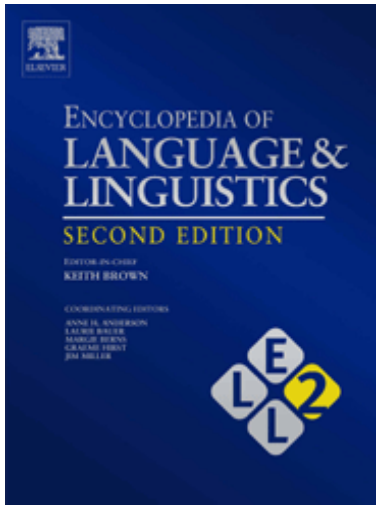

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Normativity

S Gross, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA, USA

Normative claims concern the ways things should be. Nonnormative (or descriptive) claims concern how things are, which can diverge from how they should be. 'No one should speed' is a normative claim; 'they are speeding' is not. Neither is '85% of drivers speed,' even if it describes how things in fact normally are. Statistical norms must be distinguished from norms or standards for how things ought to be.

In exploring the relevance of normativity to language, it is useful to bear in mind that normative claims fall into various kinds and can possess a range of further features. Consider the following examples:

1. Sheets should be clean.
2. Friends should not spread gossip.
3. Smoking is permitted.
4. If you believe some claim, you shouldn't believe its negation.
5. Only goalkeepers may touch the ball with their hands.
6. Goalkeepers should avoid straying from their goal.
7. Pedestrians may cross only at the crosswalk.
8. You shouldn't wear blue slacks with a brown jacket.
9. If you want to improve, you should practice more.

These examples illustrate a variety of features of normativity. Normative claims may state, not only how things should be (1), but also how they should *not* be (2), as well as how they are allowed though not necessarily required to be (3). The subject of norms can include agents (2), actions (3), and states of affairs (1). Normative claims can be conditional (4). The applicability of a norm may be constitutive of an activity ((5) – one is not playing soccer if players may use their hands). Or it may just be constitutive of doing it well (6). Normative claims are not restricted to moral claims; they can be legal (7), aesthetic (8); means–end (9); etc.

Issues involving normativity arise regarding language and linguistics in a variety of ways. Four particularly prominent questions are discussed below: May linguistics itself issue normative pronouncements concerning language and language use? Are semantic properties inherently normative? Are speech acts and pragmatic phenomena more generally inherently normative? What linguistic properties do the terms used to express normative claims themselves have?

Prescriptive Versus Descriptive Linguistics

Language users often turn to dictionaries to answer questions concerning how a word should be used. They view dictionaries as compendia of prescriptions, not descriptions. Linguists, however, generally do not aspire to normative conclusions in their research. They aim to describe and explain linguistic phenomena. On their view, linguistics, at least as they practice it, is and ought to be an empirical science. To the normative question 'what sort of pursuit should linguistics be?' they thus provide an answer that eschews normativity so far as the pronouncements of linguistics are concerned (*see* **Description and Prescription**).

It is a distinct question, however, whether the scientific study of language, though it should not enter normative claims, must also prescind from examining and adverting to normative phenomena. Canons of politeness, for example, are normative. But they impact language and language use. (*see* **Politeness**). For instance, they affect turn-taking in discourse and can become lexically, morphologically, and syntactically encoded. They thus seem important objects of study for linguists. Some philosophers of science suggest that naturalistic inquiry cannot accommodate intrinsically normative phenomena. Others object that this represents an overly narrow conception of naturalistic inquiry. This is an instance of a larger (venerable) debate concerning the status of the 'human' (or, social) sciences and their relation to the natural sciences (cf. Martin and McIntyre, 1994: Part III).

Semantics and Normativity

It is often claimed that semantic properties are intrinsically normative, in some manner encoding standards of correctness. Though fleshed out in various ways, the defense typically involves arguments purporting to show that the possession of a semantic property entails or is entailed by something normative.

For example, it is sometimes suggested that, if 'dog' denotes dogs, then one ought to apply the term only to dogs. If one applies the term to a cat, one has made a mistake (cf. Kripke, 1982). Here, it is claimed that possession of a semantic property has normative consequences. However, it is not generally the case that, if one should or should not do something with an X, then Xs are intrinsically normative; one ought not throw rocks at people, but rocks are not intrinsically normative – nor is the property of being a rock or

any of a rock's intrinsic properties. What matters is whether the normative conclusion follows *just* from the thing's being X. That one should not throw rocks at people follows, not just from what rocks are like, but from that and one's obligation not to cause bodily harm.

The question is thus whether the possession of a semantic property like 'denotes dogs' is sufficient in and of itself to generate obligations. Arguably, it is not: that one ought to apply 'dog' only to dogs would seem to follow, not just from its possessing the semantic property of denoting dogs, but from that and the further assumption that one ought to aim at truth. Perhaps one indeed ought to aim at truth; perhaps not always (maybe there are circumstances in which lying is justified – for example, to confuse a would-be cat-killer). But if the assumption that one should aim at truth must be added, then the normative conclusion does not follow from the semantic claim alone (Horwich, 1998: Chapter 8).

