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# MAKING THE SOCIAL WORLD WITHOUT WORDS

*abstract*

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*I intend to criticize and amend one of the main theses of Searle's social ontology, that is: the dependence of social reality on language. This thesis raises a circularity problem because, in Searle's account, language has conventionality as an essential feature, but conventionality depends, on in turn, on social reality. I will argue that we can solve Searle's circularity problem by considering forms of communication and ways of imposing normativity more fundamental than language.*

*keywords*

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*Language, pictures, reference, normativity*

In this paper, I intend to criticize and amend one of the main theses of Searle's social ontology, that is: the dependence of social reality on language. This thesis raises a circularity problem because, in Searle's account, language has conventionality as an essential feature, but conventionality depends, on in turn, on social reality. I will argue that we can solve Searle's circularity problem by considering forms of communication and ways of imposing normativity more fundamental than language.

**1. Features of Language and Requirements for Society**

In the fourth chapter of *Making the Social World*, Searle explains how language can constitute the bridge between mind and society. These are his two basic claims: 1) language is an extension of pre-linguistic forms of intentionality, in opposition to Davidson's and Dummett's thesis that "without language, there can not be thought at all" (Searle 2010, 61); 2) there can not be institutional facts without language. So we have a conceptual hierarchy of this sort: *thought is a condition of language which, on in turn, is a condition of society*. Searle's account of language starts from three essential syntactical features that "organize semantics" (Searle 2010, 63):

1. *Discreteness*: sentences are composed of atomic *terms* that retain their identity in the recombinations (See Searle 2010, 63).
2. *Compositionality*: the arrangement of *terms* in a sentence determines the meaning of the sentence (See Searle 2010, 64).
3. *Generativity*: it is possible to produce and understand an infinite number of sentences (See Searle 2010, 64).

To these, Searle adds three other features:

4. *Segmentation*: the continuous flow of pre-linguistic consciousness is structured by *terms* into discrete segments (See Searle 2010, 68).
5. *Duality*: at one level intentionality produces a physical utterance, but at another level the utterance represents something (See Searle 2010, 74).
6. *Conventionality*: an arbitrary meaning is attached to *terms* by some socially-recognized device (See Searle 2010, 75).

Finally, we have these last three features:

7. *Normativity*: meaning has to be conveyed on a regular and repeatable basis, that gives right to specific expectations (See Searle 2010, 87).
8. *Deontology*: the speech act involves a commitment in the full public sense that combines irreversibility and obligation (See Searle 2010, 86).
9. *Declarativity*: it is possible to create a fact by representing that fact as existing (See Searle 2010, 68).

Among these nine features, the last three – normativity, deontology, declarativity – individuate the crucial requirements for the construction of social reality. The question is whether these last three requirements are really inextricable from the first six features of language. In other words: in order to have normativity, deontology, declarativity, do we really need language, with all its essential features, or can it suffice a simpler system of communication?

## 2. The Double-Sided Tablet Experiment

I will argue that it is possible to conceive a system of communication that does not satisfy all the essential features of language but still allows to create social facts. For this purpose, I start from a thought experiment whose protagonists are the same “pre-linguistic hominids” to whom Searle denies the possibility of making a social world: “a race of early humans possessing the biological forms of intentionality, both individual and collective, but lacking language” (Searle 2010, 65). In accordance with Searle’s approach (See Searle 2010, 65-66), my thought experiment does not concern directly evolutionary biology and the problem of the origins of language, but the conceptual dependence of social facts on language. So, let us suppose that Searle’s hominids, who lack language, have nevertheless an exceptional pictorial ability, and that they have some special double-sided tablets, with a *recto* face and a *verso* face. They use the tablets in the following way: they depict a single scene on the *recto* and a series of scenes on the *verso*, and they collectively intend the situations on the *verso* as normatively connected to the situations on the *recto*. These “Tablets of the Law” thus allow the hominids to make a sort of declaration according to which the scene on the *recto* represents an event that confers a status and the scenes on the *verso* depict a series of events that represent the functions connected to the status. Moreover, they collectively intend to conform their conduct to such a connection. For instance, the *recto* can depict one of these hominids being crowned

and the *verso* the crowned hominid in situations like receiving goods and marching at the head of hunters. In this case the hominids have used the double-sided tablet to mean that the crowned hominid has the power of receiving goods and marching at the head of hunters, and in doing so they have created a new social object, something like a chief. Moreover, if the series on the *verso* also contains a depiction of the crowned man painting new tablets, the chief will henceforth count as a legislator.

Likewise, if we consider a tablet whose *recto* depicts a male and a female hominid exchanging rings, and the *verso* the same hominids in situations like living together, having sex and raising kids, in this case the tablet creates a new social object, something like a family.

