animal* (2016), to situate the current discussion and provide my phenomenological account with a natural point of departure. This section will set the scene for the contemporary debate surrounding Linguistic Relativity whilst introducing two functions of language: the Designative and the Constitutive. This section will argue that attending to the Constitutive function is certainly a fruitful approach. Yet, there is a need to go further by investigating language at the speaker’s phenomenological level.

Section Three will draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ‘Speaking Subject’, which offers a rich phenomenological account of language, one that is crucially anchored in the speaker’s perspective. One might see this as a reformulation of Charles Taylor’s account and further claims on Linguistic Relativity by taking a grounded, embodied, and affective position. Introducing the role of embodiment and Speaking and Spoken Speech will allow us to develop the crucial concept of the ‘Welsh-Speaking Subject’ in this section. I argue that this sort of Speaking Subject reorients the discussion of Linguistic Relativity because their lived linguistic bodies are attuned to distinct and irreducible traditions of Spoken Speech. This irreducibility will be demonstrated using the Welsh example of the *ti/chi* asymmetrical form.

Section Four will emphasise the reflective-affective dimension of language by using the case of the Welsh-Speaking Subject and the difficulty in presenting the *ti/chi* example. This affective dimension

emerges from the Speaking Subjects' reflective awareness of their embodied engagements within distinct languages. Subsequently, I present embodied languages from the perspective of the Welsh-Speaking Subjects as intimate and irreducible Affective Inhabitations.

2. Setting the Scene: Charles Taylor on Linguistic Relativity.

This section will draw on Charles Taylor's reflections on Linguistic Relativity, as presented in *The Language Animal* (2016), to contextualise the current discussion and offer my phenomenological perspective with a clear starting point. It will establish the stage for the current debate on Linguistic Relativity while introducing two facets of language: the Designative and the Constitutive. This part will argue that emphasising the Constitutive function is undoubtedly advantageous and more productive than merely examining the Designative function of language. Yet, there is value in delving even further by exploring language at the speaker's phenomenological level. This is where I consider the most fruitful area for advancing discourse surrounding Linguistic Relativity.

One might find, in a typical list of 'words that don't exist in English', alongside *Jayus*¹ and *Umarell*², the Welsh word *Hiraeth*. Underneath this word, you will find an English definition along the lines of 'a deep longing for a person or thing which is absent or lost'. When introducing this term to non-Welsh speakers, one is greeted with a few predictable replies. An English Monoglot might say, 'Oh my god, I've felt that!' or adjust the definition to fit their linguistic background, saying, 'So *it is* nostalgia or homesickness?' On occasion, you may be in discussion with someone who speaks another language, say Galician or Portuguese, who may remark, 'We have a word *similar* to this, *Saudade*'

The italicised words '*it is*' and '*similar*' here epitomise two notable stances on Linguistic Relativity. The former may claim that *Hiraeth* does, in fact, exist in, for argument's sake, English; it just takes more words to describe it. Here, *Hiraeth* is not a distinct Welsh feeling or experience but is commensurable, and thus Linguistic Relativity is to be rejected. The latter, however, acknowledges that we are not, in fact, talking about the same thing when we use *Saudade* and *Hiraeth*, because behind these words lies a unique constitutive linguistic background that gives the terms their specific meaning and positions the speakers who experience them. In short, there is a gap, no matter how subtle, which may support a claim of Linguistic Relativity.

In his considerations of Linguistic Relativity in *The Language Animal* (2016), Taylor falls into the latter category. However, before presenting Taylor's remarks, it may be worth briefly clarifying what Linguistic Relativity claims. Linguistic Relativity asserts that each language is linked to a distinct worldview, which can be entirely incommensurable from one language to another (Gumpertz and Levinson 1996, p.2). For Edward Sapir, one of the leading proponents of this view, the assertion of a 'distinct worldview' does not simply imply that we perceive the same world with different labels. Instead, no two languages are ever sufficiently alike to be regarded as representing the same social reality. (Sapir 1961, p.69) Put forth by Benjamin Lee Whorf, another prominent advocate of the theory-

"...all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe unless their linguistic backgrounds are similar..." (Whorf 2012, p.212, 214)

Given the boldness of such claims, Taylor's view offers a gentler interpretation of Linguistic Relativity. It is not that different languages create a new reality, but rather that the way we attend to a shared reality is shaped by our respective languages and their evolving social practices. We may not be entirely confined to a reality dictated by the language we speak; instead, we are somewhat swayed by our languages, which steer how we engage with a scene and focus on objects. For example, when asked to sort triads of objects to indicate likeness, English speakers tend to associate similarity by shape, whereas Yucatec speakers do so by material (Taylor 2016, p. 323). Here, participants from different languages do not

¹ Indonesian slang for a joke that amuses because it is so unfunny or poorly told

² Italian term for men of retirement age who spend time watching construction sites- stereotypically with hands clasped behind their backs and offering unwanted advice to workers.

appear to see different objects; instead, they focus on different features of the same object, depending on what their linguistic culture finds salient. Here, we observe narrower relativity, in which salient features of the same objects vary across languages because they are not neutral instruments.

Nevertheless, it appears reasonable to suggest that in areas where the Designative function of language is most evident—that is, when it functions as a means of describing the external physical world—there is currently little evidence to support the strongest claims of Linguistic Relativity. It appears quite difficult to empirically demonstrate that, if we do not share a similar linguistic background, observers are not influenced by the same physical evidence or hold a shared view of the universe.

