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My foreign body: exploring lived experiences of speaking a foreign language

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ABSTRACT
The significance of the body in learning and speaking a foreign language is an under-researched topic in a field characterized by a strong focus on cognition and sociolinguistics. This paper is designed to contribute to a newly emerging line of inquiry addressing the move away from the pure linguistic approach towards a more humanistic perspective. Within this context, phenomenology has been considered both as a relevant and as an under-researched approach. This article contributes to the current research on foreign languages studies by expanding our understanding of what it means to speak a language as experienced in the body.

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Introduction

On the battlefield after their victory over the people of Ephraim, the Gileads applied a language identity test to sort out friend and foe:
All of the soldiers were asked to pronounce the word shibboleth; those who pronounce the first consonant as [v] were friends, those who pronounced it [s] were enemies and therefore killed at once. (Judges:XII, 6) (Tabouret-Keller, 2008, p. 317)

In the strongly globalized world we live in, to speak a foreign language is, for a vast majority of people, part of their daily life. Be it at work, in the context of education or living abroad speaking a foreign language is a pervasive life experience. The topic of learning and speaking languages and foreign languages has been extensively studied from different perspectives mostly from the fields of language pedagogy, applied linguistics and second language acquisition. Common to all these approaches is the positivist view and the focus on certain abstract aspects such as cognitive and pure linguistic ones, while neglecting other fundamental human aspects such as emotions, feelings and bodily sensations. Although affect and emotions have been widely recognized as impacting...
successful language learning, in particular over the last two decades (Arnold, 1999; Dewaele & Dewaele, 2020; Dewaele & Li, 2018; Dewaele & MacIntyre, 2016) those studies have mainly focused on only one variable, the so-called Foreign Language Anxiety and have been concerned with measuring this variable, while other emotions and bodily experiences have not been extensively investigated.

In her critical review of this positivist account of languages, Ros i Solé (2016) argues that the mainstream research on languages has favoured the idea that languages are ‘acquired’ and ‘learnt’ rather than ‘lived’.

This paper is designed to contribute to a newly emerging line of inquiry addressing the move away from the pure linguistic approach to the phenomenon of speaking a foreign language and towards a more humanistic perspective (Ros i Solé, 2016) that considers the whole person, and in particular the bodily dimension, as a way to convey the complexity and multi-layered experience of language learning.

The approach followed in this study is a combination of phenomenology and qualitative research which I will describe in the following sections.

The turn to embodiment in language studies

Although SLA (Second Language Acquisition) research has mainly focused on the processes of acquisition as a kind of cognitive transfer and/or on the social and communicative facets of language, over the last two decades an emphasis on the relevance of the subjective aspects of second language acquisition has strongly emerged. A considerable number of research studies published supports the claim of a wider turn to embodiment in language studies. For example, Atkinson’s (2010) research presents a wealth of empirical evidence supporting embodied cognition. Also Kramsch, in her highly influential work ‘The multilingual subject’, shows how ‘far from being perceived as primarily a tool for communication and exchange of information, the foreign language is first and foremost experienced physically, linguistically, emotionally, artistically’ (Kramsch, 2009, p. 60).

The pedagogical relevance of this embodied approach has been demonstrated in a variety of educational contexts, such as in work regarding metaphors in teacher training (Coffey, 2015), language learners’ mobility (e.g. Pennycook, 2012; Phipps, 2007) and English teaching (e.g. Benesch, 2012), as well as the study of the subjective aspects of multilingual subjects (Kramsch, 2006, 2009) and investigations of the personal world of the language learner (e.g. Ros i Solé, 2016).

Within this context of acknowledging the importance of involving the whole person as language speaker, phenomenology, and in particular the exploration of the lived experience of language Spracherleben, has been considered both as a relevant and as an under-researched approach (Busch, 2015, 2017). Busch argues that the change to a first-person perspective – which characterizes phenomenology – allows the exploration of lived experiences of language learners. For this study, I have used a combination of phenomenology and qualitative research, which I will explain in the next sections.

