How to Make the Concepts Clear: Searle's Discussion with Derrida

Tomáš Koblížek

The Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Prague

Abstract: The first part of the paper deals with the key question of the Searle-Derrida debate, namely, with the question of conceptual "exactness" and applicability of concepts to facts. I argue that Derrida makes a strict distinction between the exactness in the realm of concepts and the exactness in the realm of facts. Supposing that it is not correct to argue against him – as Searle does – that concepts cannot be exact because there are no strict boundaries between facts. The second part of the paper deals with a distinction used by John Searle: The distinction between linguistic meaning and speaker's meaning. According to Searle linguistic meaning is constituted outside a particular context of use whereas speaker's meaning is embedded in a particular situation. I argue this distinction is problematic as far as any meaning is constituted in a particular utterance and in a particular context of use.

Keywords: Background, concept, speaker's meaning, linguistic meaning, utterance.

1

The famous debate between John Searle and Jacques Derrida came to an end nearly twenty years ago. John Searle's last reply appeared in his *Construction of Social Reality* (1995), Derrida's final contribution can be found in his "Afterword" to *Limited Inc* and is seven years older (1988). The polemics dealt mainly with principles of the speech act theory, the "iterability" of signs, and the complexity of speaker's intention and I will not examine it in its entirety. I would only like to return to two questions discussed in *Limited Inc* and in two texts by John Sear-

le, namely in his review of Jonathan Culler's *On Deconstruction* (1983) and in his (1994) essay "Literary Theory and its Discontents". The first question concerns the boundaries between concepts, the other question deals with the meaning of utterance. As we shall see, both questions are closely related since the answer given to the first can function as a prelude to answering the second.

As far as the question of concepts is concerned, John Searle addresses to Derrida the following objection:

> First there is the assumption that unless a distinction can be made rigorous and precise it isn't really a distinction at all. Many literary theorists fail to see, for example, that it is not an objection to a theory of fiction that it does not sharply divide fiction from nonfiction, or an objection to a theory of metaphor that it does not sharply divide the metaphorical from the nonmetaphorical. On the contrary, it is a condition of the adequacy of a precise theory of an indeterminate phenomenon that it should precisely characterize that phenomenon as indeterminate; and a distinction is no less a distinction for allowing for a family of related, marginal, diverging cases. People who try to hold the assumption that genuine distinctions must be made rigid are ripe for Derrida's attempt to undermine all such distinctions. (Searle 1983, 78)

Later John Searle explicitly applies these claims to distinctions between concepts as he points out that "most concepts and distinctions are rough at edges and do not have sharp boundaries", or that it is "generally accepted that many, perhaps most, concepts do not have sharp boundaries, and since 1953 we have begun to develop theories to explain why they *cannot*" (Searle 1994, 637, 638). According to Searle, the looseness of boundaries refers to the fact that there are "marginal" or "diverging" cases which complicate any clear conceptual distinction. Perhaps Derrida and his followers merely neglect this fact and take the opposite view regarding the concepts as something clear and distinct – thereby they commit a fundamental mistake.

This objection is especially disconcerting for Derrida and he expends much effort to refute the argument. Let's leave aside his claim that philosophers have always held that in the order of concepts "when a distinction cannot be rigorous or precise, it is not a distinction at all" (Derrida 1988, 123). Reference to historical background is surely not the main point of Derrida's defense even though the idea of tradition

and its power generally plays a key role in deconstruction. We must rather focus on his assertion concerning the applicability of concepts to facts. Derrida explicitly claims that empirical difficulties "do not, in fact, exclude the possibility of a juridical-theoretical process leading to an essential definition," and he provides the following example: "if one wishes to know what conditions are necessary for a promise, for instance to be a promise, it ultimately matters little whether or not *in fact* a promise has ever existed, or whether one has ever been *actually* discovered which would fully and rigorously satisfy the requisite conditions" (Derrida 1988, 69; emphasis mine).

