

PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE – AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN SEARLE

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ReVEL – What is Philosophy of Language? How does it relate to Linguistics and to Philosophy?

Searle - The most general question in the philosophy of language is: How exactly does language relate to reality? When I make noises through my mouth, I can typically be said to make a statement, ask a question, make a request, or make a promise, or perform another sort of speech act of a type which Austin baptized as illocutionary acts. How is that possible, since all that comes out of my mouth is a set of acoustic blasts? Another general form that this question takes is: What exactly is meaning? What is it for a speaker to say something and mean something by what he says? What is the meaning of words in a language, where the words have a conventional meaning?

The reason the question, ‘How does language relate to reality?’ and the question ‘What is meaning?’ are variants of the same question is that the function of meaning is to relate language to reality.

In answering these questions, the philosophy of language has to deal with a whole lot of other questions, such as: What is truth? What is reference? What is logic? What are logical relations? What is a use of language and how does use relate to meaning? And so on with a very large number of other questions, both traditional and new.

There is no sharp dividing line between the philosophy of language and linguistics, but in general one can say that linguistics deals with actual empirical facts about real human languages. The philosophy of language also deals with empirical facts, but generally the purpose is to get at certain underlying universal features of meaning and communication, and especially to analyze the logical structure of reference, truth necessity, speech acts, etc. and these analyses are not given by just analyzing the empirical facts about this or that particular language.

The relationships of philosophy of language to philosophy in general are again quite complex. For a long time, many people thought that all philosophy really was the philosophy of language because they thought all philosophical questions could be solved by analyzing language. I think very few people still believe that, but the philosophy of language remains an important part of philosophy in general.

The reason why the philosophy of language is not quite as central as it was, say, fifty years ago, is that many philosophers, myself for example, have come to think that the philosophy of language is itself dependent upon results in the philosophy of mind. Language is an extension of more biologically fundamental capacities of the human mind.

ReVEL – What is the relation between language and thought?

Searle - It is impossible to answer such an involved question in a short space, but certain general considerations can be mentioned. Many people think it is impossible to have thought without language but that is clearly wrong. We now have an overwhelming amount of evidence that animals are capable of engaging in at least certain simple forms of thought processes. But most complex forms of thought require something like human languages. So there is a sense in which humans have thoughts of a kind that animals cannot have. An animal might make its way through a maze in a way which shows that it can grasp the

difference between one, two, three and four paths, but without language an animal cannot think that the square root of 625 is 25. There are literally an infinite number of thoughts that can only be had with language, and the area of thinking that can be done without language is very restricted.

ReVEL – You have had a major role in the development of the theory of Speech Acts and the origins of Pragmatics. How do you see these contributions today?

Searle - I do not much like the term “pragmatics” because it implies a strict distinction between pragmatics and semantics, and I do not think that distinction can be made. However, I think the study of speech acts and the study of the use of language is absolutely essential to linguistics and the philosophy of language. I think you cannot begin to understand what language is or how it functions without seeing that the fundamental unit of meaning is what the speaker means by making an utterance, and that the fundamental unit of meaningful utterances is the speech act, specifically, the illocutionary act as originally identified by Austin’s early work.

ReVEL – Your “Chinese room” argument against strong Artificial Intelligence is already classical. But there are many criticisms of this argument. What are the main arguments from the critics and how do you respond to them?

Searle – There are so many arguments against the Chinese Room argument that I cannot summarize them, here. Basically, they all fail for the same reason: They fail to understand what a digital computer is. A digital computer, as originally described by Alan Turing, is a device that manipulates two types of symbols, normally thought of as zeros and ones. However, any symbols will do. The reason that such a device fails by itself to produce consciousness, intentionality and meaning, is that the properties of the device are defined purely formally or syntactically, and the syntax of these operations is not by

itself enough to guarantee the presence of semantics or meaning. In the Chinese room the man has all the syntax that the computer programmers can provide him with, but he still does not know what any of the words mean. And if he does not understand the words on the basis of implementing the program for understanding then neither does any other digital computer solely on that basis, because no digital computer, qua digital computer, has anything that he does not have.

ReVEL – As an experienced philosopher, could you please suggest some essential readings in the field of Philosophy of Language?

Searle - For a good general collection of articles on the subject of the philosophy of language, see:

Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962.

Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989.

Martinich, A. P, *The Philosophy of Language* 4th edition, Oxford University Press, 2001.

Searle, *Expression and Meaning*, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge University Press, 1969.