The Derrida & Searle dispute:

What happened, what did it all mean and who came out on top

*by thrownintotheworld*

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Jacques Derrida and John Searle have both shed light on their points of view regarding the structure of language and how it interacts with people. Their arguments polarise each other and once again create another point of separation in the continental/analytic divide of philosophy in the 20th century. Both Derrida and Searle have written responses to each other that entailed criticisms, for a substantial part accusing each other of misunderstanding the examined text

Derrida was a French philosopher who’s most prominent work regarded post-structuralism and his creation of ‘deconstruction’. As a manifestation, most of his work dealt with philosophy of language and literary criticism, however deconstruction has been branched out into other philosophical disciplines. His harshest critics, mostly of the analytic tradition have described Derrida’s writings as so obscure that it is too difficult to decipher for it to be taken seriously. In fact, John Searle once stated, “With Derrida, you can hardly misread him, because he’s so obscure.” (2000)

Although this statement is agreed amongst quite a substantial amount of analytic philosophers, however if there continues to be support from other academic philosophical contemporaries such as Richard Rorty (Rorty 1978) and Emmanuel Levinas, then it begs the question, does Searle’s criticism stem from making a judgement based on tradition and writing style as opposed to argument. If so, then Searle makes error of misrepresenting philosophical arguments. However, to base any arguments based on these assertions exhibits the fallacy of appealing to authority as opposed to dealing with the arguments based on their merits alone. Which in this essay will attempt to do. In particular, this essay will look to deal with Derrida’s response to Austin’s speech act theory and consequently, Searle’s response to Derrida in the same regard. As an outcome of this analysis, a each argument ought to come to clarity and perhaps one may be more superior than the other.

The entirety of the debate begins with J.L. Austin’s *how to do things with words* (1975). Austin was in fact a teacher of John Searle and because of this, Searle developed a substantial amount of influence from Austin. However, Austin’s main works centred on philosophy of language and in the time in which he was working (Primarily in the first half of the 20th century), he had looked to deal with the logical positivist conception of language. The logical positivist conception of language could be broken up into a dichotomy of statements of factuality and nonsense, meaning that all statements that do not make a truth statement are considered as meaningless. This kind of thought was influenced by Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1998)and was modified into a logical positivist framework.

Austin looked to move away from this conception of language as it appears to limit the entire scope in language. He poses a response to the positivists that not all statements intend to pose any truth-value and in consequence, they are not meaningless, but rather are uses of language that does not regard any truth-value. Out of this Austin created his own dichotomy in which language ought to be separated in. The first distinction is labelled as *constatives*. Constatives are statements that imply truth-value, so they must be either true or false whilst the other distinction is known as *performatives*. Performatives are statements that imply an action to be taken out, for example street signs that display a speed limit are performatives implying that one should not exceed the speed limit. Performatives do not have any truth-value within itself, but rather imply an action ought to be taken.

A performative is what Austin looked to describe in his speech act theory. A performative speech act is encompassed into three subgroups with the first being denoted as the *Locutionary act*. The Locutionary act is in the description of the meaning of the initial performative speech act. In continuation of using the speed sign as an example, the locutionary act regards itself with the speed sign itself. The next process in the speech act is defined as the *Illocutionary act*, which is the influence that the performative locutionary act brings on those in certain social settings. Finally, the *Perlocutionary act* is the final aspect of the speech act that is demonstrated in how actions are taken due to the initial performative. For example, the perlocutionary act lies in how exactly people respond to the speed sign.

A final central aspect of the argument depicted by Austin in speech act theory outlines certain guidelines that allow speech acts, which are entitled as felicity conditions. A condition is felicitous or infelicitous depending on certain factors such as how the act fits with social conventions, whether the situation is appropriate and how exactly the speech act is expressed. A felicitous condition is one that fits social conventions and acts toward societal norms and an infelicitous act.

Derrida spent a substantial amount of time in his philosophical investigations dealing with language and its components. He is drawn to Austin’s speech act theory and articulates his position in his text, *Signature Event Context* (1988). However, prior to analysing Austin, Derrida looks to clarify other properties of language and how they relate to each other.

*Signature Event Context* begins with a critical review of the binary opposition that is speech and writing. Derrida looks at the label of communication as a vehicle or means to an end and furthermore questions the validity of this claim. He claims that communication is rather composed by several aspects that go beyond linguistic meanings.  However, meaning in communication can be largely reduced to context, or rather it is limited by context. However, in saying that, meaning does go beyond context. Within the limits of context, there lies an absence, something that renders communication imperfect.

This analysis of the inner workings communication provides a background for Derrida’s understanding of speech and writing. Because communication is subject to context, an absence of absolute communication occurs and as a result both speech and writing experience this absence. The commonly held view was that speech is the most fundamental form of communication as its derivations are irreducible in regards to symbolic use in communication. Furthermore, because written communication is a derivative of speech in regards to symbolic formulation, then it is further absent from absolute communication. In fact, Ferdinand de Saussure stated that written communication solely exists to represent speech (Holdcroft 1991).