However, the above focuses narrowly on what Taylor calls the ‘Designative’ function of language. This function treats language as an instrument for encoding and conveying information about a shared external reality; it is just another human skill that serves a particular function. Yet, according to Taylor, languages are not merely tools or instruments for designating and labelling objects in the world. Taylor even writes that, in direct dispute with Steven Pinker, who argues against Linguistic Relativity in *The Language Instinct* (1995), tackling and disproving these Designative examples alone does not reasonably lead to a wholesale rejection of Linguistic Relativity-

“It is aberrant to think that one can dismiss these issues entirely by showing that Inuit don’t have that many words for different kinds of snow, or that colour vocabularies have less impact on colour discriminations than was thought...” (Taylor 2016, p.328)

Therefore, dismissing Linguistic Relativity based on vague colour discriminations and similar issues seems somewhat hasty, since this addresses only one aspect of his broader conception of language. These concerns relate solely to how we encode material objects in the world, which is part of language's Designative function.

In Taylor’s view, because language is inherently social (or dialogical) and enacted, it possesses a creative or ‘Constitutive-enactive’ force. The Constitutive view posits that language offers a new field or dimension to our experience. Language is not regarded as a tool to be picked up and set aside, but as a medium we are *in* (Taylor 2016, p. 90). This view of language sharply opposes non-constitutive perspectives that regard it merely as another cognitive ability. For Taylor, our daily existence is rooted in an inherently social foundation, upon which the collective imaginaries of speakers are built. The Constitutive function of language, grounded in social interactions that develop social imaginaries (such as footings, rituals, etc.), is where relativity takes on greater significance. Language can overlay the primary world of perception, adapt itself, or reflect the specific experiences of a linguistic community.

It appears reasonable to me that the Constitutive function of language ensures that the debate on Linguistic Relativity remains relevant and lively. Since languages are embedded within the societies and specific environments of their speakers, they may develop their own philosophies. Over time, we might see these create a vast divergence in cultural worldviews. To simplify this concept, we could imagine race cars starting from the same chequered flag, but they are pulled in different directions during the race. Since languages are conceptually an open totality, the vehicles may return to the same track or never cross paths again. The distance between these cars can be seen as the gulf of commensurability, or the struggle for perfect translation.

For Taylor, these creative deviations in specific languages might create “[a] deep Metaphysical gulf that divides us from earlier societies” (Taylor, 2016, p. 327). For instance, readers may be familiar with other ways that different societies and their languages attend to time. The obvious example is the Buddhist view of cyclical time, which contrasts with the monochronic or linear time predominantly experienced in the Modern West. Indeed, contemporary cultural differences expressed through language may also reflect a sense of relativity in social worlds. These differences could relate to aspects of life such as ethics, politics, or spirituality, where languages convey ideals that are entirely incompatible or opaque to one another. Failed attempts to introduce liberal democracy in countries with diverse social structures and imaginaries, such as Libya (Taylor, 2016, p. 327), exemplify this. We may suggest that the social

imaginaries, rooted in language practices, are misaligned. In this context, the creative potential of languages, over time, may develop in such a way that a speaker of one language might feel that, when trying to translate other languages and their social ideas, they are entirely foreign—almost inconceivable.

The crucial claim here is that if we broaden language beyond the Designative function, we see that its embedded nature, communicative intent, and bodily-expressive properties provoke greater possibilities for variation. In brief, as linguistic animals in a social world, we *do* things with words. It is in the ‘doing’ of things that linguistic deviations may arise. We should not be too quick to dismiss the core idea of Linguistic Relativity if we adopt a view of language that centres on its Constitutive functions, which extend beyond merely designating an external reality.

Although I am highly sympathetic to the need to expand our understanding of language, and Taylor’s Constitutive function seems a promising path, one cannot help but feel that we could develop a conception of language that goes even further. In the following sections, I will argue that adopting Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological perspective on language, grounded in the speaker’s experience, allows us to explore irreducible, embodied, and affective aspects of language. In my view, by attending to where language lives in the speaker, we can push beyond Taylor’s account and thereby reformulate the debate surrounding Linguistic Relativity.

3. Towards The Speaking Subject.

This section will draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s ‘Speaking Subject’, which offers a rich phenomenological account of language, one that is crucially anchored in the speaker’s perspective. One might see this as an expansion of Charles Taylor’s account and a further claim about Linguistic Relativity by taking a grounded, embodied, and affective position. Introducing the role of embodiment and Speaking and Spoken Speech will allow us to develop the crucial concept of the ‘Welsh-Speaking Subject’. I argue that this sort of Speaking Subject reorients the discussion of Linguistic Relativity because their lived linguistic bodies are attuned to distinct and irreducible traditions of Spoken Speech. This irreducibility will be demonstrated using the Welsh example of the *ti/chi* asymmetrical form. Therefore, incommensurability is to be found not at the conceptual level, but in the process of expression.

As previously expressed, Taylor’s perspective, in my view, can be enhanced by emphasising the subject’s phenomenological experience of living with languages. Ultimately, any claims of relativity are rooted in the experiences and felt differences of the speakers who live in and through languages. Therefore, we should approach this debate with the one element inseparable from an understanding of language as experienced: the subject that speaks, as Merleau-Ponty writes.