### 3. Reconsidering the Searlean Requirements for Society

The double-sided tablet experiment leads us to suppose that we can construct social objects without respecting all the Searlean conditions. Let us try to analyze them one by one with the aim of showing their role in our system of iconic representation and their necessity in order to create social facts. In particular, I will argue that we could still create social facts even without discreteness and conventionality.

#### 1) Discreteness

By virtue of iconic representations, we can represent situations and make social facts without discreteness, i.e. without using atomic *terms* that are instead essential elements in Searle's account.

#### 2) Compositionality

According to Fodor (2007), the compositionality principle can be applied also to pictures, although this kind of compositionality does not require discreteness: if *P* is a picture of *X*, then parts of *P* are pictures of parts of *X*. More generally, it is worth noting that: "The combinatorial structure of sentences [...] derives in large part from the combinatorial structure of episodes, and words provide the access to the components of episodes. Most of the episodes we witness, remember, or construct in our minds, are combinations of the familiar. Indeed it is generally the combinations that count, rather than the individual elements" (Corballis 2009, 34).

#### 3) Generativity

It is possible to produce and understand an infinite number of pictures, so generativity is also an essential feature of iconic representations.

#### 4) Segmentation

In Searle's account, language structures experience into discrete segments and allows human beings to move from a pre-linguistic "feature placement" to a structured propositional content. Yet Searle admits that "the intentionalistic apparatus prior to language is heavily endowed with categories" (Searle 2010, 67) and that "conscious experience already segments objects and features" (Searle 2010, 70), for instance discriminating between a figure and a background. So, we can claim that iconic representations are structured and segmented despite lacking atomic terms.

#### 5) Duality

According to perceptual theories of depiction (See Wollheim 1987), duality (that is, in Wollheim's terms, "twofoldness") is also an essential feature of iconic representations, that are constituted by a "configurational fold" (the depicting surface) and a "recognitional fold" (the depicted state of affairs).

#### 6) Conventionality

Conventionality raises an important circularity problem in Searle's account, because *language needs conventions* but at the same time *conventions are social facts and social facts need language*. Conversely, iconic representations do not have conventionality as an essential feature and so they do not have this circularity problem.

#### 7) Normativity

In Searle's account, normativity rests upon conventionality. But iconic representations allow us to convey meaning on a regular and repeatable basis, without the need for conventions. Moreover, in the double-sided tablet experiment, the syntactical relation between the *recto* and the *verso* has a normative force that gives right to specific expectations. Yet representations as such have not normativity among their features, and so we need a way to impose normativity on representations.

#### 8) Deontology

As a product of an intentional act, the iconic representation involves a public commitment of the agent.

#### 9) Declarativity

As a public product of the imagination, the iconic representation may bring into existence something that still does not exist simply by representing it as existing.

#### 4. The Social Limits of Language

In a social ontology perspective, we can define an elementary social fact as a rule that attributes a function to an entity. So, for the purpose of constructing an elementary social fact, we need a way to represent the entity and the function, and to impose a normative force on their connection.

But if we look at the conceptual basis of social reality, language can do neither the one nor the other task. Language cannot originally represent the entities and the functions because, in order to represent them, it requires in turn the social rules that assign a meaning to its terms. Furthermore, language – by itself – cannot originally impose normative force on the connection between the representation of an entity and the representation of its function, because the linguistic terms that express some normative force (e. g. verbs like “must” or “may”) rely on their turn on the speaker’s possession of normative concepts and on social rules that allow the speaker to share them.

Searle recognizes that speaking a language requires to follow rules, but his account of language as the condition of social reality precludes the possibility that these rules could be social in turn. In this sense, Searle’s social ontology is implicitly committed to Chomsky’s linguistics: the rules of language must be in people’s heads. But this commitment poses two problems: 1) the Chomskyan account applies to syntactical rules, but not to semantic rules that however need some form of social sharing; 2) the Chomskyan account does not fit well with the evolutionary claim that the only rational explanation for complex structures lies in natural selection (See Pinker and Bloom 1990).

