Revisiting Searle*

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John Searle's Philosophy of Language. Force, Meaning and Mind, DE SAVAS L. TSOHATZIDIS (ED.), CAMBRIDGE, CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2007, 297 pp.

This volume presents an in-depth examination of John Searle's influential contribution to the philosophy of language. Eleven critical essays touch on several aspects of Searle's works, offering both sharp criticisms and supportive proposals for development. The essays are grouped into two interrelated parts, which somehow allude to Searle's view on language: "from mind to meaning" and "from meaning to force". An introductory essay by Searle himself completes this valuable contribution to the philosophy of language and mind.

Searle's opening essay begins with a double-edged claim: over the last century no branch of philosophy has had achievements as great as those of the philosophy of language. However, philosophers of language generally do not treat language as a natural phenomenon, and this fact arouses Searle's suspicions. Searle's emphasis on this naturalism on the one hand, and his attempt to stress the importance of social conventions within a philosophical approach to language on the other, constitute the two main themes of this first essay.

In his attempt to figure out what language is, Searle dives deep into analyzing the relationship between language and prelinguistic cognition. Beyond signaling their shared features (mainly based on their both being forms of intentionality, and hence analyzable in terms of content, conditions of satisfaction, types or modes and directions of fit), the crucial point lies in seeing where the two diverge and, particularly, in specifying which features of language consciousness lacks, as a basic step on the path to characterizing what language is, and what we need it for.

Mentally-entertained propositions do have conditions of satisfaction. In fact, the satisfaction conditions that these propositions have under different

psychological modes coincide with the conditions of satisfaction that propositions expressed linguistically have under different illocutionary forces (that is, the conditions of satisfaction of intentions become the conditions of satisfaction of promises, and so on).

Nevertheless, in the linguistic act, the intentionality is dual-based: the speaker imposes conditions of satisfaction on conditions of satisfaction. When, for example, a speaker utters "It is raining", the production of the token is the condition of satisfaction of her intention to utter it; now, as she has uttered it meaningfully, she is imposing a second condition of satisfaction on her token: that it is raining. This feature brings us already to what Searle terms 'speaker meaning'. A system for effective communication asks for some conventional devices for conveying the speaker meaning, though; and these devices lead us to sentence meaning. A final step will introduce some syntactic elements within the internal structure of the speech act.

Once we have speaker meaning, sentence meaning, and a syntactic structure, we can already see how language is distinguished from prelinguistic cognition: developed so far, thoughts can be thought and speech acts can be performed in a way that would be impossible prelinguistically. But there is a further step that Searle emphasizes: language necessarily involves social commitments. These commitments go far beyond the commitments of the intentional states expressed, and are indeed internal to the type of the speech act performed – it couldn't be that type of speech act unless it had that very commitment. That's how language enables us to represent reality, so to speak. But our linguistic abilities go farther: we can indeed *create* reality just by representing this reality as existing.

With these latter claims Searle touches on almost every aspect developed through the following essays, divided into two parts: from mind to meaning, and from meaning to force.

I. FROM MIND TO MEANING

The first part of the volume contains six essays. The first three are focused on Searle's account of mind – based on the idea of the intentionality of perceptual experience. In the first essay, François Recanati levels a basic criticism at Searle's account: the condition of causal self-referentiality, shrewdly introduced by Searle in the analysis of conscious perceptual states, is nevertheless misplaced when assigned to the propositional content of the state rather than to its psychological mode.

The next two essays – those by Kent Bach and Robin Jeshin – attack Searle's internalism. Specifically, these two essays aim to show that Searle's account cannot adequately handle the "particularity objection" raised against the internalist view. This objection aims at undermining the conception of the

intentional content of perceptual experiences as consisting entirely of conceptual elements produced by the perceiver's mind. This purely internalist view would be unacceptable, since perceptual experiences bring perceivers into a relationship with particular objects in the world. According to both Bach and Jeshin, Searle's approach fails to overcome this objection – although each argues differently for this failure.

The externalist criticisms leveled at Searle's approach go beyond the particularity objection. His account of proper names has also been viewed with suspicion by externalism. Wayne A. Davis focuses the fourth essay of this first part of the volume on Searle's analysis of proper names, concluding that it can generally overcome the externalist attack – or, at least, maintaining that Searle's view, although it encounters some valid objections from externalist approaches, can in the end offer a more suitable explanation for this subject, and is thus preferable to the latter. Davis even proposes some improvements that Searle might adopt in order to better answer the externalists' challenge.