Here we find the crucial distinction referred to in Derrida's demand of "rigorous boundaries" between concepts. The "crystal clarity" of concepts apparently concerns the exactness of their *definition*, not their *application* to facts. According to Derrida, there are on one hand concepts as specific products of idealization – concepts determined by their definition or their definitional features – and on the other hand there are facts which satisfy the conditions set up by the definition only to a degree, "more or less". This is to say that in principle we can clearly define what it means "to promise", "to declare", or "to lie", yet, in each case of a particular use of the concepts, as we are obliged to apply the concept to specific utterances, there will always be some marginal phenomena or undecidable facts which will fail to perfectly fulfill the conditions of the concept. We know what promise is *per definitionem*, yet we need not to be sure – and usually we are not – if this or that utterance is *de facto* a promise or rather something else.

It is important to notice that this fundamental distinction is not affected by the mutability of definitions. The fact that we can change definitions has nothing to do with the simple truth that we can *simultaneously* think (1) the rigorous distinction between concepts and (2) the undecidability of their application. Derrida returns to this point in several passages of *Limited Inc* and he always speaks out decidedly. For example, in the "Afterword" he once again points out: "Every concept that lays claim to any rigor whatsoever implies the alternative of 'all or nothing'. *Even if in 'reality' or in experience everyone believes he knows that there is never 'all or nothing'*, a concept determines itself only according to 'all or nothing'" (Derrida 1988, 116; emphasis mine) – "all or nothing" indicating: either there are strict boundaries or there are no boundaries at all.

When John Searle returns to these claims he seems to overlook the distinction between (1) conceptual boundaries and (2) the clarity of particular cases to which we apply the concepts. (As we have seen, the concepts are supposed to be strict whereas the particular cases might lack the requested clarity.) To give an example of John Searle's reading of the argument it will suffice to look at his essay on "Discontents". Here he rebuts the "all or nothing" approach to concepts by pointing at their applicability. That means, the boundaries between *concepts* are shown to be loose by reference to different *facts* to which we apply the concepts. Right in the opening passage of the essay we find a statement confusing both levels of analysis: "I pointed out that it is not necessarily an objection to conceptual analysis, or to a distinction, that there are no rigorous or precise boundaries to the *concept analyzed* or the distinction being drawn. It is not necessarily an objection even to theoretical concepts that they admit of *application* more or less" (Searle 1994, 637, emphasis mine). In a similar way, few paragraphs later, Searle refuses the idea of purity of *concepts* by pointing out the "un-purity" of particular *cases*. He writes: "It is clear from this discussion that Derrida has a conception of '*concepts*' according to which they have crystalline purity that would exclude all the marginal *cases*" (Searle 1994, 637; emphasis mine). Derrida indeed possesses the notion of "crystalline pure" concepts, however, these concepts – when applied to facts – actually *admit* of marginal cases: A marginal case does not imply unclarity of a concept. Moreover, it is clear from the "Afterword" that Derrida is aware of the empirical argument against conceptual sharpness but he is determined not to use it: "To this oppositional logic [that is, to the oppositional logic of concepts], which is necessarily, legitimately, a logic of 'all or nothing', and without which the distinction and the limits of a concept would have no chance, I oppose nothing, least of all a logic of approximation, a simple empiricism of difference in degree" (Derrida 1988, 117). Evidently, for Derrida, the counterargument based on undecidable empirical facts is of no use. It violates the distinction between conceptual and empirical (factual) clearness.

2

All this is not to say that the conception of two separated "worlds", "the world of concepts" and "the world of facts", is unproblematic and resistant to doubts. On the contrary, such a conception must be

re-considered if we are aware of some basic problems in philosophy of language and general linguistics. In this part I will argue that there is no completely impervious boundary between concepts and facts, or "factual context", insofar as concepts are available to us only by means of language. I believe that the "linguistic nature" of concepts breaks the boundary between the two realms. In this context, we can make use of the Searlian definition of utterance. However, to prove the claim, we have to suspend the difference between the speaker's meaning and the sentence meaning which John Searle uses in his semantics.

