This paper is the second of a series of papers introducing the psychological concept of ego states into language studies, and presenting both against the philosophical background of existential phenomenology. The series, when complete, will have covered introducing language ego states, discussing the perception of speech and its production, and, finally, seeking explanation for language acquisition within the same philosophical frame of reference.

Why would one, in the first place, put the three, seemingly unrelated concepts and fields of knowledge together? As other disciplines of science, language studies, too, have become embedded “within the Cartesian framework of the ‘mental’ versus the ‘physical’” (Thompson, 2004, 382). In order to break away from this “embedding”, the discipline needs the “back and forth circulation between scientific research on the mind and disciplined phenomenologies of lived experience” (Thompson, 2004, 382) accommodating human experience of language. “In all functionalistic accounts, what is missing is not the coherent nature of the explanation but its alienation from human life. Only putting human life back in will erase that absence; not some ‘extra ingredient’ or profound ‘theoretical fix’” (Varela, 1996, 345).

Let me answer with a quotation from the World Phenomenology Institute’s website:

The philosopher working in a phenomenological mode ought to thus aspire to join that which is falsely and arbitrarily disjoined, and in so doing demonstrate the unity of human knowledge and the possibility of deep communication and higher philosophical understanding.

The need for such a unity has been apparent to me for a long time, dating back to my linguistics background.

Traditionally, western philosophy and, in fact, western science alike, has based its understanding of the world and relationships within it on the assumption that thought prevails over experience. Experience has been considered superficial and prone to errors and thus “unscientific”. The ultimate perspective has therefore been that of a thinker.
We have become accustomed, through the influence of the Cartesian tradition, to disengage from the object: the reflective attitude simultaneously purifies the common notions of body and soul by defining the body as the sum of its parts with no interior, and the soul as a being wholly present to itself without distance (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, 198).

This attitude has lead to the now widespread acceptance of the “scientific” or reason-based worldview as the basis of all disciplines of human knowledge. The fear of being called “unscientific” is such that few risk going against the mainstream. Thought, in its Cartesian understanding of doubting everything but thought itself, and thus being pure and disciplined, is the basis for both many philosophical systems and modern science alike. Therefore, any experience that cannot be represented in scientific thought will be rejected as subjective or illusory. Similarly, philosophical systems that diverge from Cartesianism will be viewed with suspicion. Thus, “philosophy is often rejected by people who in other respects are very intelligent; they are experts in a particular branch of positive science who, precisely because of the success of their science, are tempted to absolutize the value of a special type of scientific knowledge, particularly physical science” (Luijpen and Koren, 2003, 9).

The adoption of Cartesian view “across the scientific board”, so to speak, has, however, been met with opposition. Phenomenology, in particular, has been philosophy’s way of dealing with the Cartesian inheritance: “The intelligibility which phenomenology takes as fundamental is thus of the experiential order. It is a meaning embedded in and inextricable from the concrete experience” (Wait, 1989, 15). The response from science has come largely from neuroscience, a discipline combining the findings of neurology with studies of human experience of neurological disorders. The assumptions neuroscience bases itself upon are best summarised by this quotation from Antonio Damasio:

What, then, was Descartes’ error? Or better still, which error of Descartes’ do I mean to single out, unkindly and ungratefully? One might begin with a complaint, and reproach him for having persuaded biologists to adopt, to this day, clockwork mechanics as a model for life processes. But perhaps that would not be quite fair and so one might continue with ‘I think therefore I am.’ (…) Taken literally, the statement illustrates precisely the opposite of what I believe to be true about the origins of mind and about the relation between mind and body. It suggests that thinking, and awareness of thinking, are the real substrates of being. And since we know that Descartes imagined thinking as an activity quite separate from the body, it does celebrate the separation of mind, the ‘thinking thing’ (res cogitans) from the nonthinking body, that which has extension and mechanical parts (res extensa). (…) For us, then, in the beginning it was being, and only later was it thinking. And for us now, as we come into the world and develop, we still begin with being, and only later do we think. We are, and then we think, and we think only inasmuch as we are, since thinking is indeed caused by the structures and operations of being (Damasio, 2005, 248–249).

Eventually, Damasio (2005, 5) points to the “abyssal separation between body and mind” as what he understands as the main error of Descartes’, still pervading science and research.