The relevance of phenomenology in FL learning

Language, as a central constituent of human life, has certainly enjoyed a privileged place in the work of the most relevant phenomenologist philosophers such as Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. It has also been studied, more recently, by philosophers and cognitive scientists working in the fields of ‘embodied cognition’ (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) and the philosophy of language (Austin, 1956, 1962), as well as also being explored from a sociological perspective (Garfinkel, 2002, 2006).

Regarding a more practice-oriented approach, over the last decade, there has been a growing interest in second or foreign languages teaching and learning from a phenomenological perspective. Within this context, different aspects of learning or teaching a foreign language have been explored. Some authors have focused on the practical pedagogical implications of the insights gained through phenomenological research and reflection. This is the case of Grant (2012) who develops the
concept of ‘Speaking bodies’ for second language learning, and Hickey (2012) who draws on the work of Heidegger and Gadamer, proposing the necessity of ‘unlearning’ before learning. In recent years, studies have emerged where phenomenology has been used as a research method to explore aspects of learning a second language. Examples include the use of learning strategies (Hall, 2015), the intrinsic relationship between learning a language and poetry (Scarborough, 2015) and some studies have focused on the experience of language teachers: on how English teachers perceive academic success (Champion, 2015), or on the lived experience of language teachers immersion programmes (Cammarata & Tedick, 2012). Moving slightly away from these practical studies, the investigation here aims to shed light on a more general and philosophical question: how is one’s own body experienced when speaking a foreign language?

In the line of investigation initiated by Busch (2015, 2017), I draw on phenomenological concepts to explore the lived experiences of speakers of foreign languages regarding their bodily feelings.

Needless to say, it is beyond the scope of this paper – or any particular study – to give a definitive answer to this question. As – according to the phenomenological view – every perspective on an object is necessarily incomplete and invites further exploration (Zahavi, 2019). Through the combination of qualitative research and phenomenology, this study reveals some aspects of how foreign language speakers find themselves in the world.

Methodological approach

To be involved in phenomenological reflection means to find a way ‘to problematize your “everydayness” and taken-for-granted ways of thinking and constructively draw on prior as well as current phenomenological descriptions’ (Ravn, 2016, p. 206). Phenomenology explores the lifeworld of subjects and ‘seeks to understand what matters to them and how they make sense of what they experience’ (Zahavi, 2019, p. 117). It is concerned with careful description, analysis and interpretation of lived experience, and therefore it provides a distinctively powerful approach to investigate how the body is experienced when speaking a foreign language from a wider human and existential perspective. While phenomenology provides a framework that gives detailed attention to experience, this is a challenging task. As in the study of any aspect of human life (Carel, 2016), the experience of speaking a foreign language that I am investigating is diverse and constantly changing, and it is bound up with social, cultural and personal meaning(s) (Agha, 2007).

The deployment of qualitative methods and phenomenology in combination has, over the last decades, become well-established (Høffding, 2018; Klinke & Jonsdottir, 2017; Martiny, 2015; Ravn & Hansen, 2013). This is, in part, due to the potential of this combinatorial approach for both investigating and uncovering the significance of manifestations of human experience and analysing them in ways that other methods cannot. Its substantial contribution to the development of human sciences, such as psychology, health sciences, education and sport sciences is unquestionable (for example see, Hortborg & Ravn, 2020; Legrand & Ravn, 2009; Ravn & Hansen, 2013). This significant surge in studies, combining phenomenology and qualitative has been characterized by a rich variety of approaches drawing from a range of disciplines such as psychology, ethnography and the cognitive sciences and has been accompanied by an intense debate concerning the question of how to put philosophical phenomenology to work in qualitative research.