As a starting point we can use Searle's example which illustrates his notion of "Background". Searle writes:

> Consider, for example, the utterance, "Cut the grass". Notice that we understand the occurrence of the word "cut" quite differently from the way we understand the occurrence of "cut" in "Cut the cake" (or "Cut the cloth", "Cut the skin", and so on) even though the word "cut" appears univocally in both sentences. This point is illustrated if you consider that if I say to somebody, "Cut the cake", and he runs a lawnmower over it, or if I say, "Cut the grass", and he runs out and stabs it with a knife, we will, in each case, say that he did not do what he was literally told to do. How do we know, as we do know, which is the correct interpretation? We do not have different definitions of the word "cut", corresponding to these two occurrences. We understand these utterances correctly, because each utterance presupposes a whole cultural and biological Background (in addition to a Network of beliefs, and so on). (Searle 1994, 640)

In order to re-consider the role of concepts we must focus on the assertion that we do not possess "different definitions of the word 'cut', corresponding to these two occurrences." Such a claim is perfectly correct: There is no special definition of the verb "cut" for the case of cutting cake, nor is there a specific definition of the verb "cut" for the case of cutting grass. As John Searle puts it, we rather interpret the utterances using the Background: the utterance leans on "a set of background capacities, abilities, presuppositions, and general know-how" which enable us to understand (cf. Searle 1994, 640).

Nevertheless, Searle's approach is quite peculiar at this point. He claims that there are no corresponding definitions, yet he admits that there is a common level of meaning which is essentially different from the particular "speaker's meaning, as determined by the speaker's intentions on particular historical occasions" (Searle 1994, 647). He ex-

plicitly talks of "the sentence" or "the word meaning" and identifies it with linguistic convention. In this vein, later in the discussion, he points out that "the meaning of a text *can be examined quite apart* from any authorial intentions, because the meaning of the text consists in the meanings of the words of which it consists" (Searle 1994, 652; emphasis mine). The meaning indicated here is not the utterance meaning of the speaker but, perhaps, the meaning we find in dictionaries.

Nevertheless, we could ask how such a type of meaning is available to us. How can we "examine" the meaning which the word "cut" possesses outside a particular utterance, that is, outside an utterance pronounced in a particular context or a historical situation? I would like to put forward the following suggestion: Even the linguistic definition of the word "cut" requires the word to be uttered, situated in "particular historical occasions", and, therefore, the word or the sentence meaning does not represent a type of meaning which would be essentially different from utterance meaning. Or, to put it the other way round, in order to save the idea of word or linguistic meaning one would have to put forward such a definition of the word "cut" which would be absolutely detached from any "particular historical occasions". One would have to present a meaning that would be fully comprehensible and yet this comprehension would not be supported by any particular context of use. It seems clear that such an effort must be in vain and that such a definition is impossible. The so-called linguistic meaning or conventional sentence meaning is not independent of the situation of speaking. Rather, it is the meaning of an utterance *which we often use*: *the typical utterance meaning*.

To make the assertion clearer let's pick up another example discussed by John Searle in his polemics with Jacques Derrida. This time the discussion deals with the meaning of Nietzsche's note "I have forgotten my umbrella" that can be found in *Nachlass* of the author. Here John Searle denies Derrida's claim that the sentence might have no meaning, or as Derrida writes: "Because it is structurally liberated from any living meaning, [*vouloir-dire vivant*], it is always possible that it means nothing at all or that it has no decidable meaning" (quoted from Searle 1994, 661). Searle's main counterargument is based in the very notion of "conventional meaning", or in the notion of "sentence type" which is identified with the linguistic meaning of a sentence. The objection runs as follows: "The German sentence type has a conventional meaning in German. Given the Network and the Background, the inter-

pretation of sentence meaning is quite determinate. In a different Background culture, where all umbrellas were made of chocolate and eaten for desert after use in rainstorms, the literal sentence meaning could be understood differently (it might mean: I have forgotten the taste of my umbrella); but given the existing cultural, biological, and linguistic situation in the late nineteenth century, the literal interpretations are unproblematic" (Searle 1994, 661). In a similar way, Searle goes on to differentiate between "speaker's meaning" and "sentence meaning". He writes: "From the fact that Nietzsche might not have meant anything by the production of the token (speaker meaning) it does not follow that the token might 'mean nothing at all' (sentence meaning)" (Searle 1994, 661 – 662). Searle's counterargument is clear: As far as there is a type of meaning (linguistic meaning or sentence meaning) independent of the meaning intended by the author, the sentence will always mean something – no matter whether or not Nietzsche had anything in mind. Such a meaning – type meaning or linguistic meaning – is determined by *conventional* network and background presuppositions.

