

PhD Honoris Causa in Communication Sciences to John R. Searle

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EVENTS & ANALYSES

PHD HONORIS CAUSA IN COMMUNICATION SCIENCES TO JOHN R. SEARLE LAUDATIO BY MARCO COLOMBETTI

Nel corso di una cerimonia pubblica che si è svolta nell'Aula Magna del campus di Lugano il 23 maggio 2003, la Facoltà di Scienze della comunicazione dell'Università della Svizzera italiana ha conferito il titolo di "Dottore honoris causa in Scienze della comunicazione" a John R. Searle, professore di filosofia della mente e del linguaggio presso la sede di Berkeley dell'Università della California, "per lo straordinario contributo alla comprensione dei fondamenti delle Scienze della comunicazione, con particolare riguardo ai rapporti che intercorrono fra la mente, l'azione, il linguaggio e i processi di costruzione della realtà sociale".

Mr. President,
Deans of the Schools of the University of Lugano,
Rector of the Theology Faculty of Lugano,
Colleagues,
Authorities,
Students,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am honored to be here today to tell you why we confer the degree of Doctor Honoris Causa in Communication Sciences - the first awarded by our School - to John Rogers Searle, a most *illustrious* colleague from the University of California at Berkeley, where he currently holds the chair of Mills Professor of the Philosophy of Mind and Language. Indeed, my task is not difficult, because John Searle is one of the best known and

most esteemed current philosophers. Known and esteemed, I would like to add, for two main reasons: the high importance of what he says and writes, and the remarkable liveliness and clarity of his expository style.

In almost half a century of work, John Searle has published fourteen books and a large number of articles on language, mind, action, and society. Even if his work belongs to the great tradition of Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy, our Nominee distinguishes himself because of his originality and liberty in dealing with the pitfalls that plague many received theories. His proposals, which often succeed in reconciling philosophical analysis with commonsense intuitions, greatly influenced almost all of the academic fields that jointly make up the galaxy of Communication Sciences: Linguistics and Semiotics, Psychology, Economics and Organization Science, and even Computer Science.

Most striking features of Searle's work are the depth and coherence of his writings, which develop book after book, article after article, as if these were the chapters a unique text written in an entire life of assiduous work - a text that deals with the problem of understanding man within a unitary framework, and shows the unbroken path connecting biology to individuals and society. In this framework, language and communication play a crucial role. The central concept here, according to our Author, is that of a speech act or, technically speaking, of an *illocutionary* act. When we communicate we always perform speech acts, whether we use language or any other conventional signaling system: the notion of a speech act is therefore the natural starting point of any general theory of communication. In his book *Speech Acts*, published in 1968 and translated in many languages, Searle gave us the first systematic treatment of Speech Act Theory; thirty-five years after publication, this book is still the main reference in the field, together with a number of additional essays collected in *Expression and Meaning*, published in 1979.

Speech Act Theory views communication as a form of interaction governed by conventional rules. Given that speech acts are realized physically (by uttering sequences of sounds, writing signs on a surface, and so on), one needs to explain how a physical event can possibly bear a meaning. In Searle's view, the representational power of a physical event derives from a fundamental capacity of the mind, namely, the capacity to *represent*. To the analysis of mental states, understood as representations, is devoted another of Searle's books, *Intentionality*, published in 1983. Several are the reasons why this piece of work is fundamental for the Communication Sciences, and let me remind two of them: first, com-

munication is recognized as part of action in general, and second, the ability to represent is explained as an intrinsic capacity of the mind - a key move to escape the inconclusive circularity of many semiotic theories.

But on what do the representative capacities of the mind ultimately rest? Searle answers this question in his book *The rediscovery of the mind*, published in 1992: the intrinsic representative power of the mind consists in the brain's capacity to sustain consciousness. Our Author thus brings to completion the intellectual enterprise already started with *Intentionality*, showing that it is possible to abandon Cartesian dualism without being bound to deny the central role of consciousness. Searle's standpoint is at odds with all approaches that separate the mind from the brain, like mind-body dualism and also the position - widespread in Cognitive Science - that regards mental processes as mere computation. His *biological naturalism*, however, must not be confused with traditional materialism: Searle never tries to get rid of critical problems like the rationality of action, free will, and the weakness of the will. To the analysis of these problems, in fact, he has devoted a recent book, *Rationality in action*, published in 2001.

Searle does not forget that humans - biological organisms endowed with consciousness - live in societies they create and continuously modify. It is language that makes it possible to construct a social reality, regarded as a network of facts and rules that do not exist independently of us. In *The construction of social reality*, published in 1995, our Nominee shows us how the structure of society is built through communication processes that can be analyzed in terms of speech acts. This position has nothing to share with so-called social constructivism; Searle is, in fact, an out-and-out realist, but he sharply separates the natural world, that exists independently of us, from the world of institutions, built by human communities through communication processes.

As a whole, let me stress that our Author's work supply us with firm foundations for the common house of the Communication Sciences - a lively and exciting house we are all happy to live in, and in which we celebrate today John Searle, with joy and sincere gratitude for his most valuable contribution.

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