In a recent editorial, introducing a special issue on Phenomenological Interviews, Høffding et al. (2023) presented the broad spectrum of approaches within qualitative research that claim using phenomenology to inform their work, and they addressed a need for clarification regarding the specificities and differences of each approach. They provided a very useful overview and categorization of some of the main methods which currently combine phenomenology and qualitative research and which have generated significant new knowledge through this cross-fertilization. I will refer to this categorization of methods to situate my own approach, which is close to what has been called Phenomenologically Grounded Qualitative Research (PGQR) by Koster and Fernandez, who first coined this term (Koster & Fernandez, 2023).
Phenomenologically Grounded Qualitative Research is characterized by the application of phenomenological concepts rather than methods. The concepts that Køster and Fernandez refer to are ‘existentials’ and ‘modes’, which are two fundamental principles of philosophical phenomenology (Fernández, 2017; Heidegger, 1962). What phenomenologists call ‘existentials’ are the ‘invariant’ or ‘existential’ structures which constitute human existence. These ‘existentials’ or essential structures of being in the world, are for example: selfhood, embodiment, sociality, temporality, spatiality among others (Ashworth, 2003; Køster & Fernandez, 2023). Whilst the ‘existentials’ provide a conceptual framework that qualitative researchers can harness to organize and focus the domain of their study, they would not typically engage in this type of philosophical articulation, they would rather use ‘modes’ to frame their investigation. ‘Modes’ are concerned with a particular way of being, e.g. a way of being that is culturally specific. As Køster and Fernandez puts it:

(…) in most cases, the researcher will be interested in the way of being of a particular class of subjects (e.g. (…) people who are refugees in western Europe, or people living with a long-term disability). When we articulate what’s distinctive about these ways of being, we’re not describing the existentials or the invariant structural features of human existence. We use the existentials as a guide or framework for an empirical study of particular ways of being. (Køster & Fernandez, 2023, p. 153)

In the case of my study, the existential I focused was ‘embodiment’, but in relation to a particular way of being or mode: being a speaker of a foreign language. My research topic was the reason for choosing this particular approach. Given that Phenomenological Grounded Qualitative Research focuses on alterations in the mode of being of the person, as seen through the lens of existentials, that is, it is ‘well-suited for any study where modifications in one’s mode of being in the world can reasonably be expected’ (Køster & Fernandez, 2023, p. 165).

For my study I was looking to generate rich empirical data, I therefore chose classical qualitative tools such as semi-structured interviews to gather first-hand experience of subjects speaking a foreign language. My perspective is therefore rooted in classical qualitative research, rather than in post-qualitative perspectives which refuses conventional social sciences methodologies and their allied tools to generate data (St Pierre, 2019).

Philosophical concepts regarding bodily self-awareness

Bodily self-awareness

Phenomenology offers conceptual tools that may help us understand the experience of speaking a foreign language, in particular clarifications around the concept of bodily self-awareness.

The awareness of our own body is a central theme in phenomenology that has occupied some of the most recognized phenomenologists such as Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty or Nancy.

For this investigation, I used the phenomenological account of bodily feelings, as developed by Colombetti and Ratcliffe (2012), in particular their distinction between two forms of bodily self-awareness. One in which the body can be experienced is as an object of awareness: the Noematic bodily feelings, in which the body is experienced as an intentional object. When the body is referred to as an object, it is important to stress that it is the body as lived body (pro-prioceptively), not just as any physical body, as mentioned before. See Legrand and Ravn (2009) for a more nuanced discussion regarding the ways in which the body can present itself in conscious awareness. Another form of bodily experience is what Colombetti and Ratcliffe (2012) call Noetic bodily feelings, in which the body is felt as that through which we experience the world. It is the body as perceiver, namely as a feeling, seeing, hearing, and touching body, rather than a felt, seen, and touched body. In the first case – Noematic bodily feelings – the lived body – as a whole, or parts of the body – is experienced as an object of awareness, for example, we noticed that our hands or our voice are shaking –in the second – Noetic bodily feelings – we notice the body as subject, perceiving or not perceiving something: feeling something (or not), seeing (or not), hearing (or not).
This distinction between the awareness of the body as object or as perceiver – as a subject – has informed the analysis of the lived experiences of FL speakers in my study.

The objectified self

Another main theme salient to this study, and the allied analysis, is the experience of being objectified by the other. The topic of being objectified is a form of ‘other mediated self-experience’ (Zahavi, 2012). I perceive myself through the others, through their reactions or actions. The ‘being-for-others’ has been extensively explored by Sartre, who argues that it is the look of the other what determines the way I look to myself: ‘I am the way the other sees me, and nothing but that’ (Sartre, 2003, p. 287) According to Sartre the other’s look alienates my lived body from myself. Also, the phenomenologist Schutz writes: ‘My body escapes me, becomes alienated from me: my body-for-me becomes body for the other. The other accomplishes something that I cannot perform: he sees me as I am’ (Schutz, 1990, p. 193). Following the strand initiated by Sartre, the gaze has been considered as the objectifying instance per se (Daly et al., 2020; Sartre, 2003), however in the case of FL speakers it is not the ‘look’ of the other but the ‘listening’ of the other.

