John Rogers Searle (1932-) has made an outstanding contribution to the philosophy of language. His work on the speech act theory, with the well-known *Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (1969), has been among the most influential in linguistics and applied linguistics, especially within the field of pragmatics. John R. Searle’s work has also been recognized for his research on the philosophy of mind and social philosophy.

John R. Searle was born in Denver, Colorado, and studied at the University of Wisconsin from 1949 until 1952. He then attended Oxford University as a Rhodes Scholar where he studied under the influence of John Austin from 1952 to 1959. At Oxford University he obtained a bachelor of arts (1955), a master of arts (1959), and a doctorate in philosophy (1959). He is currently a Slusser Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, Berkeley.

During his career, John R. Searle has been a lecturer and a visiting professor at several prestigious universities in the United States and around the world and has obtained honorary degrees from universities across the world: the University of Belgrade (2009), the University of Turin (2000), the University of Bucharest (2000), the University of Wisconsin (1994), and Adelphi University (1993). He is an honorary professor at the Tsinghua University, Beijing (2007) and at East China Normal University, Shanghai (2007). He has been awarded with numerous prizes including the Puffendorf medal (Sweden, 2006), Mind and Brain prize (Italy, 2006), National Humanities medal (USA, 2004), Jovellanos prize (Spain, 2000), and the Distinguished Teaching award at the University of California (Berkeley, 1999), among other prizes and honors. Likewise, Searle has been president of the American Philosophical Association (Pacific Division, 1990) and he has been a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences since 1977. Most of his research has focused on the philosophy of language; he is especially known in the field of pragmatics for his work on speech act theory. Following John Austin’s 1962 philosophy of language, speech act theory postulates that when communicating, people perform three types of acts: a *locutionary act*, an *illocutionary act*, and a *perlocutionary act*. In addition, Searle presented a taxonomy of speech acts (*representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, declarations*) which has been widely used in pragmatics.

In relation to the illocutionary force of speech acts, Searle also proposed the concept of intentionality in his work *Intentionality: An Essay of the Philosophy of Mind* (1983). Based on the illocutionary acts, intentionality was developed as, first, the speaker’s objectives which lie underneath each speech act and, second, as the collective intent in social action rather than an individual act, which is the basis for the creation of social reality, as discussed in *Collective Intentions and Actions* (1990) and in *The Construction of Social Reality* (1995).

Searle’s work has additionally focused on the philosophy of mind and consciousness. One of the most controversial contributions to the field has been the “Chinese room argument.” This argument, which was approached in “Minds, Brains, and Programs” (1980), aims at raising the weaknesses of artificial intelligence. Strong supporters of artificial intelligence had previously claimed that it would be impossible to distinguish a machine from a person. As a response to this, Searle conducted the Chinese room experiment to demonstrate that even if computers have programs which may allow...
them to simulate native speakers’ answers that does not entail that computers are capable of understanding. As part of his work on the philosophy of mind, Searle delved into the philosophical debate about the dichotomy of consciousness and brain. With “Biological Naturalism” (2007) Searle claimed that consciousness actually exists and is a result of specific brain processes.

Apart from his contributions to the philosophy of language, mind, and social philosophy, Searle became involved in politics while he was in Berkeley. He joined the Free Speech Movement, a university political movement which fought for the students’ rights and freedom, and which also claimed that politics should not be prohibited on the university campus. As a result, he wrote The Campus War (1971) in which he presented the political and social situation of that time, dealing with the possible causes which had led to the students’ political reaction toward 1960s America and against the lack of free speech at university settings.

John R. Searle’s work on the philosophy of language has had an immense impact on the field of pragmatics, with a major influence on interlanguage pragmatics and cross-cultural pragmatics. Searle's taxonomy of speech acts has been the most commonly used taxonomy in pragmatics in order to examine how different speech acts are performed in different languages and cultures.

As for interlanguage pragmatics, Searle's speech act theory has been the basis of numerous studies on how learners of a foreign or second language use and develop speech acts in the target language, both in the classroom and outside it. It is also important to mention that Searle’s theories have also raised numerous criticisms, among them, the idea that Searle’s theory of illocutionary acts is based on functional criteria (the use of complete sentences as illocutionary acts), while a speech act is actually a pragmatic feature that may be formed by a stretch of speech with a communicative function. In addition, his idea that the speech acts are semantically universal has been highly criticized, with numerous claims that these may actually vary with culture (e.g., Wierzbicka, 1991). Finally, Searle has also been criticized for overlooking the role of the listener in the interaction. However, Searle's concepts are still among the most influential in the field of pragmatics, his work is being translated into multiple languages, and his theories are still being applied, adopted, adapted, criticized, and investigated all over the world.

SEE ALSO
Cross-Cultural Pragmatics; Interlanguage Pragmatics; Speech Acts Research

References


**Suggested Readings**


Júlia Barón Parés