“...to know what language is, it is necessary first of all to speak. It no longer suffices to reflect on languages lying before us in historical documents of the past. It is necessary to take them over, to live with them...only by making contact with the speaking subject can I gain a sense of what other languages are and how to move around in them. (Merleau-Ponty 1964a, p.83 in Silverman 1980, p.129-130)

Here, I am emphasising the importance of delving into the specificity of experience and observing what surfaces. We should begin with the experience of speaking languages, which may lead us to underexplored subjective aspects that underpin how we live with languages.

3.1 The Lived Body of The Speaking Subject.

As a clarificatory remark, the term ‘Speaking Subject’ itself is employed to encapsulate Merleau-Ponty’s view that language does not occur to a ready-made subject but instead produces one. Only by acquiring language concepts can a subject truly become a subject. Hence, much like other aspects of his philosophy, we ought not to view ‘speaking’ and ‘subject’ as a separate dichotomy. Instead, the term ‘Speaking Subject’ should be regarded as inseparable and coeval, as if the terms were written in tandem, one on top of the other. Much of the complexity with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of language, in my view, derives from the necessity to write in sequence that which is lived simultaneously.

Merleau-Ponty emphasises the lived body of the Speaking Subject as the foundation of language. So, we should begin by clarifying what exactly ‘lived body’ means. For him, the role of bodies has not been sufficiently considered in theories of language or in philosophy more generally. Instead, bodies have been reduced to various structural mechanisms with the mind serving as the control centre. By ‘lived body’, Merleau-Ponty means it in a much broader sense than just the functional body. A clue to the importance of our lived bodies is provided at the start of our lives, as the world is presented to us as “bodily explored” (Zahavi 2019, p. 57). Acting in the world and sensing it always require mediation and activity between our environment and our lived bodies; therefore, when we discuss the lived body, we should understand that it comprises much more than its material or structural components.

To emphasise this point, I invite the reader to think of having the flu. You may be thinking of a stuffed nose and a head cold. You may even say, ‘I can’t wait until I’m normal again,’ and promise to cherish life’s small victories when you recover. This reflection helps us realise that there is much more to our bodies than their physical aspect. Illness temporarily confiscates our lived bodies, leading us, for a moment, to see it as “just a body” (Di Paolo, Cuffari, and De Jaegher, 2018, p. 95). This sentiment seems intuitively correct when we think of the other people we encounter. When we think of a friend, I’m sure that we aren’t only picturing their bare bones, as if a corpse on an operating table. Because these people are living bodies, we think of them as they are in the world, as they behave around others. They may have embodied gestural quirks, a style of talking, a methodical way of doing things. We may imagine them as bringing a “whirlwind” (Di Paolo, Cuffari and De Jaegher 2018, p. 660) with them, or as possessing a sticky texture in which their history, relations, and moods are brought along and emanate through their lived bodies. This ‘lived body’ should be granted a special status in any conception of language because it is deeply implicated in our relation to the world and others.

The body also tends toward expression; we might say it is its default setting. We are compelled to express ourselves; even in sleep or death, the body communicates something. (Merleau-Ponty 2013, p.187). It is this inclination towards expression that is bestowed upon bodies, which is the source from which language emerges from the surface. Consequently, an essential part of the lived body’s expression is its linguistic character. Language is how the body attempts to connect with others by expressing itself, and any definition of language should start with the inseparable embodied aspect. Here, we begin to see a subtle shift from Taylor’s socially embedded focus in his conception of language towards the bodies of the subjects who express through language.

To clarify, for the Speaking Subject, language is inseparable from the body (Merleau-Ponty 2013, p. 211). If we were to take spoken language, for example, this, to him, is but one form of ‘language’ that manifests through speaking via the speech organs. As he writes-

“...the contraction of the throat, the sibilant emission of air...a certain manner of playing with our body” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, p.200).

This seems intuitively correct; after all, we often describe languages as ‘tongues’ that move through our bodies, by word of mouth (Heidegger 1993, p. 400). However, we must remember that spoken language is one form of language; it coexists with various forms of embodied action as a continuation and elaboration of bodily expression. Therefore, language is in motion through our bodies; it is fundamentally embodied.³ Merleau-Ponty takes the merging of language, body, and world literally. As he writes-

“I relate to the word *just as* my hand reaches for the place on my body being stung.”
(Merleau-Ponty 2013, p.186)

Crucially, the italicised ‘just as’ is Merleau-Ponty uniting language and body through embodied gestural expression.

³ As a clarifying note, since the term ‘language’ is often narrowly associated with spoken language, Merleau-Ponty prefers to use the term ‘gesture’, because this shows the reader that language emerges as expression throughout the body, from the hands, feet, face, and mouth.

This embodied gestural view of language can be explored through everyday examples of the Speaking Subject. When we discover a word trapped on the tip of our tongue, we may feel the knots or tension in our bodies unravelling. Similarly, a sobbing child who has sought solace from a grandparent after being unkindly treated might hear the wisdom, ‘Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.’ Even as a child, one is left confused, as it was obvious that words could hurt, as shown by a tear-soaked T-shirt. When we are tasked with presenting to the class, we may employ techniques to reduce leg or hand shaking, such as leaning on the desk or using a thicker notepad. However, as we begin to speak, we are reminded that our words are delivered with tremulous indecision; they are as much a part of our bodies as anything else. Finally, I invite the reader to imagine hearing a loved one; when we hear a loved one’s voice, we recognise it as their body, almost as if it were paired with their words; we imagine their movements. These experiences remind us of Merleau-Ponty’s sentiment that language is as unshakable as flesh.

