Linguistic Frontiers • 7(1) • 2024
DOI: 10.2478/lf-2024-0006

sciendo

Linguistic **Frontiers**

Normativity in Languaging and Practical Activity

Original Study

Rasmus Gahrn-Andersen
Department of Culture and Language. University of Southern Denmark, Slagelse
rga@sdu.dk
ORCID: 0000-0001-6142-6919

Received: November 15, 2023; Accepted: January 2, 2024

Abstract: The paper explores some of the commonalities between language and practical activity. It focuses on the normativity involved and presents an account on two different kinds of normativity which constrain both languaging and practical doings in general. In this connection, the paper engages with the first-order—second-order distinction central to the Distributed Language Perspective and shows that there is a way for proponents of this perspective to come to terms with linguistic normativity without presupposing a dualism between, on the one hand, first-order articulations and, on the other, the second-order normative constrains that condition them.

Keywords: Languaging, practices, normativity, Wittgenstein, Distributed Language

1. INTRODUCTION

The connection between language-use, or *languaging*, and practices is a topic that has traditionally been neglected in linguistics. Saussure (1959) famously claimed that language is fundamentally different from other practical activities due to its essential, or: inner, traits. Indeed, he identified *la langue* as this homogeneous essence. Nevertheless, he was bound to recognize that language plays out in actual usage. Thus, he effectively acknowledged that the essence of language is bound to relate to something inessential as being vital to its expression. He took the instantiations of language in speech as this heterogenous and, hence, non-essential phenomenon. As I argue elsewhere (Gahrn-Andersen 2023), it is crucial that we critically engage with Saussure's assumption that foundational differences exist between, on the one hand, language as a particular phenomenon and, on the other, practical activities more generally. Instead of treating them apart as having their own essentially defining traits, we should be looking at important commonalities between them. Indeed, Wittgenstein (2009) did precisely this by coining the term of 'language games'. The present paper is devoted to exploring one such commonality. Specifically, I turn to the question of normativity which is a central one relating not just to language-use but also social phenomena more generally. I'm concerned with exploring how we may conceive of linguistic normativity in relation to the norms and rules that can be said to govern not just the seemingly homogeneous or essential aspects of language but also other kinds of socio-practical doings.

2. A WITTGENSTEINIAN STARTING POINT

I begin with an observation made by Wittgenstein (2009), in which he demonstrates that, although we can consistently attribute boundaries to a range of denotable phenomena relative to a given concept, these boundaries are not fully determinate or all-encompassing with respect to what the concept denotes. This is because we

employ the same concept (e.g., the concept of 'game') to denote phenomena that are simultaneously both similar and different. For example, the concept of a game encompasses a variety of activities, ranging from using language in coordinative activities to playing chess or participating in a dance competition. As such, Wittgenstein holds, a given concept is used to denote 'family resemblances', or similarities, amongst its denotable phenomena. He writes:

> I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities [existing between different phenomena denoted by the same concept] than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family – build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, and so on and so forth – overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: 'games' form a family. (36e)

Wittgenstein's point here is important in at least two respects:

First, it acknowledges how the same concept may be employed to describe different types of phenomena, connecting them through their 'family resemblances'. Relatedly, it is indeed impossible to definitively fix the boundaries of a concept. In fact, concerning the concept of 'a game', which plays an indispensable role in his philosophy, Wittgenstein asks:

> "For how is the concept of a game bounded? What still counts as a game, and what no longer does? Can you say where the boundaries are? No. You can *draw* some, for there aren't any drawn yet." (37e)

Thus, boundaries emerge through the active utilization of concepts, or what Wittgenstein refers to as 'drawing'. This point is crucial for what follows.

Second, the absence of fixed boundaries associated with a concept implies that there are no rigid rules governing the usage of the concept. In other words, the use of a given concept is not entirely determined by preexisting rules. Indeed, as an extension of the aforementioned quote, Wittgenstein makes the following point:

> 'But then the use of the word is unregulated – the 'game' we play with it is unregulated.' – It is not everywhere bounded by rules, but no more are there any rules for how high one may throw the ball in tennis, or how hard, yet tennis is a game for all that, and has rules too. (ibid.)

