

## Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics

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[note to the editors: I have been overly inclusive here, figuring that it's easier to delete than to add.]

### **Abstract:**

Normative claims concern the ways things should be. Non-normative (or, descriptive) claims concern how things are, which can diverge from how they should be. This entry discusses several of the many ways issues involving normativity arise for the study of language: whether linguistics itself may issue normative pronouncements; whether semantic properties are inherently normative; whether speech acts and pragmatic phenomena more generally are inherently normative; and what linguistic properties the terms used to express normative claims themselves have.

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### **Main Text:**

Normative claims concern the ways things should be. Non-normative (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’s 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 is 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’s not generally the case that, if one should or should not *do* something with an X, then X’s 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 non-normatively. (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 (i) ‘A and B’ implies A and (ii) A, B imply ‘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) argues 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.

Above, statistical norms were sharply distinguished from norms for how things ought to be. But statistical norms, like other non-normative 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 towards a certain kind of action—in this case a negative attitude towards 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.)

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