Others claim that semantic properties are intrinsically normative because *what makes it the case* that terms have their semantic properties are certain normative phenomena. The possession of semantic properties is thus alleged to be entailed or determined by the obtaining of normative facts. For example, some argue that semantic claims (such as that 'dog' denotes dogs) obtain in virtue of a language user's being disposed to apply 'dog' to dogs in appropriate circumstances – where what makes circumstances appropriate may include how things optimally ought to be when applying such a term. Others, however, attempt to show that, contrary to such claims, one can 'naturalize' semantic content. They maintain that terms have their semantic properties in virtue of facts that can be characterized nonnormatively (cf. Loewer, 1996).

One project in foundational semantics that would reject 'naturalization' thus construed is inferentialism (Brandom, 1994). According to it, semantic claims (such as 'dog' denotes dogs) obtain in virtue of it being the case that certain inferences involving the term would be correct to draw, and certain inferences would not. Logical terms provide the best cases for this approach: the claim would be that 'and' means what it does in virtue of the validity of inferences of the form (1) 'A and B' implies A and (2) A, B implies 'A and B.' Among the challenges is to extend this strategy to other terms. In the case of 'dog,' the relevant inferences would include not only transitions (in appropriate circumstances) from the presence of dogs to 'Those are dogs,' but also the inference from 'Those are dogs' to 'Those are mammals' – and much more besides.

Pragmatics and Normativity

Even if the meanings of expressions are not inherently normative, one might claim that what speakers do with expressions is inherently normative. Human language use, at least in core cases, is a species of intentional action, and all such action is done for reasons. One's reasons for acting are subject to normative assessment; they may or may not be *good* reasons. The intentional nature of linguistic action figures prominently in speech act theory (Austin, 1975) and accounts of conversational implicature (Grice, 1989). It also provides one motivation for developing game-theoretic models of language use.

Consider first the study of speech acts. It is often claimed that, for the utterance of a sentence to constitute the performance of a speech act, it must be performed intentionally by a speaker beholden to certain norms, with specific norms attaching to specific speech acts. For example, for the utterance of a particular sentence to constitute an assertion, the speaker must represent herself as having warrant for the truth of the claim asserted, with the result that she can be held accountable if the claim is not true or at least was not asserted on sufficient grounds. The transmission of truth, or perhaps knowledge, is said to be the aim or point of the practice of assertion. In this case, the norms constraining linguistic action would be constitutive of the kind of action at issue (cf. Williamson, 1996).

In performing a specific speech act such as assertion, it is often one's intention to communicate more than just what one asserts. (Sometimes one intends to communicate something *instead* of what one makes as if to assert.) For example, in answer to the question 'Do you think John is coming?' one might utter the sentence 'There's a lot of snow on the roads' in order both to assert that there's a lot of snow on the roads and to communicate that John is probably not coming. Grice (1989) argued that such 'conversational implicatures' are possible because of language users' sensitivity to the reasons for which a cooperative speaker would utter particular sentences in particular conversational contexts. He articulated a set of maxims for cooperative language use – for example, that one be as informative as possible, all else being equal, but also that one refrain from prolixity, all else being equal – that parties to a conversation tacitly assume one another to be observing. Speakers can then rely on hearers to infer an implicature, as in the case above, when doing so preserves the assumption of cooperation. Such maxims are norms that specifically apply to cooperative conversations and that enable speakers and hearers to discern the specific conversational reasons behind linguistic actions.

In the preceeding discussion, statistical norms were sharply distinguished from norms for how things ought to be. But statistical norms, like other nonnormative facts, can have normative upshot; how things are affects what means one should take to achieve one's ends. Conforming to a trend, for example, can in some cases increase the likelihood of obtaining an outcome. This is certainly so with language. Suppose one has an interest in one's utterances being understood. One then has reason to speak in a way that will promote understanding. But then, insofar as there exist statistical norms concerning pronunciation, assignment of meaning, expected prolixity, and other linguistic matters, there is reason to conform to those norms, since those norms will correlate with other language users' expectations. This provides one rationale for using game-theoretic techniques to study both the development of linguistic norms (in the statistical sense) and the ways speakers deploy language on particular occasions (see, e.g., Nowak and Komarova 2001, and with reference to pragmatic phenomena, Parikh, 2001).

Linguistic Properties of Normative Terms

We express normative claims – like any other claims – by using language. Normative expressions such as 'ought,' 'justified,' and 'you should not do that' are thus themselves proper objects of linguistic theorizing. Three examples are the use of deontic logic to capture the content of normative lexical items, expressivism as a non-truth-conditional analysis of normative sentences, and the study of generics.

Deontic logic – a branch of intensional logic – studies the logical relationships among normative expressions. 'It's obligatory that one X,' for example, implies 'It's not forbidden that one X.' Logicians studying such expressions construct formal languages with axioms and inference rules that capture these relations. Such investigations can be construed as contributions to the lexical semantics of the normative terms (see Føllesdal and Hilpinen, 1971).

