In the preface to the *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty renders an account of language and perception in which the subject enjoys an immediate grasp of the presence of the given. Language is not a screen impervious to thought in its relation to the perceived world, but the treasure reflecting an engagement with the things themselves. In reference to a characterization by Jean Wahl of the distinction between essence and existence in the works of Husserl, he states:

Husserl’s essences are destined to bring back all the living relationships of experience, as the fisherman’s net draws up from the depths of the ocean quivering fish and seaweed. Jean Wahl is therefore wrong in saying that ‘Husserl separates essence from existence.’ The separated essences are those of language. It is the function (*fonction*) of language to cause essences to exist in a state of separation which is in fact merely apparent since through language they still rest upon the pre-predicative life of consciousness. In the silence of originary consciousness (*conscience originaire*), one sees appearing not only that which words mean but likewise that which things mean: the core of primary signification (*signification*) around which acts of denomination and expression are organized. (Ph.P.: xv/x)
Language is, therefore, the mirror image, the apparent state, of a silent core, or to use Sartre's term, an "infrasilence," that is more primordial than it. It is, in fact, the re-presentation of this silence in a form of abstraction, of separation. As such, it is the holder of a meaning received and imparted from another domain, a domain "furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into precise language" (Ph.P: xviii). In short, the world is what we perceive, and what we perceive gets translated into words. Thus, on this account there is a strict relation between our knowledge and the original or 'pre-text' (since it is the "core" to which all signs ultimately refer) to the perceived world. And, as a result of this relation the sign is granted a status which remains always derivative.

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Merleau-Ponty explicates this standpoint with regard to the "essence of consciousness:"

Whatever the subtle changes of sense (sens) which have ultimately brought us, as a linguistic acquisition, the word and concept of consciousness, we enjoy direct access to what it designates. For we have the experience of ourselves, of that consciousness which we are, and it is on the basis of this experience that all linguistic significations (significations) are assessed, and precisely it which makes (fait que) language mean (veut dire) something for us. (Ph.P: xv/x).

Here I come upon an actual presence to self beneath the level of the universe of things said. And it is precisely here, at this Archimedean point where, as he put it, "I am the absolute source" (Ph.P: ix), that language not only undergoes assessment, but becomes meaningful. In the return to the things themselves that this preface on the nature of phenomenology reinstates, then, the elements of knowledge can be cleanly separated on the basis of this direct means of access into "the world which precedes knowledge, and of which knowledge always speaks (parle)" and the 'speaking' which remains "significative (signative) and dependent" regarding it (Ph.P: ix/iii).

The secondary status that significative practices receive in the