However, Derrida’s position on this view, as a deconstructionist looked at this binary opposition and appeared to deconstruct the hierarchy. Derrida firstly implied that the claims of reducing writing to a derivation of symbols equally apply to spoken language and therefore, they share equal reliance, reducibility and fundamental properties in regards to its relationship with symbols.

Iterability denotes the ability for a statement, whether spoken or written to be repeatable. Derrida finds this important due to the absence in communication. So key is the process of iteration in communication that without it, communication fails, as Derrida explains, “A writing that was not structurally legible – iterable – beyond the death of the addressee would not be writing.” Consequently, iterability is a condition of communication, without iterability, communication is non-existent. Also as a result, due to the perpetuating absence in communication, every iteration must continue to contain the comprehensibility so that the correct and legible communicative gestures have occurred.

However, this relates to why the process is not denoted as reiteration, because of the absence renders communication as imperfect. The importance of iterability through writing as opposed to speech is in that a detachment must occur in the process of written communication whereas spoken communication is always attached to the speaker, even if the message has been recorded, it is still directly connected to the original speaker.

Iterability in any form of communication extends to separation of the iteration into any other context, which is otherwise known as ‘general citationality’. This process occurs without any limitations to what type of communication is occurring and thus functioning as a common ground for speech and writing, and any other form of communication for that matter. The fact that the existence of a certain citation is independent of context, the grounding for citations becomes weaker. However, despite the flimsiness of general citationality, it is necessary for communication exactly because it allows the possibility of communication in a differing context. As a result, the unreliability of general citation is what makes it crucial to communication.

Because of the absence and imperfections of general citaitionality and all forms of communication that occur, Derrida implies that intentionality is not a foundation for meaning but rather, it has its place. As he claimed, “The intention which animates utterance will never be completely present in itself and its content”, Derrida assures that there is a place for intentionality in meaning, however it does not ground it due to the absence.  As a result, utterances need to be able to have more than one meaning to work in any different context. In fact, meaning needs to transcend a singular intention in order for communication to work. This claim stems from Derrida’s approach in what language means. Saussure influenced him in regards to language being a life in itself, independent of individuals and intentionality.

Once Derrida asserts his definitions on the state of language and communication in *Signature Event Context*, he then goes on to critique Austin’s speech acts. Derrida praises Austin on visualising language for something that goes beyond creating utterances of truth-value, but rather a more expansive view of communication. However, the criticism of Austin is laid in the extent that speech act theory goes to, precisely in the example of infelicitous utterances. Austin had recognised that infelicitous speech acts do occur, but he chose not to examine its place in communication.

The infelicitous speech acts for Austin extend to pretend performatives in utterances such as acting in a play or writing a story. These are labelled as parasitic speech acts and Austin decided not to build his linguistic framework on these speech acts. This is where Derrida’s criticism of Austin lies in, as noted earlier, general citationality is a more important attribute of language than intentionality, so parasitic speech acts and felicitous speech acts both draw from the same sources and apply it into another context, using general citationality in the same sense.

This criticism is claiming that Austin is too narrow as opposed to outright wrong. He claims by excluding parasitic speech acts, Austin loses an all-encompassing view on language. In fact, in Austin’s exclusion, speech act theory does not work because felicitous utterances need parasitic speech acts in order to fulfil itself. Derrida does concede that the general citationality in felicitous and parasitic speech acts are not the same, but they are both just valid.

Searle made a swift and concise reply in his text, *Reiterating the Differences: A Reply to Derrida* (1977). From the beginning Searle implies that there is no great debate to begin with as Derrida merely misunderstands Austin’s speech acts. He does admit however that he did not find Derrida’s “arguments very clear and it is possible that I may have misinterpreted him as profoundly as I believe he has misinterpreted Austin”. This statement brings an air of caution in regards to applying his critique on Derrida because in admitting that he may not have understood Derrida, he may have responded incorrectly.

Searle’s first criticism of Derrida is in his speech/writing distinction. He views Derrida’s distinction of speech/writing as invalid because of Derrida’s attribution of writing as unique because of iterability. Searle argues that speech and writing both share iterability as they both equally repeatable. His next critique on Derrida’s distinction is in the absence apparent in written communication. Searle demonstrates examples in which the communicator (writer) and receiver can communicate without having to be absent from each other.

Searle’s solution to Derrida’s misapplied results of deconstruction is that the true distinction between speech and writing exists in the relative permanence of written communication. He justifies this through arguing that once an utterance is spoken, the communicative gesture is left in the open air, written communication on the other hand, does not lose its existence as time goes on, providing that a copy of the text remains. Searle in fact claims that Derrida confuses iterability with permanence.

In regards to Searle’s criticism of Derrida’s speech/writing distinction, Derrida claimed that iterability occurs in all signed communication, thus making Searle’s criticism invalid. For Searle’s criticism of absence, Searle misreads Derrida in that absence does not necessarily regard a physical absence, but rather an inability to completely express ones thoughts. Searle’s missing of the mark in his criticism begs the question on whether he had read Derrida correctly and legitimately looked to right his wrongs.

