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SUMMARY

‘Normativity in Language and Linguistics,’ edited by Alekski Mäkilähde, Ville Leppänen, and Esa Itkonen, is a collection of essays which aims to emphasize the centrality of the normative aspect of language and the language sciences. The book includes eight chapters discussing the role of norms and normativity in language and linguistics from a variety of perspectives, preceded by a somewhat lengthy introduction by the editors.

In their prologue, the editors shed some light on the notion of norm, claiming that norms are social entities whose content concerns what somebody is obligated, permitted, or forbidden to do. In other words, in the social world we speak of norms “wherever a mistake can be made.” Depending on the type of norm, actions conforming to or violating them can be described and/or evaluated in terms of their appropriateness, permissibility, correctness, etc. Following Itkonen (1983), the editors distinguish between norms of correctness and norms of rationality. The former regard the well-formedness of sentences in a language (e.g., in English, the article precedes the head noun), whereas, quoting von Wright (1963: 9), the latter are concerned with “the means to be used to attain an end” (e.g., if someone asks you how old you are and you want to be cooperative, you ought to give them your actual age instead of some arbitrary number). Ontologically, norms exist at the conceptual level: they are objects of common knowledge, quite independent of what happens in space and time. Consequently, the epistemological act we need to know the content of norms is intuition rather than observation or sense-perception of spatiotemporal entities. The authors support this claim with the aid of a range of examples from logic, philosophy, and the history of linguistics.

In Chapter 2, entitled ‘Concerning the scope of normativity,’ Esa Itkonen emphasizes that the notion of norm is based on the distinction between right and wrong. For instance, he claims that science is governed by the macro-norm “seek the truth,” which presupposes the distinction between a description and its subject matter. For instance, if grammar is a description of the correct sentences in a language, then grammar cannot determine which sentences in that language are correct. With the aid of examples, Itkonen shows that this norm is often violated in the field of linguistics (e.g., Chomsky 1976), enabling the rise of several controversial if not downright problematic theories. Moreover, the author particularly insists on the importance of normativity in semantics. Contrary to the claims often made by

proponents of Cognitive Linguistics (e.g., Langacker 1987) that meaning is conceptualization, Itkonen argues that what occurs in people's minds is irrelevant for semantic analysis. On the contrary, he claims that semantic analysis must be based on necessary truths (e.g. Pap 1958). As an example, he points out that the analysis of 'father' as 'male parent' is reached using two entailments: i) if A is B's father, then A is male; ii) if A is B's father then A is a parent. If what we have in mind when we use the word 'father' contradicts one of these entailments, this does not invalidate them, it just means we are using the word incorrectly. The correct use of linguistic structures is thus not determined by individual conceptualizations, but rather by intersubjectively valid norms (Wittgenstein 1958).

In the third chapter, entitled 'Norms of language,' Jordan Zlatev and Johan Blomberg address the ontological and epistemological nature of linguistic norms. They adopt a phenomenological approach, based on the notions of intentionality (the essential directedness of consciousness in the world) and intuition (having a thing present to us as opposed to having it intended in its absence), integrated with the situated cognition concept of embodied intersubjectivity (the grounding of our cognition in the bodily experience of ourselves as well as other people). Against this background, they explore the insights on linguistic norms provided by Esa Itkonen and Eugen Coşeriu. Based on their study, the authors draw the following conclusions: 1) linguistic norms set "invisible" conditions for what constitutes appropriate language use and they are constantly being confirmed and sanctioned in human interaction; 2) they are known by pretheoretical reflection through intuition whenever they are confirmed or breached; 3) norms exist at three distinct levels: the universal level (language in general), the historical level (a specific language or dialect), and the situated level (a determined register or style); 4) they originate as the result of a dialectic of sedimentation and motivation processes at a more enchronic and a more diachronic time scale; 5) the basic characteristics of linguistic norms are inevitability (they constitute the meaning system of a specific social group), breakability (by mistake or deliberately flouting), and the dialectical nature of being both social and individual.

