Signature Event Context

Philosophy 157
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Communication

- The classical theory of communication is that of transmission of meaning from one subject to another
- Condillac is typical: "ideas" are passed on
- The primary medium of transmission is speech
- Writing allows for transmission even in the absence of the receiver
- Absence thus conceived is the extension of presence

The Theme of *Sec*

- Communication is not the transmission of "meaning" from one "subject" to another
- Writing is therefore the same kind of communication as speaking
- In both cases, the occurrence of an "event" which provides a "context" for meaning is not the primary aspect of communication

Plato on Speech and Writing

- The argument is found in *Phaedrus* 275-6
- "Living speech" has "unquestioned legitimacy," as opposed to its "brother," or "image," written speech
- Written speech seems to talk to you, but it only repeats itself
- Written speech "drifts all over the place"
- It cannot defend itself against abuse when it falls into the wrong hands

The Argument

- Step 1: show that writing communicates without being bound by context
- Step 2: show that even the event of the speech act is similarly unbound
- Step 3: generalize this result to all communication
- Step 4: show that the non-contextuality of communication precludes its being the transmission of "meaning" from a "subject"

The Classical Concept of Writing

- Words are persistent marks, as opposed to sounds
- The written sign breaks from context, in that the reader and writer need not be there
- The written sign is constituted by spacing from the contextual chain and present reference

Iterability

- Plato's description of written speech emphasizes its detachment from the speaker
- Derrida emphasizes this detachment in terms of the survivability of writing
- Writing must be able to survive the absence of "subject" and the intended audience
- He calls this survivability "iterability"

A Platonic Note

- Derrida's attempt to cut writing off from context might be defended in another way
- Writing "drifts all over the place" because its survivability allows it to be *interpreted* out of context
- But this kind of distinction might not serve Derrida's purposes, because then he would not be able to extend the argument to speech

Context

- If a piece of writing is iterable, its communicability does not depend on the context of its composition
- The ultimate kind of detachment from context is being cited
- Putting words in quotation marks shifts the emphasis to the words themselves and away from their "intended meaning"

Spoken Language

- It can be thought of as conforming to a code, but recognition of its identity (over tone of voice, accent) is stressed
- It can be independent of context
- This unity makes a phoneme a grapheme
- Further, all experience can be understood in graphemes, "chains of differential marks"

Searle's Criticism

- Iteration is the production of more than one token of a single type
- As such, it is not the same as survivability
- The fact that writing is iterable does not cut it off from the context of composition
- Even if the context of composition is ignored, the writing is meaningful insofar as it is a possibility of an intentional act

Mark Without Referent

- The sign does not need intention to signify, signified meaning, or referent
- Husserl noted that one can utter a sign whose object is merely possible
- He also noted that the signified might be absent
- Mathematical meaning works this way
- Contradictory sentences are meaningful

Agrammaticality

- "The green is either" is not part of cognitive language, according to Husserl
- He rejects this because he is concerned with a language of logic and knowledge
- But in another context they can function as signifying marks
- This can be done by putting them in quotation marks: citing them

Problematics

- Austin's advances were Nietzschean
- He liberated communication from meaning
- But he arrived at impasses
- This is due to his failure to see that language is "graphematic in general"
- This causes him to blur key distinctions

Searle's Criticism

- "The green is either" is an instance of ungrammaticality
- But we cannot give it meaning by saying that it means ungrammaticality
- Derrida fails to understand the distinction between use and mention
- "Derrida has a distressing penchant for saying things that are obviously false"

Context

- Austin's theory requires exhaustively determined contexts
- The most important is the "conscious presence of the intention of the speaking subject"
- So the speech act after all conveys meaning
- There is no "residue," no polysemy or "dissemination"

The Performative

- J. L. Austin had advanced a theory of performative utterances, such as "I promise"
- Austin's contrast between performative and constative utterances led him to think of utterances as primarily speech acts in context
- So communication is not transmission of meaning
- Though the constative utterance transforms a situation, that is not its internal structure
- Force is substituted for truth-value

Regression

- Austin wanted to dissociate himself from the "fact/value" opposition
- But he subjects speech acts to ideal regulation, via intention
- Deviations are taken as accidental and exterior, teaching nothing about the linguistic phenomenon
- He does not consider the more general conventionality of the sign
- He does not explore the consequences of the perpetual presence of risk of going wrong

Exclusion

- Austin rejects a general theory of language which would establish the bounds of the essential and accidental
- He also excludes the possibility of "quoting" a performative utterance
- It would be "abnormal" and "parasitic"
- The reliance on the "ordinary" makes his position more problematic, but he does not try to give a general account of the normal and abnormal

Intention and Iteration

- Intention would not govern all of utterance
- It will not be present to itself and its content
- The non-serious can no longer be excluded from "ordinary" language
- The context might then lack intention
- Looking for intention there exposes the ethical and teleological aims of analysis
- The real basis is *différance*, which determines the general space of possibility of speech acts

Questions About Failure

- Does the possibility of failure stand outside language, like a ditch
- Or is the risk of failure internal to language?
- In the second case, what could "ordinary" language mean?
- Isn't Austin passing an ethical and teleological evaluation off as "ordinary"?
- Isn't iterability what is fundamental?

Signatures

- The spacing in speech acts is a disruption of presence
- Austin keeps presence by reference to the source (origin) of the utterance
- In the case of writing, this is marked by the signature
- A signature loses its ties to the signer, but is still a trace of the source
- This is due to the signature-event

Building Theory on Failure?

- If failure is at the center of successful performance, how is it that acts are successfully performed every day?
- A performative utterance could succeed only if iterable
- We need to build a theory on a typology of iteration
- Intentionality will have its place

Conditions for Signature

- Signature-events exist and forge ties to the signature
- But their possibility is rooted in that of failure
- To succeed, the signature must be iterable
- This condition corrupts its identity and singularity

Summary

- Writing is not the transference of meaning, the doctrine of logocentrism
- The system of speech is not subordinate to that of writing
- The reading of writing is not hermeneutic decipherment
- Deconstruction must reverse priorities (speech to writing) and displace the system and its non-conceptual underpinnings

"Let's Be Serious"

- Searle overlooks the main points of the paper (indicated in its title)
- Searle charges Derrida with confusion in making distinctions he in fact repudiates
- Derrida does not deny intentionality
- He does not confuse permanence with iterability

Searle's Criticisms

- Derrida with gives an "unrecognizable" interpretation of Austin
- The distinction between the original and parasitic is purely logical
- Austin's "exclusions" simply enable him to focus on the central character of speech acts
- Speech acts must be iterable, because they are conventional

Ende/Fin

"Limited Inc a b c . . ."

- Derrida's response to Searle is nearly 90 pages long
- Much of its tone is sarcastic and mocking
- He replies not to Searle, but to to the "auto-authorized heirs of Austin, including two people cited in a footnote
- He claims that the interpretation of Austin is dogmatic