Following the criticism on iterability, Searle consequently claims that Derrida’s foundational distinction between speech and writing facilities further fallacious arguments. Therefore, the arguments Derrida made further on regarding general accounts of speech and writing are dismissed as invalid because of his foundational error according to Searle. Once again, it appears as though as Searle continues to criticise Derrida’s formulation of distinction and subsequent deconstruction. In fact, it seems as though deconstruction is the problem according to Searle, as he clarifies in his paper, *The World Turned Upside Down* (1983).

Searle’s solution to the foundational underpinning of writing has been earlier on described as permanence. Consequently, in order for the meaning of the writing to be considered as permanent, the writing must have an intention attached to it. This breaks from Derrida’s intersubjective conception of any one’s ownership of language. For Searle, meaning is tied to the subject, whilst for Derrida, meaning in written text is for the most part found outside of any individuals intention and is also never perfectly expressed, thus the absence.

Searle’s next criticism regards Derrida’s criticism on Austin, in particular Derrida’s criticisms on Austin’s parasitic discourse. Searle accuses Derrida of misunderstanding Austin in regards to parasitic discourse. He accuses Derrida of mistaking Austin’s lack of attention to parasitic discourse for being a monumental error and also involving a moral misjudgment. Both of these claims appear as a misrepresentation of Derrida’s critique on parasitic discourse. However, Searle’s central criticism on Derrida’s analysis on parasitic discourse is that in a defence of Austin, Searle claimed that Austin’s speech acts did not rely on parasitic discourse in the sense that parasitic discourse is dependent on legitimate ‘felicitous’ utterances. It is once again demonstrated by how Derrida came to blur the lines between parasitic discourse and felicitous speech acts, which is through his method of deconstruction.

Searle’s final criticism in regards to parasitic discourse looks at Derrida’s ‘general citationality’. Searle accuses Derrida of confusing his concept of citation with parasitic discourse. It appears as though Searle views Derrida’s analysis on Austin as an effort to use deconstruction and consequently blur the once distinctive lines. According to Searle, a citation is a mentioning of the cited source without using it and a parasitic speech act does not mention the cited source but the speech act uses it.

In regards to answering Searle’s criticisms of Derrida regarding parasitic discourse and citationality, it is important to see the outcomes in Derrida’s deconstructionist method. To blur these lines that Searle sees as a mistake, is for Derrida to view both oppositions as relying on the same sources. I would claim along similar lines to Derrida that parasitic discourse cites as it utterance. Because one cannot separate the two, the distinction made by Searle is superfluous. The reasoning behind such a claim is because even though parasitic discourse does not overtly make it explicit that the utterance is referring from something else, the utterance can exist because it is referring to something else. It is a citation because even though it is not an self-aware referral, the referral is the citation.

For Searle, the nature of language shapes a philosophical worldview. He also divides a conception of language into two traditions, one of a mathematical-logical formal system and another that looks at the use of language within a social framework. He ascribes to the latter tradition of the philosophy of language. This makes a direct connection with Searle’s understanding of intentionality. Searle argues that even if the intention of the original utterance were to be lost, then the intentionality of the receiver creates meaning in the particular utterance. This is considered the case because in absence of intentions, meaning cannot be found, according to Searle. This example demonstrates how exactly Searle’s conception of language could be considered as a branch for his philosophy of mind.

Derrida’s conception of language derived from a response of structuralism. With linguistical structuralism in brief summary being the idea of language as entailing an all-encompassing structure that is made sense of through its components that cannot be separated or reduced to a separate collection of properties. These properties relate through binary oppositions and create structures, hierarchies and principles within language that allow language to function as a structured unit.

Derrida’s *deconstruction* looks to undermine these binary oppositions, displacing the linguistic hierarchy that exists in structural linguistics (1998). His idea of the metaphysics of presence, or rather the constant absence as previously mentioned examines a further separation from structuralism. Furthermore, Derrida’s denoted condition of *différance* explains his conception of language. The idea of différancefor Derrida means both to differ (to change) and to defer (to postpone). The crux of différance is firstly, to demonstrate why writing does not depend on speech, because of the double meaning indicated in the word that can not be differentiated in speech, but can be differentiated in writing. The key component of différance is in its action of deconstruction because it in itself removes the structure and rigidity of meaning.

These constructs that resulted from structuralism to a deconstructionist conception of language caused Derrida to view meaning in language as separated from the communicator, thus somewhat separated from intention and furthermore, because of différanceand the deconstruction of binary opposition, meaning is subject to context.

In analysis of both Searle’s and Derrida’s works on the conception and meaning of language, it is clear to see that both of their viewpoints derive from their starting points. In a sense, they are both correct in what they are trying to express. For Searle, meaning comes back to the subject or the communicator, whilst for Derrida, once an utterance is expressed it is separated from the communicator, thus causing meaning to derive from the life of language itself.

It appears as though Searle’s reply does not conflict with Derrida’s ‘*Signature Event Context*’ as much as he perceived as it seems to have missed the mark on some of Derrida’s arguments. However, there are some issues that demonstrate some cause for questions in Derrida’s arguments that Searle does address. However, many of these issues lie on their foundational basis for understanding language and meaning in language. I would though, in conclusion, claim that overall Derrida’s arguments came across as more comprehensive than Searle’s.

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