Next comes Christopher Gauker's essay, aiming to dispute "the alleged priority of thought over language". There is indeed a widely accepted view, which Searle himself shares, that conceptual thought has ontological and explanatory priority over language. Gauker instead maintains that conceptual thought is always essentially linguistic – meaning not that language-independent thought processes don't exist, but that these are not *conceptual* thought processes. With this claim, Gauker touches on an aspect of Searle's account of mind and language that is usually seen as uncontroversial, as it is in fundamental agreement with the current generally-held view.

The same could be said about the subject of the last essay: Searle's criticism of Kripke's interpretation of Wittgenstein's works is disputed here by Martin Kusch. Kusch argues that Searle has failed to defend the individualistic conceptions of content from the challenges posed by Kripke's communitarian interpretation of Wittgenstein. Martin Kusch's essay brings the first part of the volume to a close.

II. FROM MEANING TO FORCE

The second part of the book starts with Kepa Korta and John Perry's essay "How to say things with words". There, Perry's reflexive-referential theory is used as a basis on which to build a remodeled account of locutionary content.

Korta and Perry challenge the traditional equation that systematically compares the proposition expressed by an utterance with what is said by that utterance. Instead of this commonly accepted monopropositionalistic view of the utterance, these authors propose a system where the reflexive contents of

the utterance play a role in understanding what the speaker plans to communicate. Within this pluripropositional picture, the referential or locutionary content will, in most cases, be comparable to what is said by the utterance. But there are indeed certain cases where the authors of the essay demonstrate that the two notions cannot be equated: in cases where the speaker is being ironic, or in the case of many logical operators, propositions are locuted but not said. The approach proposed here proves to be highly effective in dealing with these meaningful differences, too frequently overlooked in the traditional pragmatic accounts.

One of the pillars of Searle's account of meaning is the distinction between the propositional content and the illocutionary force, inherited from Frege's distinction between sense and force. Stephen J. Barker begins his essay by listing the five reasons that might be posited in favor of this distinction. He immediately argues against their adequacy though, and he proposes rejecting truth conditional semantics, by abandoning the distinction between force and sense, and, thus, also the idea of the propositional content.

Barker develops an alternative conception of meaning, which is proposition-free, and he claims that the semantics he proposes (where assertions, and not beliefs, are considered to be the primary truth-bearers) can take us far beyond the achievements of truth conditional semantics.

Nicholas Asher also questions truth conditional semantics, by setting it a challenge which he doesn't expect can be overcome within the confines of this standard semantics: a unified account should be obtained for the meaning of natural language sentential connectives when applied to sentences beyond declaratives. Asher claims that such a uniform approach is both theoretically desirable and actually achievable: but we first ought to reject truth conditional semantics and favor instead a dynamic semantic framework. He proposes a system where these requirements are met by combining dynamic semantics with discourse representation theory, and he shows that within this new framework the desired account of the meaning of sentential connectives can be deftly obtained.

The next essay is a contribution by the editor of the volume, Savas L. Tsohatzidis, where yes-no questions and Searle's approach to them are examined. Searle's thesis – which was inspired by Frege's work, and is fairly widely endorsed – maintains that a yes-no question has the same propositional content as its grammatically corresponding assertion. Tsohatzidis argues against this claim, and shows that it entails undesirable consequences for Searle's general approach. He proposes instead an alternative solution for proceeding to analyze these questions: Tsohatzidis puts forward an account where yes-no questions are not seen as having a propositional content *at all*. This claim is embedded in a distinction between illocutionary acts of first order (whose forces would be applied to propositions) and the higher-order

ones (whose forces would be applied to sets of possible first-order illocutionary acts).

Mitchell Green's essay rounds the volume off. Green focuses on Searle's idea of the connection between mental and linguistic intentionality, and especially on the claim that every kind of illocutionary act is an expression of a particular kind of mental state. Furthermore, according to Searle, a speech act will be sincere only if the speaker is in that very same state of mind. Green maintains that Searle's account is not adequate, because it interprets the expression of a mental state by means of an utterance as a conventional property of the utterance. Instead, Green develops an alternative proposal, whereby a speaker's expression of a mental state via an utterance is seen as linked to some inferences that hearers make in order to preserve the hypothesis that the speaker is sensitive to community norms.

The twelve essays that make up this volume touch on every significant aspect of John Searle's extensive work on the philosophy of language. Innovative suggestions can be found to underpin Searle's approach, together with clever criticism that should definitely be taken into consideration. The difficulty that might arise from the immense diversity of subjects and approaches is easily handled with the help of the editor's perfectly fashioned introductory chapter.

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