In Searle’s account, as well as in Chomsky’s account, hominids directly jump, in a quite inscrutable way, from a pre-linguistic thought to a fully developed language. On the other hand, this jump can be better explained in evolutionary terms, by considering “motivated representations” as an intermediate step between pre-linguistic hominids and fully-linguistic men. According to Burling, “unlike most words on our spoken languages, motivated signs are related to their referent by more than just an arbitrary convention” (Burling 2005, 79): they can be related to their referent by resemblance (iconic representations) or by a physical connection, for instance the act of pointing (indexical representations). Moreover, Burling claims that “icon and indices played a greater role during the earliest stages of language than they do in the spoken languages we use today [...]. At the early stages of any conventional form of communication, iconicity and indexicality are the most obvious principles to exploit” (Burling 2005, 82). In short, iconicity and indexicality give pre-linguistic hominids a way of representing and sharing representations of states of affairs, without the need of sharing rules of representation. In this way we have not, unlike Searle and Chomsky, to put the rules into men’s heads. The rules themselves can be constructed by means of iconic and indexical representations. That

is to say that elementary social facts can be created by representing entities and functions by means of certain kinds of representation that do not need social rules to work, while the imposition of normativity can be achieved by extra-linguistic means like enforcement, imitation, training, and especially paradigmatic applications.

Such an account could contribute to solve the main circularity problem that afflicts the Searlean theory, i. e. the mutual dependence between language and conventionality. Motivated representations and paradigmatic applications introduce a basic level of communication where it is possible to create elementary social facts that can enable conventionality and therefore language.

5.  
A Different  
Account of  
Language

Our account of the social limits of language could be criticized on in turn by noticing that the problem is not language in itself, but Searle's account of language. That is to say that Searle makes appeal to a definition of language that is too narrow, and too strictly linked to the notion of conventionality. Conversely, if we endorse a Gricean perspective (See Harnish 2005 and 2009), we can conceive an utterance in general as an expressed attitude, that is, as an intention to make a propositional attitude (a belief, a desire, etc.) manifest. In such a perspective, a speech act "can be defined in terms of the propositional attitude expressed by the speaker, and the understanding of such communicative acts can be defined as the recognition of such propositional attitudes by the hearer" (Harnish 2005, 15).

This account, unlike Searle's, has no more requirements about discreteness and conventionality, and so it seems to have no more circularity problems. Yet we still have to explain how propositional attitudes can be expressed by the speaker and recognized by the hearer. Harnish suggests that "the recognition of such expressed propositional attitudes on the part of the hearer is guided by a *shared system* of inference strategies, presumptions, and contextual information, *all stated in terms of propositional attitudes*" (Harnish 2005, 15, my emphases). But this explanation raises a new circularity problem since, in order to build such a "shared system", we already need a way of sharing propositional attitudes. So, also a Gricean account of language requires an integration in terms of basic mechanisms of communication that must ground the sharing of propositional attitudes.

6.  
A Different  
Account of  
Normativity

Moreover, expressed attitudes as such seem to have no means in order to account for normativity. As Harnish points out: "The notion of an illocutionary act sometimes (Searle) or always (Alston) involves normative notions such as 'commitment', 'taking responsibility for', etc., and these notions are not captured by expressed attitudes" (Harnish 2005, 23). Normativity seems to be a

more primitive notion than sharing attitudes.

At this point, we could try to introduce normativity and shared rules as a foundation for the possibility of sharing attitudes. But if we conceive rules as representations in people's heads, as Searle does, we still have a foundational problem, whose best formulation can be found in Wittgenstein's "skeptical paradox": in order to follow the rules we need to interpret them, but in order to interpret them we need *rules* of interpretation (See Wittgenstein 1953: §198). So: "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rule" (Wittgenstein 1953, §201).

According to Kripke's reading of Wittgenstein's text, the only way to solve the "skeptical paradox" is by means of a "skeptical solution" based on the "inversion of the conditional" (Kripke 1992, 93): we do not have to say that "we agree because we all follow the same rule", but that "we follow the same rule because we all agree". Agreement – that is, regularity of behavior supported by paradigmatic applications – is the most primitive form of normativity. In this sense, the skeptical solution "holds that there are facts about a shared understanding, and about what individuals mean by their utterances, when a communal practice of the appropriate sort is in place – where such a practice requires that we have individuals who are, for the most part, inclined to 'go on' in the same way. It is, if you like, the practice that grounds the normatively charged facts about meaning, understanding, and the grasp of concepts, rather than such facts that ground the practice" (Davies 1998, 137). Agreement, so intended, corresponds to Wittgensteinian "bedrock": " 'How am I able to obey a rule?' – if this is not a question about causes, then it is about the justification for my following the rule in the way I do. If I have exhausted the justifications I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned. Then I am inclined to say: 'This is simply what I do' " (Wittgenstein 1953, §217). The skeptical solution finally allows us to unpack the bedrock metaphor in the following terms: "Wittgenstein warns us not to try to dig below 'bedrock'. But it is difficult, in reading him, to avoid acquiring a sense of what, as it were, lies down there: a web of facts about behavior and 'inner' episodes, describable without using the notion of meaning" (McDowell 1984, 348).