Expressivism in its most basic form is the doctrine that normative claims such as 'Murder is wrong' do not purport to determine truth-conditions, but rather express an attitude toward a certain kind of action – in this case a negative attitude toward murder. Normative claims on this view are thus no more liable to assessment for truth or falsity than such aesthetic expressions as 'Chocolate: yum!' Expressivism might be motivated by the intuition that normative claims – for example, moral claims – do not purport to express objective facts. Expressivism, however, has difficulty accommodating embedded normative claims. The sentence 'If murder is wrong, then what Mary did was wrong' does not itself express any attitude to murder. This would seem to indicate that the expression of an attitude is not itself among the semantic properties of the expressions used. Moreover, the following argument seems deductively valid: murder is wrong; if murder is wrong, then what Mary did was wrong; therefore, what Mary did was wrong. It's natural to elucidate this validity by viewing the argument as an instance of the truth-preserving inference schema *Modus Ponens*. But this can seem blocked if normative claims do not determine truth-conditions. (For discussion from the perspective of a more sophisticated version of expressivism, see Gibbard, 2003.)

Generic claims – such as 'Dogs have four legs' – provide an example of unobvious normativity. The sample sentence's truth, on the relevant reading, does not depend on the four-leggedness of *all* dogs. (Amputees do not witness its falsity.) Nor does the existence of *some* four-legged dogs suffice for its truth. The claim is not even that *most* dogs have four legs: a generic claim does not report a statistical norm. (It may be true that a spider's life has four stages, even if the vast majority of spiders never make it past the first.) The content of a generic claim is rather normative; *normal* dogs have four legs. Perhaps this is even in some sense how dogs ought to be – at least to conform to conversationally relevant expectations. (On generics generally, see Carlson and Pelletier, 1995.)

See also: Assertion; Austin, John Langshaw (1911–1960); Causal Theories of Reference and Meaning; Chomsky, Noam (b. 1928); Description and Prescription; Evolutionary Theories of Language: Current Theories; Generic Reference; Generics, Habituals and Iteratives; Grice, Herbert Paul (1913–1988); Inference: Abduction, Induction, Deduction; Kripke, Saul (b. 1940); Linguistics as a Science; Norms and Correctness; Politeness; Reference: Philosophical Theories.

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Norms and Correctness

S Bowerman, University of Cape Town, South Africa

Traditionally, a language is thought to be structured along a set of rules, or 'norms,' that prevail over all aspects of the language: phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics. These norms serve to make the language distinctive, intelligible within a wide speech community, and learnable. However, the precise definition of a norm is controversial and difficult. It is important to distinguish between those norms (which I shall call 'descriptive norms') that enable us to describe a language or variety from observation of data, and prescriptive or 'pedagogical norms,' which often reflect some abstract ideal of how a language should be used, rather than the actual practice of native speakers of that language.

Norms and Linguistics

Descriptive norms, then, are intuitive (Itkonen, 1994: 2835) and are acquired rather than learned. Pedagogical norms, on the other hand, are learned and might not be intuitive; this is especially evident when a learned norm does not reflect the practice of the speakers of a language (the traditional prohibition on ending English sentences with a preposition is a good example). Languages are naturally subject to variation and change; without some norms, established naturally or by convention, it is likely that there would be so much individual variation that mutual intelligibility would be nearly impossible. Prescriptive norms often intend to fix the language in a certain state, so that any variation from them would be a violation of the norms of the language, and therefore 'incorrect.'

Norms or rules pertaining to linguistic composition can be quite easily identified across the spectrum of language. For example, the use of the suffix *-s* to form the regular English plural can be described as a 'norm.' Likewise, the inversion of the first auxiliary in an English sentence is the norm for creating a *yes-no* interrogative form. Phonology, too, has an identifiable set of norms: any native (or competent) speaker of English, for instance, would recognize that the sound sequence *belk* is a permissible word in English, even though it is not yet a word; under current norms, however, the sequence *blzr* is not a permissible sound structure to form a word in English. All of these norms are describable and reflect the current state of (some variety of) the language; and all of these norms are subject to change.

Norms also apply to other aspects of linguistic behavior. For example, it is a norm that one would answer a question with a statement appropriate to the question; anyone who does not do so would be behaving against the norms, or 'incorrectly.' However, where we are dealing with aspects of human behavior, rather than the abstract 'structure' of a language *per se*, the boundary between 'norms' and 'correctness' becomes even more blurred.

The concept of the linguistic norm is a crucial one for linguists in both the prescriptive and descriptive traditions. For descriptivists, norms are the means by which a language is described. Thus, the standard practice for the composition of a verb phrase in English is that the complement follows the verb; this can be rewritten as the rule VP → V.DP in a description of the language. Any deviation from this norm is ungrammatical (or, if grammatical, must be explainable by another norm). Likewise, VP → DP.V is the norm for a Japanese VP, as the complement normally precedes the verb. However, it is important to note that speakers in context do not always make consistent use of the 'rules': utterances may consist of 'ill-formed' sentences and phrases that are perfectly well understood in context and are not noted as unusual. This also applies to conversational behavior, in that a question form could legitimately be used