3.2 Introducing Speaking and Spoken Speech.

The question weighing on us is this: what exactly do we rely on when communicating through speech (embodied gestures)? What linguistic resources do we use to shape our bodily expressions, turning them into speech that others can understand? After all, I was not born with the bodily knowledge that lifting only my middle finger will offend.

For Merleau-Ponty, we should move away from the monological view of language; ‘speech’ is not merely the act of articulating a thought that is already “complete and self-contained” (Kee 2018, p.417) inside the individual. Nor is the meaning of speech found in some internal realm of thought or feeling that I infer (Kee 2018, p.418) in isolation. Instead, we comprehend the meaning of speech in its immediacy, just as we do not infer that someone is angry but rather know it in the present moment. This ability appears because, as we grasp speech, which for Merleau-Ponty can be a verbal gesture or something like a frown, an intersubjectively embedded background seems to be present that we refer to. We do not seem to attend to a frown in isolation but rather against the backdrop of other facial gestures we’ve encountered. That is, we, as Speaking Subjects, are already embedded in an enlanguaged world.

Following this thread suggests that our speech does not operate in isolation; communication is already immersed in intersubjectivity. Taking this perspective further, Merleau-Ponty imagines styles of speech or embodied gestures that emerge from certain languages, such as signalling to a friend ‘come here’ in Italian or shrugging one’s shoulders in French.⁴ (Silverman 1980, p. 125). Here, our embodied gestures or speech come alive because they are embedded within a specific gestural/linguistic community.

All the while, it also seems fair to suggest that speech belongs to the singular Speaking Subject; we seem to have a say in what we’re going to say. Therefore, for Merleau-Ponty, speech must be distinguished in two ways: *Speaking* and that which has been *Spoken*. Crucially, we should not interpret this as Merleau-Ponty establishing a dichotomy; both Speaking and Spoken Speech are present in all speech (Kee 2018, p. 433); they comprise an inseparable whole.

When a subject speaks, they feel at the centre of speech; this is the essence of *Speaking Speech*. The act of speaking feels very much like one’s own, just as waving to say goodbye to a grandparent—though a common gesture—is, at that moment, deeply imbued with our own affection. We are reminded that subjects are necessary for speaking, and thus, we “cannot absolutely distinguish language from the speaking subject” (Merleau-Ponty 1973, p. 99). We can consider what Merleau-Ponty calls Speaking Speech as the subject’s deployment of speech in the instant.

Behind this present and personal act of speaking, Merleau-Ponty presents a body of speech: *Spoken Speech*. We may view Spoken Speech as a broad body of language or “acquired fortune” (Merleau-Ponty 2013, p. 203) that serves as a springboard for the new (Mooney 2022, p. 199). We may identify Spoken

⁴ A specific example of embodied gestures belonging to specific language communities may be the Haka, performed in the Te Reo Māori language in Aotearoa (New Zealand).

Speech as an institution or a sedimented cultural acquisition (Free 1990, p. 299). Spoken Speech is what lies behind the word; it is an attitude or function of speech that conditions it (Merleau-Ponty 2013, p.180). We may be able to exemplify this by using the English word 'tidy' in England and in Wales. In England, tidy may be used to mean something well-kept, the act of tidying up, or the bringing of order to something. These meanings are also adopted in Wales. However, in Wales, the term is also used to approve of something or to express thanks. For example, if I were to order a coffee and the waiter were to bring it over, I may say, "Ah, tidy that is."

We may imagine that, as a child initiated into a language community, the expressive resources she draws upon, like the word 'tidy', are inspired by the Spoken Speech of other members of the community, as if she not only speaks a language but speaks from out of it.

"...a wave that gathers itself together...to once again throw itself beyond itself." (Merleau-Ponty 2013, p.203)

To refer to the wave quotation above, we should view Spoken Speech as the tide that drives the final wave's movement. Like the ocean, language has no centre; it is an open totality that invites the Speaking Subjects into its momentum. As Zahavi encapsulates, the lived experience of the Speaking Subject is "...always furnished with meaning, or that I understand the world and myself through a traditional, handed-down, linguistic conventionality." (2019, p.58).

To return, this leaves Speaking Speech as "simply speech" (Free 1990, p.299), an embodied linguistic gesture actively delivered by the Speaking Subject. We may consider this the 'frontlines' of language, as something we know to be an activity of our own, yet also reiterated and fostered by the need to belong to the saying. Speaking Speech, then, always operates against a particular background of Spoken Speech; "it is always a fold against the immense fabric of language" (Merleau-Ponty 1964b, p. 42).

This is not to say that one cannot stretch the bounds of articulation. But what is said must be said from somewhere. In a sense, the Speaking Subject is both bound and freed in speech. To reformulate the words of Heidegger- to speech belong the speakers, to speakers belong the speech. (Heidegger, 1993, 406).

