

Must a sign be repeatable?

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Abstract. This paper contests a point that Jacques Derrida and John Searle actually agree on, within their infamous debate: that a sign must be repeatable. I focus on a situation involving dissent when evaluating this claim.

Draft version: Version 2 (July 6th 2022, reference correction).

A claim that has been made about signs is that they must be repeatable. Given an instance of a type of sign, it must be possible to produce another instance of that type of sign. For example, if a sign with the words “Do not enter,” is hanging on a door, one can produce a sign with the same words and hang it on another door. The repeatability claim is associated with the controversial philosopher Jacques Derrida. He writes, “It must be repeatable—iterable—in the absolute absence of the receiver or of any empirically determinable collectivity of receivers.”¹ Derrida thinks that this is true of any meaningful item, such as any spoken or written word, and draws a number of consequences from this point.

Derrida famously had a debate with John Searle in which they disagreed about many things. But Searle does agree with the point about repeatability. He tells us:

As Derrida is aware, any linguistic element written or spoken, indeed any rule-governed element in any system of representation at all must be repeatable, otherwise the rules would have no scope of application.²

¹ 1977a: 179-80.

² 1977: 199.

Derrida acknowledges that Searle is right to attribute this point to him.³ Below I inquire into whether we should accept the point.

Perhaps Derrida's point applies to spoken and written words, but I wish to inquire into whether it applies to all communication systems. Before addressing this question, there is another question that arises. What is a communication system? Let us suppose that if there is a convention in place in a certain context that something has a certain meaning, for example that a white flag means surrender in war, then there is a communication system. I do not know if there can be communication systems without conventions at all, but when there is at least one convention of this kind, then there is a communication system. This is all the clarification that we need below.

Repeatability? To challenge the claim about repeatability, I shall draw upon some not entirely pleasant material from political philosophy. A distinguished political philosopher imagines an unusual boardroom meeting in which the chairman proposes another meeting next week and then asks, "Anyone with an objection to my proposal will kindly so indicate by lopping his arm off at the elbow?"⁴ The sign for communicating dissent in this case is an act of self-mutilation. What if the chairman adds, "Except Smith who must commit suicide to indicate this," and Smith then, in front of all present, commits suicide? Smith has given the sign that indicates that he dissents, but this sign is not repeatable.

Objection-and-reply. Someone who believes in magic might object that a necromancer could bring Smith back to life, enabling the sign to be repeated. Grant them their necromancer. This just gives rise to the question, why is being repeatable important for understanding how any given sign can function as a sign at all? For we can explain how

³ 1977b: §m. It is worth noting Derrida's response to this claim: "Indeed, it is so "clear" and I am so "aware" of it, that this proposition is one of the indispensable levers in the demonstration of Sec. This lever is explicitly posed as such from the very beginning."

⁴ John Simmons 1976: 280.

Smith's suicide can function as a sign without making any reference to its being repeatable. The explanation refers to what the chairman said, which includes a specification of how Smith could indicate dissent; what Smith did, which was to meet the specified requirement; and the absence of anything which undermines the conclusion that he thereby dissented.⁵ Derrida and Searle do not tell us the sense of possibility they are working with when claiming that signs must be repeatable, but whatever sense they have in mind, being repeatable seems irrelevant here.⁶

Addressee's absence? Derrida claims that a sign must not just be repeatable; it must also be repeatable in the absence of any specific addressee. This is another essential feature, according to him. I shall briefly contest this claim, though doing so is not my main purpose here. Let us imagine a group in which the way to welcome someone is to raise a palm in front of that person, except Jones. To welcome Jones one must punch him while he is awake, according to group conventions. This sign is repeatable, but is it repeatable in the absence of its addressee?

I do not wish to approve of bullying by using this example. It is just that I find it useful for evaluating Derrida's claim. One can of course make a similar sign to someone else. For example, one can say, "This is how we welcome Jones," followed by punching the person one is addressing. But this is not an instance of the same type of sign, because this type involves punching Jones. I suppose Derrida could say that this type of sign does indeed require the presence of Jones but it is not necessarily addressed to Jones, such as if one is

⁵ Must dissent be intentional? It seems to me that if a certain act is defined as the way to indicate dissent, then usually a person counts as dissenting when it is reasonable for others to say, "If they did not want to be understood as dissenting, then they should not have performed that act in that context."

⁶ Simon Glendinning, a philosopher much influenced by Derrida, asserts, "it is simply inconceivable that something should be, say, a word and yet not be capable of being repeated again in new contexts" (2000: 276). Given how strong the claims of repeatability made by these philosophers are, I wonder whether I am missing something; but at present I cannot see any good reason for accepting them.

teaching someone else how to welcome Jones. In this case, it can be repeated in the absence of the person addressed: the person being taught. I am not sure that this reply works. Does one not still have to welcome Jones, and so address him, as part of this way of teaching how to welcome Jones? Nevertheless, it is a defence of Derrida's position when faced with this example.

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