I will now present my study and how I generated the rich qualitative data. This will be followed by an analysis of the lived experiences descriptions of the body presence when speaking a foreign language. Finally, I will present and discuss my contributions to the fields of language studies and phenomenology.

The study

Participants

The purpose of this study was to generate rich descriptions of body experiences when speaking a foreign language. To gather the data, I carried out in-depth interviews between 2016 and 2019 with five university language students and one with a member of academic staff in Higher Education, four participants were male and two female. The duration of the interviews was one hour. The participants were learning or had learned different languages (Japanese, Spanish, French, English) and had different levels of proficiency in the foreign languages: from knowing just few Japanese words or being a beginner in Spanish, or having an intermediate level of French, to being a fluent speaker of English. The participants were selected because of their experiences in learning a foreign language and their willingness to reflect on their experiences and articulate them with as much detail as possible.

The ethical code of conduct salient to the conduct of research at the Open University (OU) and the protection of participants data was followed throughout the research.

The interviews

The interview questions were designed following a phenomenological approach and following the recommendations for a phenomenological interview (Englander, 2012; Höffding & Martiny, 2016; Ravn, 2016). This involved being open, attentive, and inquisitive in trying to understand the experiences of the interviewees.

I asked each of the participants for a description of concrete experiences or situations they recall as learners and speakers of a foreign language regarding their bodies. For example, if they could remember any body sensation when they were engaged in speaking a foreign language. The subsequent questions followed the particularities of the responses of the interviewee with a focus on their body experiences. Although the start of the interview was very open around the question ‘What it is like to speak a foreign language?’, I subsequently asked them to recall and describe concrete situations focusing on their bodily sensations, either on parts of the body, or on the body as a
whole. The aim of the interviews was to bring forth detailed and nuanced descriptions. As Høffding and Martiny (2016) state, interviewers always actively participate in the knowledge generation process, even in an open interview, and I was aware of the dynamics of co-generating knowledge.

The interviews I conducted were guided by the conceptual framework described above: using the existential ‘embodiment’ and focusing on a particular modal alteration ‘being a speaker of a foreign language’ and my understanding of this particular mode, emerged from the interview and data generated. According to Køster and Fernandez:

by using existentials as a conceptual framework, the researcher does not impose experiential content on the interviewee. Rather, the existential provides a lens that allows the researcher to focus on and explore the specific content that they want to understand and describe with the interviewee. (Køster & Fernandez, 2023, p. 157, emphasis in original)

A fundamental part of this exploratory phase of generating rich qualitative data is related to the developing and sustaining of a phenomenological attitude throughout the whole process. That means, as is repeatedly emphasized in phenomenological literature, standing aside from the attitude one ‘normally’ has to one’s own experience by ‘involving a disciplined suspending or bracketing of this “natural attitude”’ (Ravn, 2016, p. 207). Although complete bracketing of assumptions and beliefs is not possible, the Husserlian notion of epoché is useful to encourage us to adopt a more self-critical and reflective approach in research (Allen-Collinson, 2009). To suspend the taken-for-granted ways of being with things and others, that means, to suspend the ‘natural attitude’ as described above, is a constant challenge to be navigated throughout the analysis (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008; Ravn, 2016). The phenomenological interview also involves dealing with a level of experience that is fundamentally difficult to access, therefore the interviewer needs to push beyond the everyday level of reflection ‘to evoke descriptions of pre-reflective and often embodied experiences that have not been previously reflected on or narrated by the interviewee’ (Køster & Fernandez, 2023, p. 160).