3.3 The Welsh-Speaking Subject.

Certainly, the idea of the Speaking Subject, rooted in their lived body and engaging with Spoken Speech to speak for themselves, seems invaluable. This provides insight into what appears to be happening at a crucial level: the speaker. The key point is that languages are simultaneously embodied and embedded. Charles Taylor primarily addresses the latter aspect concerning Linguistic Relativity, whereas Merleau-Ponty's conception of language interweaves the whole. This process of interweaving, as this sub-section argues, may bring new considerations to light.

To synthesise Taylor's stance on Linguistic Relativity with new terminology from the sub-sections above, we may suggest that contained in the Spoken Speech of a given language are social concepts and practices that cannot be translated from one tradition of Spoken Speech to another via the act of Speaking. In fact, Merleau-Ponty appears to appeal to a similar sentiment here-

"That's why a language is never fully translatable to another; we can speak several languages, but one of them remains the one in which I live. To wholly assimilate a language, it would be necessary to take up the world it expresses, we never belong to two worlds at the same time." (Merleau-Ponty 2013, p.193)

Crucially, in reading Merleau-Ponty, we can subtly reinterpret Taylor's view from Section Two. It is not so much that social concepts across different languages may be incommensurable, but rather that, by starting from the requirement to express such concepts as commensurable, any way to demonstrate this would necessitate a Speaking Subject to embody two languages simultaneously. We might see this as an *a priori* concern about how the debate over Linguistic Relativity can genuinely progress. We can never

truly belong to all the languages we speak at once, because, to speak, the subject must immerse themselves in the specific tradition of Spoken Speech and embody the language in Speaking. In this process of conveyance, some essential element is lost.

Considering this concern, we might utilise the unique positionality of the Welsh-Speaking Subject as testimony to demonstrate the irreducible phenomenological aspects of being a Welsh speaker that evade conveyance. In attempting to belong to two languages when presenting the following *ti/chi* asymmetrical form example, we might, through its shortcomings, be led to the relevant affective dimensions that are being overlooked. It seems apt that, just as Merleau-Ponty grounds language in the subjects who speak, we should also conduct the debate on Linguistic Relativity from the perspective of subjects who live in, and often in-between, languages, say Welsh and English.⁵

In Welsh, '*ti*' is often used to address someone you're familiar with, such as a close friend. Teachers or parents also employ it to create an authoritative effect. In contrast, '*chi*' is used in formal situations, when speaking to someone you don't yet know, or as a sign of respect toward superiors or elders. At first glance, to some readers, the term 'you' seems fairer because it places everyone on equal footing, whereas *ti/chi* suggests imposing a hierarchy. However, being immersed in the Spoken Speech of both Welsh and English, this view doesn't necessarily hold.

Here, one is aware that we're thinking through English to suggest an 'asymmetry' in *ti/chi*. After all, the Welsh language does not call this asymmetrical at all. When using an Anglophone framework to analyse this difference, we may impose a hierarchy in which *chi* is elevated above *ti*. The teacher employs *ti* to establish authority, and the student utilises *chi* to give consent. Thus, we are being relegated and promoted as we fluctuate between these terms. This suggests that others are determining your status. Through an English-speaking lens, we may find this disagreeable; *we ought to treat people equally by using the same word - 'you'*⁶.

This doesn't feel like the case in practice for the Welsh speaker, though, because although one may be relegated to *ti* (usually by a parent or teacher during childhood), we are also elevated to *ti* as a casual sign of comfort between one another. The same can be said for *chi*. While one feels strongly obligated to use it to assert hierarchy and elevate someone else, one also receives this when newly acquainted with someone. To add, *chi* may be viewed as initiating a discussion with an in-built goodwill gesture with a stranger, and *ti* may be used subtly to signal to someone that they're at ease in their presence. Here, in the Welsh-speaking context, one finds that this so-called asymmetrical form requires reflecting on relationships before speaking. Here we begin to see that underlying this practice, specific Welsh-language attitudes emerge.

We could then observe that any potential asymmetry imposed by this form is somewhat inaccurate, because while a hierarchy is evident in some instances, the forms are also employed as a counterweight. Any fears of hierarchy are nullified, as both *ti* and *chi* achieve a balanced equilibrium in situations of Speaking Speech. The point of imposing this form is to allow it to alternate in conversation, so that the recipient of the form is always at the 'higher' end. It is like setting someone up to compliment them.

This means that these forms require a Welsh speaker to be continually sensitive to the other's position relative to themselves. Once understood, the English term 'you', which seeks to flatten this hierarchy, appears to fall short from the Welsh perspective. Through a Welsh-speaking lens, 'you' seems less considerate, as the speaker does not need to consider the other's relation to themselves before addressing them. The word 'you' may occasionally come across as rude and impersonal because it

⁵ The following example is one that reflects my own language background. I could imagine that similar examples may arise from the likes of Euskara or Te Reo Māori-Speaking Subjects. I am also open to considering dialects and accents here, although this falls beyond the scope of this paper.

⁶ The English form 'Thou' could be seen as the archaic form of *chi*. This form fell into disuse in the 17th century. Interestingly, this form persisted in some regional dialects in the UK (namely, rural areas in Lancashire and Yorkshire).

applies to everyone⁷. Little effort is required of the speaker beyond speaking, whereas in Welsh, the listener is considered even when they are silent.