Expanding on this final point, it becomes evident that we must relinquish the idea that games (including language games) are entirely constituted or defined by activity determined by rules that can be articulated beforehand or, following Saussure, are essential.

In case we assume that language-use can be explored as rule-regulated activity, Wittgenstein's point invites us to distinguish some aspects in the practical actions that relate to the upholding of practices. On the one hand, we find the actions that are constitutive of practices ('whats') and, on the other hand, we must also acknowledge 'the manner in which' such actions are actually performed (i.e., the 'hows' pertaining to such 'whats'). Although the what-how distinction might not be sensible to draw in a Wittgensteinian context, it nevertheless seems sensible if we are to explore language-use through the distinction between first-order activity and second-order constructs that have been formulated by proponents of the Distributed Language Perspective (DLP).

3. ON THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN FIRST-ORDER LANGUAGING AND SECOND-ORDER LANGUAGE

Among proponents of DLP there is a widespread tendency to draw an analytical distinction between two different kinds of linguistic phenomena. This distinction is perhaps the most important way of showing how this perspective differs from traditional structuralism (as advocated by Ferdinand de Saussure). In this connection, an important emphasis must be placed not on language itself, but on the activity of doing language and, hence, what Maturana (1988) (among others) has conceptualized as *languaging*. This move is crucial for as Thibault argues

> "languaging behavior and its organization is irreducible to the formal abstracta that have characterized the focus on a de Saussure-type system of formal regularities in mainstream linguistics over the past century" (Thibault 2011, 210)

Languaging dynamics unfold on the level of the here-and-now as individuals engage in dialogical coordination and synchronization of bodily actions (218). This coordination occurs across three different levels of fast timescales, integrated in actual languaging activity. These timescales comprise 1) pico-scale bodily dynamics (measured in milliseconds to tens of seconds), 2) micro-scale doings and sayings (ranging from tens of seconds to seconds), and finally, 3) the sensed 'flow' of the interaction (measured in seconds, minutes, and beyond) (see Thibault 2011, 215–216). Yet, as Thibault also points out, there are other intersecting phenomena which, on much slower or cultural timescales, have a bearing on what happens in the flow of the embodied engagements of languaging agents. For instance,

> The dynamics of first-order languaging and their evolution are attracted to a culturally distributed set of topological invariants (attractors) involving processes of historical differentiation and recategorization of their dynamics into second-order lexicogrammatical patterns. (Thibault 2011, 217)

Thus, we find that so-called 'second-order language' - which is synonymous with what linguists traditionally take as their object of study and, hence, what Saussure would identify with *la langue* - unfolds on a much slower and far more stable timescale than first-order languaging. While the latter pertains on the level of individual,

embodied situated interaction, the former is situated on the level of culture and the stable patterns it affords. Needless to say, these stable patterns cannot be reduced to what goes on in a single moment. As such, they involve a degree of non-locality and a history of interactions that surpass the here-and-now but which nevertheless have a decisive influence on how languaging unfolds. Lexico-grammatical patterns, Thibault argues, function as attractors that practically "guide and constrain first-order languaging" (216). So, although languaging is irreducible to a language ('la langue'), given the myriad heterogeneous elements and situated factors that characterize its enactment (which cannot be 'overcoded' or explained by appeal to linguistic normativity), it is nevertheless the case that first-order languaging dynamics are insufficient in themselves to account for how such activities can spread and have repeatable formal aspects distributed across individuals of a given population as well as across generations of such individuals. This connects with the basic fact that proponents of DLP situate themselves somewhere in-between Saussure and Wittgenstein by recognizing that an appeal to rules and norms is sensible in the context of languaging accounts. Take, for instance, Cowley's (2019) points that "Bodily expression helps people bind wordings into acting with (or without) equipment by using normative, physical and other outward criteria" (466) and that languaging "uses moves based on the bodily experience of normative practices within familiar cultural worlds" (471).

4. TWO KINDS OF LINGUISTIC NORMATIVITY

Revisiting Wittgenstein's account on the rule- and non-rule-regulated behavior, we can hypothesize two core aspects pertaining to practical actions: the practical actions themselves (or simply, 'what'), on the one hand, and, on the other, the manner in which these actions are performed (or simply, their 'how'). In the case of the 'whats', or the practical actions themselves, they can be singled out as playing a key constitutive role to a given practice and, in principle at least, as being amenable to explicit normative instructions that can facilitate such actions.