Throughout my investigation, I was aware of the importance of self-awareness and put into practice as much as I could bracketing my own understanding, my own background, and my own involvement. I developed an attitude of refraining from importing external frameworks and setting aside judgement about the phenomenon (Finlay, 2009). In my case, as a language teacher and language learner myself, it is impossible to put aside my experiences and knowledge. However, the phenomenological method enabled me to be open and see the embodied phenomenon of speaking a foreign language in a new, fresh way. When I processed and analysed the interviews, the findings were for me unexpectedly new and some of them intriguing, suggesting my position in this study as insider-outsider (Milligan, 2016).

The interviews were transcribed and meaning units were identified. As I was interested in the content of their descriptions, it was not necessary to produce a linguistic transcription. In some cases, where descriptions were not clear, I returned to the interviewee and asked them for clarification. Then the meaning units were analysed using the phenomenological concepts. This is what Høffding and Martiny call ‘Tier two’ in the phenomenological interview, where descriptions and interpretations of the interviewees’ experience are related to phenomenological work already done in a particular field (Høffding & Martiny, 2016). In my case, I related the descriptions to the concepts of ‘bodily self-awareness’ and ‘self-objectivation’.

Analytic approach and foci

Phenomenological analysis is a first-person perspective, but not concerned with recounting immediate, subjective experience per se. As Gallagher and Zahavi (2008) emphasized phenomenology ‘has as its goal, not a description of idiosyncratic experience – “here and now, this is just what I experience” – rather, it attempts to capture the invariant structures of experience’ (Gallagher & Zahavi, 2008, p. 28).
Presence vs. absence of the body

Considering the obvious role that the body plays in speaking a language, it can only be surprising the marginal attention that it has attracted in the field of language studies. Within the mainly cognitive positivistic tradition, as mentioned in the introduction, the body’s involvement in speaking a language has been reduced to parts and articulation organs, not the body as a whole. Disciplines such as phonology or phonetics study parts of the body, like any other object, in the case of the tongue or the lips, for example, considering the ways in which those body parts have to be moved to produce a particular sound. These body parts can be studied, drawn and measured. The body I am referring to in my investigation is the lived body, the body as it is felt, the body in its subjectivity.

The way the body is present to us in our daily life is a recurrent topic in phenomenology. The question is: how is the body perceived? Is it like any other available objects? Gallagher and Zahavi (2008) speak of the body as experientially transparent when dealing with daily life: ‘The body tries to stay out of our way so that we can get on with our task; it tends to efface itself on its way to its intentional goal’ (p.163). Gallagher (2005) argues that our body can be close to being on automatic in many daily activities, including speaking, where the body is just in the background ‘marginalized’ behind our conscious awareness and the focus of the attention is on a social or communicative situation.

The presence of the own body when speaking an FL differs considerably from the way our body ‘disappears’ when speaking our first language. Unlike with our first language, when speaking a foreign language, the speaker deals reflectively with their body. That means that the body appears in the foreground of awareness. FL speakers attend intentionally to the body, for example trying to pronounce a certain sound, putting the lips or tongue in a certain way, modulating the long or short vowels, pushing the air in a certain way, etc. Therefore, in the case of speaking a foreign language, the body is not experienced as transparent, on the contrary, it stays ‘in our way’, its presence could be characterized rather as opaque than transparent. Its presence is manifest and in foreground. Unlike when we are speaking our first language, where our attention is normally focussing on the message and where our body is somehow ‘absent’, when learning and speaking a foreign language the body makes itself apparent as a sort of ‘uninvited guest’.

As I will show in the next sections, speaking an FL seems to be characterized by a heightened presence of the body as an object of our attention, either as a whole or as some parts of the body. It can also be felt as a diffuse, background bodily feelings. Our body awareness can also refer to the way in which our body perceives things. I will explore different types of body awareness in the next section. Bodily self-awareness is a central topic in phenomenology that can share light in the understanding of the experience of speaking a foreign language.

The following extracts illustrate some aspects of this ‘alteration’, the descriptions generated during a lengthy interview process, and are exclusively the participants’ words. I used the existential ‘embodiment’ as a guide and framework to identify and select the relevant passages during the analysis process.

Results

In the following sections of the analysis of my data, I will present some ways in which possible bodily experiences of FL speakers are structured.