Here, the Welsh-Speaking Subject might be attuned to an underlying difference in how ‘fairness’ is understood in Spoken Speech across languages. This echoes Taylor’s sentiment in Section Two. In English, using the same word for everyone implies fairness against the backdrop of a view of neutral equality. However, in Welsh, the asymmetrical forms *ti/chi* establish a convention that everyone must consider and uphold to ensure fairness. Here, the practice of fairness operates against the backdrop of attentive equality. We may say that this fairness is embedded in the practice of speaking rather than in the sameness of the words themselves.

We might quote from Wilhelm von Humboldt, one of the main influences on Taylor’s Constitutive function of language, to capture the essence of the previous example.

“... there resides in every language a characteristic world-view ... every language draws about the people that possesses it a circle whence it is possible to exit only by stepping over at once into the circle of another one”. (von Humboldt, [1836] 1988, p. 60)

This quote and my example certainly illustrate Merleau-Ponty’s claim that we never belong to two languages at the same time. But in fact, it may not be the example *per se* that illustrates it, but the act that I undertook in attempting to encapsulate the *ti/chi* example through speaking English, even though the example is folded into the immense fabric of Welsh Spoken Speech.

The previous asymmetrical example and its social nuance were difficult and inadequately conveyed. This may be because conveying social variation in one language, in this case English, requires elucidating the example in an English ‘way’. That is, one language must host the example. I sense that bilingual speakers might empathise, as they have been immersed in two languages and are used to this sense of inadequacy in conveying ideas to the uninitiated. Humboldt would probably suggest that to articulate the example, I needed to exit Welsh and ‘step over’ into the English language. In this act, crucial cargo (meaning) is lost. Paradoxically, to explain this difference, one invariably loses some of the difference. One can only appeal to metaphor here and say that translating these lived practices of variation is like attempting to portray a dream. The reader may notice that we have approached my burning questions from the opening school vignette.

This is a fundamental issue in discussions of Linguistic Relativity. One must express examples in a common language that is not a neutral instrument, thus, *prima facie*, consigning claims and examples to a particular lens, logic, and method of enquiry. There appears to be no neutral or objective yardstick by which to measure and compare them. Often, when advancing such claims, the examples in question and the language in which they are articulated seem to slide past each other. The destiny of my example is left in the hands of Speaking Subjects who will naturally use their own background of Spoken Speech, which inevitably will distort the discussion for the sake of understanding in a particular language. This entire conveyance process feels akin to pointing (maybe unknowingly) with a crooked finger.

In this section, we pushed beyond Taylor’s Constitutive function of language by grounding language in the lived body of the Speaking Subject. As an embodied Speaking Subject, the act of expression is given special weight. By wrapping the Speaking Subject in Speaking and Spoken Speech, we were able to articulate Taylor’s stance in a grounded manner. And still, as the Welsh-Speaking Subject attests, by adopting this unique positionality of the Speaking Subject, we become acutely aware of the felt sense of incommensurability that lingers after expression. This is what the final section will untangle.

4. The Affective Inhabitation of Languages.

⁷ This appears interesting given that ‘Thou’ fell into disuse, in part, because it was deemed impolite. Here we see a clear deviation.

This section aims to highlight how the phenomenological framework set out in the previous section can shed light on affective aspects of the Welsh-Speaking Subjects' experience. In adopting Merleau-Ponty's embodied example of the Speaking Subject and developing an example, we are no longer tackling whether the concepts in these languages are incommensurable, but rather that, in their presentation, the Welsh-Speaking Subject, in virtue of their positionality, may *feel* a deviation. Take the anecdote that started this paper. Here, we are reminded that the Speaking Subject is intimately *and affectively* tied to the languages they speak. As I scribbled down an English version of my story, attempting to mimic each rhetorical technique and the precise meaning of words, an affective sense of difference persisted. We should pay closer attention to this subtle yet crucial component housed in the speaker. This is, of course, not to say that we should no longer care about conceptual incommensurability, but we should also enter the discussion from another angle. This other angle of which I speak is specifically the experience of the Affective Inhabitation of languages.

In deploying the term 'affective', I should be clear about what I specifically mean. First, I am not alluding here to the emotional content of words, or that which is exhibited by accent, tone, posture or expression. Nor am I discussing 'affective dimensions'; an approach in linguistics that tackles affect in language through dimensions such as valence, power, arousal, or novelty (Soriano 2022, p.493-4). And finally, I wish to make no substantive claims about how different languages may carve out specific affective spaces. This would inevitably lead to a broader debate on the universality of emotions, which falls beyond the scope of this paper.

By framing the discussion from the perspective of the Welsh-Speaking Subject, a subtle new affective dimension of living *between* languages emerges. This dimension, which is part of the broader affective experience of language, stems from the constant process of transition and the felt tension between the Spoken and Speaking Speech of different languages. I am emphasising precisely the affective components involved in navigating and reflecting on the languages we experience. I am interested not in how language may influence our feelings, but rather in what we feel about the various languages we speak and therefore inhabit.

A more suitable label for this inter-language situation, or for reflective-affective capacity, may be 'Affective Inhabitations of language'. This Affective Inhabitation emerges during language travel, in which we begin to develop a relationship with the languages we live in. Given that I am pinpointing a subtle element of the affective experience of living with languages, it is worthwhile building this Affective Inhabitation from the ground up.

Firstly, we must remind ourselves that once we are initiated into a language, we can experience it privately. We are reminded of this private experience with language when we hear ourselves speak (Merleau-Ponty 1968, p. 144); this is akin to a hand touching our other hand or seeing one's reflection in a mirror. These are rare instances in which we may, through reflection, encounter ourselves as subjects and objects.