Is there anything wrong with the claim? At this point, we must carefully judge the particular case. It is quite correct to assert – against Derrida – that Nietzsche might not have meant anything and that the sentence is still meaningful. Yet, we should be aware of the fact that Nietzsche's note is not meaningful simply because it is in German, that is, because it has a linguistic meaning which is essentially different from the particular meaning of the utterance. In fact, when John Searle points to the Background and the Network which determine the interpretation of the conventional meaning, he is pointing to a *particular context* as determining the meaning of the *utterance* – not determining a different type of meaning, the linguistic meaning. Nonetheless, as in the case of the speaker's meaning, he must think of a particular situation or context of use in order to obtain the so-called linguistic meaning. At the very least he must imagine somebody intending the meaning in such a context. Perhaps, the context would be: it is raining and the umbrella is an instrument I can use in order to stay dry.

Why is it, then, that John Searle would still like to talk of *two types* of meaning? Does he simply deny the unity where no difference can be found? It seems his approach is based in a specific procedure: John Searle usually analyzes an utterance in *two* different contexts and by this analysis he obtains two meanings. However, retrospectively, he claims that the two meanings are co-present in *a single* context of use

and that they represent *two types* of meaning. To be more specific: At first, the utterance is set up against a more typical context and a more typical network of beliefs. By this procedure we obtain the so-called linguistic or conventional meaning. In the "Discontent" essay the utterance "the window is open" serves as an example. The linguistic meaning is identified by reference to the common context of use: there is an open window (see Searle 1995, 645). Subsequently, the same utterance is confronted with a less typical or an "individual" occasion. By this procedure we obtain the so-called speaker's meaning. Here John Searle provides an example of diplomatic context where "the window is open" could mean "there are opportunities for further negotiations" (Searle 1995, 646). Yet, it appears that the difference between these two meanings – linguistic meaning and speaker's meaning – is not a matter of *type* but rather of *typicality*: it is a difference *in the degree of typicality* between two utterance meanings. In one particular context, the utterance refers to what it commonly refers, i.e. to window as an object which we open to get fresh air. The other context is specific: it concerns the situation of a diplomatic meeting. However, John Searle would still insist that the linguistic meaning – the common meaning – can be found in the diplomatic utterance too, no matter what the diplomats think. I would rather say: the so-called linguistic meaning cannot be found in this linguistic unit automatically, it cannot be found there as some kind of a permanent semantic layer. The utterance would have to be projected against another (common) context where the so-called linguistic meaning is constituted.

Why spend so much time dissolving the difference between the two types of meaning? Why should such a thing matter in philosophy of language? There are various reasons but especially one in particular could be put forward for discussion. It is worth noticing that the dissolution enables us to eliminate the problem of how we should understand the *relationship* between the two types of meaning in an utterance. John Searle often refers to this relation as something complex or complicated but he gives no explanation of how these two types of meaning can exist together in one linguistic unit (cf. e.g., Searle 1994, 647 or 659). The analysis becomes much easier if we do not operate with two types of meaning. It suffices to make clear that we either interpret the meaning of utterance as referring to typical occasions, or else we deal with utterances in a situation which is quite unusual. From this it follows that linguistic and speaker's meaning are not two semantic lay-

ers enveloping one other in a single utterance. There is only one type of meaning, sometimes more and sometimes less common or typical.

Institute of Philosophy
The Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, v. v. i.
Jilská 1
110 00 Praha 1
Czech Republic
tomas.koblizek@gmail.com

References

DERRIDA, J. (1988): *Limited Inc*. Transl. S. Weber and J. Mehlham. Northwestern UP: Evenston.

SEARLE, J. R. (1994): Literary Theory and its Discontents. *New Literary History* 25/3, 637-667.

SEARLE, J. R. (1983): The Word Turned Upside Down. *The New York Review of Books*, 74-79.