Body as object: the conspicuous body

Some of the descriptions of the lived experiences of speaking an FL not only have the body as an intentional object (noematic bodily feelings), but the body comes in the foreground, it stands out, it makes itself apparent. These foreground bodily feelings, to use Colombetti’s (2011) words, can be diffuse or localized.
The descriptions of the participants within my investigation manifest experiences of what I have called the conspicuous body. Conspicuous is understood here as opposed to transparent. This term has also been used by Carel (2015) and Ratcliffe (2008) to denote the opacity of the body in certain situations: ‘When one’s body becomes conspicuous, one’s experience of the world loses fluidity and becomes impeded’ (Ratcliffe, 2008, p. 307).

When describing their experience of speaking an FL, participants report different sensations involving their whole body being in the foreground of their awareness. FL speakers experience their body not only as opaque but also as ‘being in the way’, as a sort of obstacle or impediment to the intended actions. When describing their experiences, participants used words like ‘atrophied’, ‘restricted’, ‘weak’, feeling ‘like a toddler’, or incapable of achieving anything. One FL speaker describes the following experience when trying to talk Japanese to a little girl:

Having something quite simple in your head and not being able to communicate it to someone else, I felt completely atrophied, if you think of the intellect as a muscle. It was disappointing. In that situation I was less than a toddler.

The whole body doesn’t seem to respond. It feels like having reduced functionality, having lost functionality. Another participant in a similar situation described his sense of being incapable of doing anything, and he compared this sensation of being in a state of fruitless, perpetual movement, with no onward movement like having a nightmare, it is some kind of bodily ruminative experience, with a noticeable loss of agency:

Yes, it was uncomfortable, (...) like having a bad dream where you are trying to achieve something, but it never really happens, it keeps happening, but you are not quite able to achieve what you want and I walked away with the feeling of non-achievement.

Another participant reports the sensation of his whole body is ‘sinking’ when people stop listening to him when they notice that he has a foreign accent:

When that happens, I just feel like I am sinking. It is a sinking feeling. Sinking.

Within this conspicuous body sometimes the bodily self-awareness is localized in parts of the body, such as the ears, the voice, or the sounds produced with articulating organs, such as the mouth and tongue. One participant described how he can hear himself speaking, but not recognizing his voice, in a kind of dissociative experience:

The words and voice are out of me; the thread is not connected to me. I am horrified to hear those voices that are coming out of me, I don’t think they belong to me: it is not what I wanted to say, it not how I wanted to say it … I think that my ears get blocked and what I hear is kind of muffled, it really feels that it doesn’t belong to me, it is like being in a nightmare when you don’t hear very well.

These quotes reveal the heightened bodily awareness of the participants. Either their whole body or parts of their body. Furthermore, the participants describe a sense of disconnection and alienation with the own body and a sense of lack of control. Interestingly similar characteristics have been described by other authors in distressing situations. For instance, Svenaeus writes in his studies about feeling pain that the body displays ‘foreign and uncontrollable sides’ (Svenaeus, 2015). Also, Carel (2016) describes the experience of illness as ‘disruption’, ‘frustration of bodily intentionality’ FL speakers describe a sort of disrupted intentionality, of reaching out, but not achieving, the connection of their body with the world is disrupted, pointing to a field that clearly goes beyond the current studies in foreign languages and deserve further exploration.

**Body as subject: the perceiving body**

In some descriptions of the lived experiences of speaking a FL, the body is not the object, but the perceiving subject. According to Colombetti and Ratcliffe (2012) even when one’s own body is not the object of experience, there are bodily feelings that continue to contribute to experience, as
background bodily feelings (Colombetti, 2011). In this type of bodily feelings, the body does not ‘impose its presence’ like in the foreground bodily feelings, but it is somehow ‘obscurely felt’ (Colombetti, 2011, p. 297). In the background bodily feelings, the body does not disappear from our attention, but a situation in the world is characterized by the subject as possessing a specific affective quality, for example, the quality of dangerousness or threat. In the following quote, a participant describes his experience as an English student who just arrived in Japan at a railway station knowing only a few words in Japanese:

I stand on the platform, and I had a strong feeling of uncertainty and inadequacy, not knowing what was right or wrong … feeling completely lost. I was feeling completely bewildered, anxious. Not being able to ask anyone, not being able to participate in a conversation and help someone who is trying to help you. That was pretty grim.