For instance, in the case of tennis, we find various practice-constitutive actions, including serving, returning, and different umpire rulings. Moreover, all of these are usually taught by tennis instructors to their students. This is done to familiarize the student with the sequence of a tennis game so that s/he will understand the sequence of actions in a game of tennis and, hence, how one should behave while playing tennis. If one sticks to the praxis logic of tennis, the actions and events play out in a predictable manner – at least on the overall systemic level. Their predictability does not pertain to the outcome of the game, the number of incorrect serves, how many times the match is postponed due to rain etc. Rather, it relates to the basic fact that particular practice-constitutive actions are enacted throughout the sequences of a match and, moreover, that only practice-specific 'whats' are what enable the match to progress from beginning to end.

The hows related to the execution of such actions involved, however, are somewhat different to those of linguistic expressions. What is worth observing regarding the 'how' is that Wittgenstein's tennis-example merely takes into account one particular kind of 'manner in which', specifically one that remains contingent upon the action that is performed. Indeed, Wittgenstein places emphasis on those aspects that can vary in relation to a given action and, hence, which are not themselves regulated by rules (i.e., the height of the ball and the speed of one's throw).

The example can be extended to other contexts where the agent doesn't articulate in ways that can be described as linguistic or, even more basically, as symbolical. For instance, there are not explicitly stated or 'learned' rules regarding how one should stop at a red light in a traffic junction. As pedestrian, one might stop with a jump, a twirl, a bend, or something else. The manner of stopping doesn't affect the action in question; what matters is not how one stops, but that one stops. Therefore, even an incorrect serve in tennis could be said to relate to the 'what' of the serve rather than to its 'how'. It exemplifies the 'what-ness' of a wrong serve rather than the 'what-ness' of a correct one.

This distinction seems sensible in the sense that, although no explicit rules govern the velocity of the ball in tennis, the velocity of the ball is nevertheless inseparable from an action (serving) that stands in relation to other kinds of rules (and actions) surrounding the overall tennis practice. Put in the terms of DLP, these aspects give evidence of the heterogeneity of the actions and how such heterogeneity cannot be fittingly accounted for by means of referring to the homogeneous and repeatable rules of a given culture or community. Yet, as Thibault observes, in the context of languaging, the normative range of human culture impacts on the how. Thibault recognizes this when arguing that cultural patterns shape how we produce linguistic utterances:

> "the enormous variety—the many degrees of freedom—of vocal tract gestures at the individual scale is subjected to increased standardization or coding to conform to normative patterns and expectations at the population level" (Thibault 2011, 217)

This point by Thibault is a good reminder of the fact that our linguistic expressions are heavily enculturated. In fact, considering that language is a man-made phenomenon, it couldn't be any different. Also, it testifies to the recurrency - in the pregnant sense of practice-relative constitutive actions - that Maturana (1988) takes to be a core defining trait of languaging as going beyond, in the sense of interconnecting, isolated situated inter-subjective encounters. Yet, it shows why proponents of DLP are somehow stuck in evoking the first-order—second-order dualism. In fact, even the range of heterogeneity available to language-users is somehow regulated

normatively thus making it sensible for proponents of DLP to consider so-called 'non-locality' as being an indispensable aspect of localized actions. So, the question is if we can identify a common denominator for both phenomena so that we can convincingly argue that the first-order—second-order is an analytical construct for describing an activity that we term as 'linguistic' rather than an indisputable ontological fact.

Considered in relation to languaging and Thibault's point concerning how the second-order impacts on the heterogenous elements of the first-order, I find that Wittgenstein's distinction is somewhat limited. This is especially the case if we define the so-called 'what' as the instantiation of the constituents of 'a language' in the form of an articulated word or letter, and the 'how' as the manner in which the letter or word is articulated (in either writing or speech). In the remainder of this section, I will make a case for considering the normativity pertaining to the how of linguistic expression as a phenomenon that escapes Wittgenstein's distinction[1] between, on the one hand, activity guided by pre-extant rules and, on the other, activity that are free from normative constraints (e.g., the height and speed of throwing a ball in tennis or how one performs a 'stop' when stopping at a red light). Thus, we can make a case for considering the 'how' relative to linguistic articulation as falling somehow in-between the two: although being free from preexisting rules that can somehow be predicted or articulated in advance, it nevertheless does involve normativity albeit of a different, tacit kind.