## 7. The Social Construction of Language

Up to this point, we have criticized Searle's claim that language is the condition of the construction of social reality, by showing that it raises a circularity problem since it has conventionality as an essential feature, and conventionality needs social reality in its turn. A less narrow account of language, like the Gricean "expressed attitude theory", can release language of its dependence on conventionality, but still has the problem of explaining



how the propositional attitudes can be shared and in which way such a sharing can acquire normativity. I have argued that we can try to solve this problem by considering iconical and indexical representations as ways of expressing attitudes, and by grounding normativity not on shared rules, but on a “bedrock” of agreement.

At this point, we can even agree with Searle that language is different from all the other social facts

in the sense that the institutional declaration “Obama is president” *creates* a president, while the mere linguistic utterance “snow is white” *does not create* snow nor its whiteness. But we have however to acknowledge that language itself needs a pre-linguistic social mechanism that, by assigning to the sign “snow” the status function of referring to snow, *creates* a word.

Semantics cannot be reduced to the computation of the meaning of a sentence. Semantics also regards the meaning of the words, that is – according to Kripke (1980) and Kaplan (1990) – the act of naming entities and the propagation of this act via a causal-historical chain. But the act of naming is not a linguistic act: it is a meta-linguistic act, that is a social act that requires pre-linguistic representational skills and rule-following skills. A word is itself a social object that needs to be constructed. Naming, in this sense, is an act that, even if it is not a speech act, creates a social object: naming is the act of conferring to a sign the deontic function of referring to an entity. In this sense, the double-sided tablet can ideally exemplify an elementary mechanism to create words as social objects: if we use the *recto* of the tablet to confer to a sign the status of “bearer of meaning” and the *verso* to depict a series of situations that such a status allows to represent, then we obtain something like a dictionary that implements linguistic conventions. This account fits well with some recent theories of language that stress the importance of gestures, iconic representations and paradigmatic applications in order to reconcile the theories of language with the evolutionary approaches. In this sense, we can conceive the double-sided tablet as a conceptual scheme implemented by some evolutionary hypotheses. For instance Burling’s (2005) hypothesis: symbols are special gestures, maybe accidentally produced but collectively recognized as *connected* to instrumental actions. Or, for instance, Corballis’s (2002) hypothesis: words are the vocal emissions maybe accidentally produced but collectively recognized as *connected* to iconic gestures.

Although language gives us an extremely powerful tool to extend and develop our capacity to create social facts, it is not a necessary condition for the construction of human social reality. To construct a social fact we need representations, but not necessarily linguistic representations:

we can rely on iconic and indexical representations, that do not require a social foundation. Moreover, we need a way to connect representations between them and to impose normativity on this connection, but we do not necessarily have to do that by linguistic means: we can rely on pragmatic means (like enforcement, training, examples, paradigmatic applications) that do not require a social foundation. In Wittgenstein's terms: " 'Then can whatever I do be brought into accord with the rule?' – Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule – say a sign-post – got to do with my actions? What sort of connexion is there here? – Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it." (Wittgenstein 1953, §198).

Finally, we need skills that allow people to use these representations and their connections, but we do not necessarily need linguistic skills: we can rely on more basic skills like imitation, mind-reading and mental time travel, that do not require a social foundation. According to Corballis: "It may be more useful to view the constructive nature of language as the product of what Locke and Bogin (2006), after Marler (1991), called an 'instinct for inventiveness' that goes beyond language *per se*. This instinct may well be uniquely human but is evident in many activities other than language, including mental time travel, manufacture, art, music, and other modes of storytelling, such as dance, drama, movies, and television" (Corballis 2009, 38).

To sum up, I propose to amend the Searlian conceptual hierarchy – language *is the condition of society* – in the following way: motivated representations, pragmatic ways of imposing normativity, and instinct for inventiveness *are the conditions of elementary social facts*, that *are the conditions of language*, that *is the condition of complex social facts*. In this sense, "grammar can be regarded as a device for making communication more efficient and streamlined" (Corballis 2009, 35), but not as a necessary condition for communication and not even as a basic requirement for the creation of social facts.

The basic requirements to create an elementary social fact are the motivated representations and the normative associations between them. We can find an excellent example of this claim, quite surprisingly, in the conclusion of the fourth chapter of *Making the Social World*. Searle imagines being in a pub, carrying three beers to the table, one for him and the others for his friends. In doing this, he creates a new social fact – the private property of beers – without words. As Searle writes, "Indeed I need not say anything. Just pushing the beers in the direction of their new owners can be a speech act" (Searle 2010, 89).

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