Even if this participant’s attention is focussing on other things (trying to find his way or ask someone) the quality of the distressing experience colours a background awareness of his tense, disoriented and anxious body. The world is experienced by the subject as possessing a specific quality.

The analysis of the lived experiences of the FL speakers also suggests that what stands out for participants was not only a heightened awareness of their body, as described in the previous section, but also their awareness of not having access to their body, the inaccessibility of body sensations. Participants were aware of their body as perceiver, or rather non-perceiver of the world and themselves.

In his book ‘The absent body’, Leder (1990) makes a detailed account of how our bodies are absent from our lives. He uses the term ‘Recessive body’ to refer to the organs and processes of our own body that are unavailable to our own awareness, as most of internal bodily processes and parts are, such as the spleen, circulation, vegetative processes, etc. To describe this experience, or rather, this lack of experience, he uses the term ‘I cannot’.

In addition to this recessive or inaccessible body, as described by Leder, which is common to all humans, FL speakers report a specific inability to perceive aspects of their own body. They describe how they cannot hear their own accent, that they cannot hear the way they sound to others, for example, native speakers. They are only aware of ‘doing something wrong’ from the reactions of the people that listen to them.

The difference with the FL speakers is that this recessive or inaccessible body, this ‘I cannot’, applies only to them, not to the ones who hear them speaking. It is specific to them. The following quote from one of the participants describing his experience at a café in Brussels illustrates this point of body inaccessibility:

I was in a busy café trying to order a coffee for me and my friend, I was speaking French but the woman was answering in English, it was embarrassing, she was clearly signalling that I was not part of the community, people were waiting and I was wondering, why can’t I just order? Why is she asking questions? What am I doing wrong? Is my accent wrong? I had a lot of questions and a strong feeling of self-doubt. It was apparent to everyone that I was English and that French is not my language, that I am not part of them, that I don’t understand their ordering system or the particular delicacies of that region (…) I was still trying to order and feel embarrassed not to be able to speak to an acceptable standard, I was not like a local, or a native, I was clearly aware of being an outsider.

What this lived experience reveals is a significant difference with the ‘recessive body’ as presented by Leder. In Leder’s account internal organs, for example, the spleen, are inaccessible to everyone: I cannot feel my spleen and nobody else around me can. However, in the situation described in the quote, it is the subject, the FL speaker, the one who has no access to his own sound: the others can hear what they cannot.

This experience of their non-perceiving body has the particular quality of lacking: it is something that I (me as a foreign speaker) cannot do, I cannot perceive, but others can. Stressing the sense of outsider and of lacking, deficient, inadequate, but also the sense of being objectified.
The primacy of sound: being ‘auditioned’ by the other

As mentioned above, the objectivation of the self has been extensively studied by some phenomenologists, and a number of studies from other disciplines such as postcolonial studies, raciolinguistics or gender studies have focused on how the body is objectified by the gaze or the ear of others for example, Fanon (2008), Derrida (1998, 2005), Butler (2006), Flores and Rosa (2015) or from an embodied sociolinguistics perspective, Bucholtz and Hall (2016).

The phenomenological account of objectivation clearly focuses on the gaze – Jauhiainen (2012) seems to be an exception – however regarding the experiences of FL speakers those visual images do not work: the feeling of being objectified does not appear when the other sees me, but when they hear me, it is not through the gaze, but through the sound, the hearing. There is a wide range of images and words to describe visual objectivation: gaze of the other, being seen, the look of the other, however, there is an apparent lack of words and images for its auditory version. I have come to the term being ‘auditioned’ to express this type of auditive objectivation that manifests in the lived experiences described by FL speakers, such as the previous quote of the student in the Belgian café. This is a new characterization of objectivation that challenges the traditional visual focus of the objectified-other and, at the same time, it signalizes the importance of sound as an objectifying instance that needs to be further explored. ‘Audition’ has the connotation of being a critical hearing, of having the power or sense of hearing.