Returning to the distinction between what I've termed the 'what' and the 'how' of practical activity, we can assert that Wittgenstein's tennis analogy is not entirely fitting for describing the 'how' of linguistic action. The reason for this lies in its insufficient generalization of the ways in which linguistic utterances are produced which, as Thibault argues, involve normative influences. Indeed, we can argue that although such utterances are not normative in the sense that, for instance, the construction of grammatically correct sentences is, they nevertheless exhibit normativity. As such, we can argue that although Wittgenstein's observation concerning the contingency of the how's involved in playing a game the tennis makes sense, his observation cannot be generalized to include human practical activities that involve the expressions of 'symbols'.[2]

The two kinds of normativity that overlap in languaging can be espoused in the following manner. First, there is what we in lack of better words may call 'what-normativity'. As mentioned above, such normativity can be said to precede the actions which it regulates. For instance, we can specify in advance the letters of a given alphabet or the majority of words of a given language (i.e., by consulting a dictionary). Furthermore, we can formulate that the meaningful word 'cat' is spelled using the letters 'c', 'a', 't', and, not, 'k' and 'd'. Moreover, there are also rules pertaining to how such letters and words can be combined. These rules constrain the degrees of freedom we have at our disposal when engaging in acts of languaging. For instance, in English it is well-known that there are six fixed subject forms (meaning that one is bound to use one of them), that verbs and subjects in a sentence must agree in number, that there are three main tenses etcetera. Given this kind of recurrency, it is not surprisingly that proponents of DLP identify normativity as belonging to the slower, cultural timescales.

For the sake of exploring the kind of normativity that is at play in linguistic articulation, we can take the example of handwriting. Considered as a general phenomenon, there are no exactly formalized rules on the population level for *how* curly one is permitted to write the letter 'S' nor *how* elliptic one can write the letter 'O' in order for them to be recognized as such. Rules for correct articulation cannot be established in advance on the level of expression but must be formulated following either correct or incorrect articulation (the 'what'). And of course, the ultimate test is how one's handwriting is encountered by other people. The reason that it cannot be pre-established is simple: we don't have sufficient conceptual accuracy at our disposals for being able to account for - as well as to counter - idiosyncrasies of individual articulations. Nor are we able to predict the unlimited variety of expression of peoples' handwritings. This not only testifies to the vagueness and generality of concepts such as 'roundness', 'straight,' 'curved', 'crooked' etc. (cf. Wittgenstein's point above in **section 2**) but also to the uniqueness pertaining to our articulations. A handwritten letter or symbol is always materially unique and never exactly the same as other handwritten tokens expressive of the same "type" – even when articulated by the same unique individual. In the case of machine writing, however, the case is slightly different in that mechanical reproduction gives the impression, at least to the naked eye, that one is encountering an exact repetition across instances which may even give the illusion that there is type-token congruency. Nevertheless, one can simply change the font to see the difference (e.g., O O O O). Does it even make sense to say that an ideal type of the letter O exists somewhere and, if so, how would it look? The answer is that there isn't any. We can say that we continuously approximate the letter O in our handwriting although we will never be able to articulate the "type" itself (as such, it might pertain to a Platonic heaven or, more plainly, to some of our cognitive faculties).

At the same time, there clearly are limits to how a given letter or number is articulated. An O, for example, can be more or less circular or more or less elliptic. Needless to say, one shouldn't write one's Os so elliptically

1 It is doubtful that Wittgenstein himself took this distinction as being nothing but the mere result of (yet) another language game constructed around the illusion of clarifying language as a phenomenon with essential traits.
2 Following Maturana (1988), I deem symbols to be an epistemic construct which has been abstracted away from languaging activity.

that they end up being perceived as non-elliptical whereby no one would ever perceive them as the letter 'O' (except of course if they had familiarized themselves with the writer's 'intentions' or the context of the expression). This is not just because they fall too far from how we tacitly expect the how'ness of an O to be, but also that they might also fall into the how'ness of a different shape or symbol ('what') such as a non-elliptical oval. And there can also be a seeming overlapping of 'hows' as in the case of Wittgenstein's (2009) duck-rabbit. In addition, as Grice's (1969) example with the different meanings of the word grass shows, similar 'hows' may have different 'whats'.

