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SEARLE AND SINCLAIR ON COMMUNICATIVE ACTS: A SKETCH OF A RESEARCH PROBLEM

John Searle (1932–) and John Sinclair (1933–2007) have worked in very different academic traditions: analytic philosophy and empirical linguistics. Nevertheless, although they work with very different methodological and theoretical assumptions, they both tackle one of the deepest questions in the philosophy of language – the nature of units of meaning – and there are similarities in their models of communicative acts – speech acts and extended lexical units. It is therefore productive to study in how far the two approaches are complementary, and whether their different strengths can be combined. I will give brief examples of how Searle's model could be strengthened by grounding it in empirical textual and ethnographic data, and therefore – conversely – how Sinclair's model could be strengthened by giving it a social rationale.

Searle and Sinclair most obviously share the view that a model of communicative acts is of central importance for a theory of language use. However, Searle does not discuss how his elegant theory of social ontology could be grounded in observations of authentic language, whereas Sinclair does not discuss how his elegant model of phraseology could help solve questions in social or philosophical theory.

It might appear that the two sets of work are hardly comparable, since they originate in very different intellectual. However, as Popper (1994: 37) argues, if we start by assuming that two frameworks are incommensurable, then we will learn nothing by comparing them. Even if we finally conclude that no complete agreement is possible between them, we may learn something new. I will argue that a synthesis of the two positions would require developing what Searle and Sinclair both neglect, namely a theory of what lies in the middle between small things (such as speech acts) and big things (such as social institutions).

Working out the details of this synthesis would require a major research programme of conceptual, ethnographic and linguistic analysis. But if the programme is successful then we could show the relevance of recent corpus linguistics to Searle's philosophy and the relevance of recent analytic philosophy to Sinclair's linguistics.