Crucially, in my view, as the *ti/chi* example suggests, we develop a reflective-affective capacity for languages as we traverse and embody different languages. We may look into the mirror of our linguistic situation. As we switch languages and embody them, the Speaking Subject is always reminded of their varied experiences with language; one senses a contrast in Spoken and Speaking Speech as they inhabit a language. This reflective ability, born at the brief border-crossing between languages, means the Speaking Subject now not only knows something but also *feels* something about the languages they live with. By traversing and embodying various languages, the Welsh-Speaking Subjects are both inside and outside the languages they speak; they may view the language they are not presently using from the outside. It is in this distance, of meeting and then leaving a language, also known as the process of inhabiting a language, that one begins to develop an affective relationship, one built on intimacy which crucially requires distance.

It is this reflective capacity that opens the specific Affective Inhabitation of language. Using the mirror analogy, by embodying Welsh, we can view our reflection as the English-Speaking Subject from the

outside. What develops behind the absence of English expression, as we embody Welsh, is a feeling towards English. To put it in a bodily metaphor, in virtue of using my left hand, I sense the strength or inadequacy of my right.

This Affective Inhabitation, resulting from bodily engagement and disengagement from languages, can manifest in many forms.⁸ To use the *ti/chi* example or the school anecdote, I experienced in both cases a sharp affective sensation indicating that what I had just written did not fully capture what I meant. I noticed feelings triggered by switching languages that relate to my relationship with English and Welsh, which, in turn, reveal something about the languages themselves. In this example, the affective aspect manifests as a felt dissonance between the meanings of words. More broadly, the Affective Inhabitation of a language appears in the Speaking Subject as a reflective-affective sense of belonging, refuge, or as a bodily reassurance. This Affective Inhabitation may also be one of discomfort and alienation. Through our relationship with the languages we express, we inhabit languages at a profoundly personal and embodied level, allowing us to sense contrasts through affect. These contrasts become more pronounced as we constantly straddle different languages. It is worth briefly alluding here to the idea that attending to our affective inhabitations of languages may also have implications for understanding experiences of marginalisation, say, in the case of Minoritised languages like Welsh.

We may conclude this section by returning to where we started in Section Two. I exemplified the English monolingual speaker who may deduce that they, in fact, grasp and can experience *Hiraeth*. I then suggested that a Galician might not be so hasty to assume this and instead insert their own salient term. We may say that because the Galician understands their variant, *Saudade*, they know that it rests on the specific Spoken Speech of their own language. The semantic gap between *Saudade* and *Hiraeth* cannot be bridged by deploying more descriptive terms alone, because these terms need to be embodied in the act of speaking. This speaking must rely on the undercurrent of Spoken Speech, which situates the term in its specific place.

For the English monolingual speaker, no number of synonyms or metaphors can capture *Hiraeth*. This would require understanding its life, which can only be achieved by becoming a Welsh-Speaking Subject. In fact, the word is composed of two words, *Hir* (meaning 'long') and *Aeth* (meaning 'went'). Thus, an understanding of the language and the specific metaphorical picture the word wishes to paint is interwoven with its meaning. To put it another way, they would need to be woven at the level of the body into the fabric of the linguistic practice itself, so the language and its meanings become "transparent". (Kee, 2025, p. 6).

True too, this monolingual speaker would realise that this alone would not be enough. Why? Because conveying *Hiraeth* requires it to be felt. In becoming a Welsh-Speaking Subject who inhabits languages, they would also develop reflective-affective ties to language. In the process of Affective Inhabitation, in the experience of being both inside and outside of languages, the gulf in meaning between *Hiraeth* and other substitutes would feel evident. The Monoglot speaker would need to assume the positionality of the Welsh-Speaking Subject to experience *Hiraeth* and sense the space between the meanings.

We could use an analogy: a monoglot speaker, by becoming a Welsh-Speaking Subject, can now try on two pairs of shoes that claim to be the same model, walk in them, inhabit them, and see if they truly fit. However, they would not be able to fully grasp or convey this felt difference because one cannot wear two pairs of shoes simultaneously, or in our case, affectively inhabit two languages at once. All that remains is the ambient sense of difference one had as they switched shoes, which begins to dissipate the moment their feet are housed in the other shoe.

⁸ I am attracted to Ratcliffe's (2008) concept of 'existential feelings', but instead of these being 'feelings of the body' and 'ways of finding oneself in the world' (Ratcliffe 2008, p.2), I am discussing the affects connected to existential feelings of language within the body and how Speaking Subjects find themselves in the world through languages.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, I am reminded of my first introduction to Linguistic Relativity in Bernard Harrison's (1979) introductory book on the philosophy of language. He provoked the reader to consider the possibility that what one knows is by virtue of the language one speaks: "It is not what I know, but what I know in knowing English." (1979, p.18). I am now drawn to adjust this quote to say, 'It is not what I know, but what I know *and feel* in knowing the languages I inhabit.'

The latter section did not aim to cover every aspect of the affective dimension of language. Instead, the section focused on one specific reflective-affective capacity that Welsh-Speaking Subjects develop as they embody and Affectively Inhabit languages. We inevitably feel something about the language we speak, and by tracing these feelings, we may be able to grasp the lived subtleties imbued in the Affective Inhabitation of languages. These subtleties, in my view, can be grasped by paying attention to the positionality and reflective capacities of Speaking Subjects who affectively inhabit different languages.