With regards to the kind of normativity, that I term as 'how-normativity', we cannot help to observe that the limits are different from that of its what-counterpart in that the limits here are unarticulated and tacit. Indeed, no one has ever communicated the precise limits to us for the expression of a given letter or word, nor would anyone be able to do so. And that is for the simple reason that there aren't any. Rather, the limits are tacitly confirmed, negotiated or rejected every time we meet a particular linguistic utterance or articulation. Indeed, it would be absurd to think that articulatory limits could somehow be cognized or established in advance since that would presuppose that the language user has experienced, or has a capacity for imagining, every conceivable written articulation of a given sign.

By contrast, in practice, the normative evaluation instead refers to the fact that other people are able to decipher whatever scribbles one has put down on a sheet of paper as a given letter or as manifesting of a given type (i.e., the letter 'S' and 'O', respectively). Of course, in the course of learning to write, a teacher will encourage their students to practice the writing of particular letters. And the teacher is also able to correct the student's writing in the sense of declaring when a letter or word has been inadequately articulated. Nevertheless, it is not possible for the teacher to provide precise instructions as to how 'exactly' one should write a given letter due to the heterogeneity relative to how each unique token is articulated.

This example can used for showcasing that although there are certain aspects pertaining to the articulation or expression of words which cannot be explained by means of explicated rules, these aspects are nevertheless normatively evaluated. This kind of normativity is not only tacit in the outset, but it is also impossible to specify in advance. As such, it differs from the other kind of normativity (so-called 'what-normativity') which, by contrast, can be prespecified. Needless to say, however, this doesn't mean that we explicitly consider such normativity or rules when we are engaging in languaging. Indeed, children are enculturated into language through imitation and trial-and-error. One need not be a linguist to use language nor need one to be reflectively aware of the what-normativity involved. Besides, we can also imagine that sentences can violate aspects of this kind of normativity but still be meaningful in their own right. Think of the sentence-constructions of Master Yoda from Star Wars which obscures the standard object-subject-verb relation in English. Yet, the regularity pertaining to the what has the kind of "non-locality" (Steffensen, Cowley 2010) to it which means that it can be generalized across contexts, explicated and, equally important, taught to others as a second-order phenomenon.

5. NORMATIVE UNITY THROUGH PRACTICAL UNDERSTANDING

I have made a case for considering two kinds of normativity that are intrinsic to not just languaging activity but other practical activities as well. So, the question is if we are bound to accept the prevalence of a dualisms or if there are instead a means for identifying a basic, common denominator?

Following the exposition in Heidegger's (2010) 1925-26 Marburg lecture course on logic, we can single out so-called *as-structures* as pertaining to human practical activities more generally. These structures entail the basic taking of something *as* something. In this connection, 'taking' involves a kind of performance-driven experience of the thing in question; as *a something* or what I have conceptualized as a 'what'. According to Heidegger, such experiences are truly basic or, in his terms, original. As such, as-structures make up our 'primary way of understanding':

> "Acts of directly taking something, having something, dealing with it 'as something,' are so original that trying to understand anything without employing the 'as' requires (if it's possible at all) a peculiar inversion of the natural order." (122)

The evocation of as-structures is original in the sense that it pertains to the basic appearance of useful things in our familiar everyday world. Things appear to us through unthematic, pre-predicative experiencing. As such, this means that such experiencing is more basic than our predicative thematizing of things in propositions. But as Heidegger makes clear, the appearance cannot be seen apart from the familiarity by means of which we encounter things as practical things which serve particular practical means and ends. Heidegger mentions the example of perceiving a chalkboard:

> For example, [the chalkboard] might be familiar in terms of the service it can render, what it can be used for, the use for which we meet up with it at all—in a word, its 'for-writing-on.' This end-for-which [Wozu] is itself already comprehensible and known, as is the thing itself that is there for this purpose and as this: the chalkboard. (120)