What the participants reveal in their descriptions is that the other has a power to hear the sounds of my body, that I don’t have. My body reveals itself to the other, not to myself. This type of objectivation seems more extreme than the one described by Sartre or Schutz for consistency. In their descriptions I know what the other sees, in this one, I don’t hear what the other hear. In the previous quote, the participant is dismayed by a situation in which the people surrounding him hear his accent, or his mistakes but he cannot. This form of bodily objectivation has not been sufficiently explored within phenomenology. A further cause of alienation and distress is that they perceived their body as an informer, without having any control on it.

The body as informer

In the previous section, I have shown how participants described different ways in which their body is experienced as alien: ‘Not responding’, ‘atrophied’, ‘my voice doesn’t belong to me’. This feeling of alienation is heightened by a further aspect of bodily sensations when speaking an FL: the sense that my body discloses me. Not only is it the case that the body is not felt as an ally, but rather as an enemy. I would like to come back to the quote from the Old Testament I used at the beginning of this paper around the pronunciation of the word shibboleth which served as a criterion to distinguish friend from foe. Without the tragic connotation of this passage of the Old Testament, the participants I interviewed described the experience of being ‘given away’ by their body, by the way, they pronounce the language, as the previous quote: ‘It was apparent to everyone that I was English and that French is not my language’. Another participant describes more in detail such an experience of being ‘given away’ as foreigner by his body, by his accent. He elaborates this experience further in that this acknowledgment influences the communication, it deviates the focus from the message to the messenger:

The accent plays a part. When you start talking to somebody and you can see how their eyes glare, they look somewhere else and they somehow switch off or they block communication, because as soon as they hear your accent, they think that they will not understand you and that is terribly frustrating. It is body language, for me I can notice that they switch off because they hear a different accent. My assumption is that as soon as they hear an accent, they assume that either you won’t understand them, or they won’t understand you. They give up.

Closing remarks

The bodily experiences of FL speakers have been analysed using the phenomenological distinction of the body as an object of awareness, and the body as perceiver. The analysis of the lived
experiences of FL speakers showed the opacity of their body: the conspicuous body. This heightened body awareness involved both the whole body and some parts of the body. Furthermore, their lived experiences were characterized not only by a foreground awareness of their body, but by the sense of disconnection and disruption, by a sort of disrupted intentionality.

Regarding the awareness of the body as perceiver, this study showed the presence of background bodily feelings, such as tension or anxiety that coloured the whole experience of a situation in which the FL speaker was immersed. The analysis of the data also evidences the FL speakers’ experience of not being able to access their own body, their own sounds, whereas others do have access to these, and thus having a clear sense of being objectified by others. This type of being objectified, or of self-experience mediated by others, has been extensively studied by some phenomenologists, but their focus has been the visual field, the look of the other. However, in my study, the objectifying instance is not the look, but the sound: being heard. I have created a new term ‘being auditioned’ to convey this type of auditive objectivation, which has not been sufficiently explored within this field of phenomenology. Within the lived experience of ‘being auditioned’, a heightened sense of alienation towards the own body is revealed when the body is perceived as an informer, as the one who discloses the ‘foreignness’ the not-belonging to the community.

The aim of my study was to contribute to the understanding of the experiences of FL speakers regarding their bodies from a humanistic perspective, and to provide a more nuanced and comprehensive account of the quality of emotions that emerge beyond the topic of Foreign Language Anxiety.

My analysis of the bodily lived experiences of FL speakers revealed a great complexity and richness of bodily self-awareness, characterized by the interplay of heightened presence/absence of the body and the primacy of sound in the experience of being objectified. Although the main contributions of this paper reside in the conceptual developments of our understanding of the bodily experiences of speaking a foreign language, there are fundamental implications for teaching and learning a foreign language. I argue that a more nuanced account of the role of emotions and bodily sensations for FL speakers is needed in order to develop more holistic approaches to teaching and learning. My findings further strongly suggest the need to revisit and further develop the blanket term ‘Foreign Language Anxiety’ which clearly does not account for the broad palette of bodily experiences of FL speakers.

My study has therefore shown that much more research is needed in the complex field of what it means to speak a foreign language from a human existential perspective.

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