This paper began with Charles Taylor's reflections on Linguistic Relativity, as presented in *The Language Animal* (2016), to situate the discussion and provide a point of departure. Section Three introduced Merleau-Ponty's 'Speaking Subject', which offers an embodied phenomenological account of language, to develop the concept of the 'Welsh-Speaking Subject'. I argued that this type of Speaking Subject reorients the discussion on Linguistic Relativity because their linguistic bodies are attuned to distinct, and in my view, irreducible traditions of Spoken Speech. This was shown by deploying the Welsh example of the *ti/chi* asymmetrical form. Section Four emphasised the affective dimension of language by using the case of the Welsh-Speaking Subject and the difficulty in presenting the *ti/chi* example. This subtle affective dimension emerges from the Speaking Subjects' reflective awareness of their embodied engagements within distinct languages. Subsequently, I present embodied languages from the perspective of the Welsh-Speaking Subjects as irreducible, deeply intimate, Affective Inhabitations.

This paper aimed to deploy a phenomenological account of the speaker to resituate the discussion of Linguistic Relativity from the perspective of the irreducible linguistic experience of Welsh-Speaking Subjects. Of course, the Welsh-Speaking Subject is just one variation within the much broader category of Minoritised Language-Speaking Subjects. This category appears promising for further investigation, as the Speaking Subjects often inhabit languages that have historically been dominant or subordinate to one another. Also, for Minoritised Language-Speaking Subjects, the languages they speak may both have official status and coexist in the same space, thereby making the daily act of inhabiting different languages a reality. I therefore suspect that this experience of Affective Inhabitation may be more evident in their language travel, as in the cases of Euskara or Te Reo Māori-Speaking Subjects. Once these affective threads are woven together, they may directly reveal why speakers in some of these communities sense an incommensurability within the languages they inhabit. Nonetheless, honouring such diverse experiences requires approaching Linguistic Relativity from many angles. If our relationships with languages are personal and intimate, as I argue, then the philosophy aiming to explain and describe them should be equally so. Words, after all, can feel as tangible as flesh.

Reference List.

- Di Paolo, E. A., Cuffari, E. C., & De Jaegher, H. (2018). *Linguistic Bodies: The Continuity between Life and Language*. Cambridge, Ma: The Mit Press.
- Free, G. (1990). *Language, speech and writing: Merleau-Ponty and Derrida on Saussure*. Hum Stud 13, 293–301. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00193567>
- Fuchs, T. (2013) 'The Phenomenology of Affectivity', in K. W. M. Fulford and others (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Psychiatry*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199579563.013.0038>,
- Gumpertz, J.J., and Levinson, S.C (1996). *Rethinking Linguistic Relativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Harrison, B. (1979). *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Language*. Palgrave Macmillan, London. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-16227-7>
- Heidegger, M. and Krell, D.F. (1993). *Basic Writings: from Being and Time (1927) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*. London: Routledge And Kegan Paul.
- Kee, H. (2018). *Phenomenology and Ontology of Language and Expression: Merleau-Ponty on Speaking and Spoken Speech*. Hum Stud 41, 415–435 (2018). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-018-9456-x>
- Kee, H. (2025). *From encountering foreign languages to the language of phenomenology: Merleau-Ponty and The Problem of Speech*. Continental Philosophy Review. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11007-025-09679-1>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968), *The Visible and the Invisible*. (A. Lingis, Trans.) Evanston: Northwestern University Press
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964a) "Phenomenology and the Sciences of Man," (J. Wild, Trans.) in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), pp. 43-95.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1964b). *Signs*. (Trans. R.C. McCleary, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1973). *Consciousness and The Acquisition of Language* (H. J. Silverman, Trans.). Evanston: Northwestern University Press.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2013). *Phenomenology of Perception* (D. Landes, Trans.). New York: Routledge.
- Mooney, T. D. (2022). *Language, Speech and Affectivity*. In: Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology of Perception: On the Body Informed. Modern European Philosophy. Cambridge University Press; pp. 186-205.
- Pinker, S. (1994). *The Language Instinct: The New Science of Language and Mind*. William Morrow and Company
- Ratcliffe, M. (2008). *Feelings of Being. Phenomenology, Psychiatry and the Sense of Reality*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sapir, E. (1961). *Culture, Language and Personality: Selected Essays*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Silverman, H. (1980) "Merleau-Ponty and the Interrogation of Language." *Research in Phenomenology*, vol. 10, pp. 122–41. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24654311>. Accessed 5 Feb. 2025.

Soriano, C. (2022) "Affective meaning in language". Volume 1, edited by Gesine Lenore Schiewer, Jeanette Altarriba and Bee Chin Ng, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton, pp. 489-510.
<https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110347524-023>

Taylor, C. (2016). *The Language Animal: The Full Shape of the Human Linguistic Capacity*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

Von Humboldt, W. ([1836] 1988). *On language: the diversity of human language structure and its influence on the mental development of mankind* (trans. P. Heath). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Whorf, B. L. (2012). *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf* (J. B. Carroll, S. C. Levinson, & P. Lee, Eds.). The MIT Press. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt5hhbx2>

Zahavi, D. (2019). *Phenomenology: The Basics*. London; New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.