This end-for-which of a given thing is basically tied to the thing's serviceability and, hence, what it can be used for (121). In other words, it relates to what the thing affords as a useful thing. But neither the end-for-which nor the serviceability are something that are constructed upon experiencing the thing. For as Heidegger states, "I am always already further ahead by understanding the

end-for-which and the what-as in terms of which I am taking the thing that is given and encountered at the moment" (124). In a manner of speaking, we meet the thing through our understanding-based comportment of as-structures thus allowing us to relate to the thing as a particular kind of 'what' (e.g., a hammer, a screwdriver, a cup).

The same can be said about how we experience words. Amongst others, Kee (2020) has argued that words function in a tool-like manner: "like a hand tool, language, preeminently as a spoken phenomenon, has its own materiality, that of sound" (906). And as such, words come with their own horizons which, like Heidegger's notion of end-for-which,

> "are the networks of typical habitual associations that inform our perception of and interaction with that object, tool, or word and prefigure further continuations of experience with it." (ibid.)

In functional terms, the implied horizon cannot be seen in separation from the socio-material context that the agent takes part in and enacts particular as-structures in relation to. As such, as-structures which can be enacted in relation to things in general but also letters, words, numbers and other 'symbols' can be said to play a constitutive role to a particular practice or language-game (see, for instance, the example in Gahrn-Andersen 2024, 9–10). Heidegger's focus falls almost exclusively on the 'what' in the sense that it takes the givenness of the 'how' or the appearance and/or manifestation of a given something for granted. Yet, his claim that familiarity precedes over and informs our perceiving indicates that the as-structure also pertains to the 'how' which typically has a different phenomenality than the 'what'. This difference is clear from the fact that when reading a text or listening to a person speaking, we normally experimentally transcend the manner-in-which a word or letter is being articulated. Instead, we're orienting towards the said. That is, of course, unless there is something in the very articulation which makes such an orientation difficult. And here familiarity with the 'how' is important. This is also why students are encouraged to practice their handwriting skills and, hence, to acquire a technique as to the articulation of letters and words: this not only informs their abilities to write but also their reading skills in that it enables them to construe a practical understanding relative to each letter in the alphabet and every word they come by so that they can recognize the particular letter or word across various idiosyncratic instantiations. In sum, we can thus consider the normative unity of hows and whats as being traceable to our practical understandings. Moreover, I have sought to show that human practical understanding can indeed be seen as what unites and enables languaging and human practical activities in general.

REFERENCES

Cowley, S. J., 2019. Languaging evolved: A distributed perspective. *Chinese Semiotic Studies*, 15(4), 461–482.

Gahrn-Andersen, R., 2023. Radicalizing radical linguistics: on the need to overcome the language–practice divide. *Linguistic Frontiers*, 6(2), 5–9.

Gahrn-Andersen, R., 2024. Enacting Practices: Perception, Expertise and Enlanguaged Affordances. *Social Epistemology*, 38(1), 70–82.

Grice, P. H., 1969. Utterer's Meaning and Intention. *Philosophical Review*, 78(2), 147–177.

Heidegger, M., 2010. *Logic: The Question of Truth*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Kee, H., 2020. Horizons of the word: Words and tools in perception and action. *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, 19(5), 905–932.

Maturana, H. R., 1988. Reality: The search for objectivity or the quest for a compelling argument. *The Irish Journal of Psychology*, 9(1), 25–82.

Saussure, F. d., 1959. *Course in general linguistics*. New York: Philosophical library.

Steffensen, S., Cowley, S. J., 2010. Signifying bodies, health and non-locality: the

aftermath. In Cowley, S. J., Steffensen, S., Major, J. C. (Eds.), *Signifying Bodies:*

Biosemiosis, Interaction and Health. Braga: Portuguese Catholic University Press, pp. 331–355.

Thibault, P. J., 2011. First-Order Languaging Dynamics and Second-Order Language: The Distributed Language View. *Ecological Psychology*, 23(3), 210–245, available at: < DOI: 10.1080/10407413.2011.591274 >.

Wittgenstein, L., 2009. *Philosophical investigations* (4th ed.). Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.