In the fourth chapter, 'A primer for linguistic normativists,' Michael B. Kac provides an accessible account of the concept of normativity and its relevance for the linguist. First, he makes the difference explicit between social norms and physical laws: occurrence of violating behavior is enough to falsify the latter but not the former (indeed, an utterance such as "dog the barked" does not falsify the claim that in English the determiner precedes the noun). Then, Kac shows that the claim that grammaticality is an illusion, put forward by Sampson & Babarczy (2013), does not hold up to scrutiny. Indeed, with the aim of a few simple examples, he shows that the existence of exceptions does not falsify the rule. Moreover, he also shows that Sampson & Babarczy's claim that (un)grammaticality is an artifact of present-day linguistics is contradicted by the ubiquity of this notion in the history of linguistics. Then, Kac claims that linguistic knowledge is largely intuitive, where intuition is to be understood as a two-step process: 1) the making of an intuitive judgment; 2) an inductive inference based on that judgment. He goes on to demonstrate that "intuition is the rock-bottom of all grammatical analysis," emphasizing that even corpus-based analysis ultimately relies on the linguist's intuition (e.g., part-of-speech tagging). As a result, the author maintains that present-day linguists should embrace rather than reject the traditional view of grammar as a set of requirements and prohibitions.

The fifth chapter, contributed by Tapani Mötönen, addresses 'The normative basis of construal,' a prominent notion in Cognitive Grammar. Construal can be understood

semantically as conventional perspectivity and pragmatically as a contextual adjustment of perspective. Against a common view in Cognitive Linguistics, the author argues that the analysis of meaning does not consist of an analysis of conceptualizations but focuses on the analyst's intuitive grasp of socially sanctioned linguistic meaning. Consequently, an individual's understanding of meaning is not primarily a conceptualization but rather the ability to correctly abstract and reapply semantic information based on the actual use of an expression. Therefore, construal is primarily a socio-normative entity and only secondarily a cognitive phenomenon. From this point of view, meaning is conceived of as conventionalized intention: "construal is learned as a conventional/normative subject-object relation, which is partially and indirectly characterized by conceptualization but explicit in the way in which an expression is used" (p. 141). As a result, construal can be defined as "adjustment of expression according to context."

In the sixth chapter, entitled 'Language as a system of norms and the Voloshinovian critique of abstract objectivism,' Mikko Laasanen evaluates the suitability of Valentin Voloshinov's theory of signs as an alternative to the Saussurean conception, as proposed by representatives of the dialogical approach to the study of language (e.g., Harris 1990). The author stresses that Voloshinov distinguishes the notions of theme (i.e., the aspect of language which is different each time it is used) and meaning (i.e., the elements of language which are self-identical and unchanging in every instance). Voloshinov is interested in the study of theme, not meaning. According to him, the whole concept of language is an abstraction as he calls into question the langue-parole dichotomy, which he considers as abstraction. However, Laasanen shows that the Voloshinovian theory of sign is built on the very Saussurean position, which implies that the representatives of dialogism are aiming at the impossible. This undermines Voloshinov's attempt to defend the replacement of the notions of invariance and abstractness with variation and concreteness. Indeed, the study of variation cannot be separated from the study of invariance (see Thibault 1987), and the notion of meaning in context cannot be parted from the study of context-independence. As a result, the Voloshinovian view can be considered a precursor to the study of discourse but not an alternative to the Saussurean position.

The seventh chapter, contributed by Ville Leppänen, is entitled 'Linguistic variation and change: A normative approach.' First, the author identifies three types of variation concerning correctness: 1) non-normative variation (the incomplete internalization of norms, abnormal language use, and random mistakes; 2) normative variation (within the grammar of a language or dialect/register); 3) gray variation (outside the boundaries of certainly known correctness). The author notices that norms and speech communities have a (sometimes problematic) two-way relationship: speech communities vary in size and permanence, and there is constant interaction between different speech communities and their norms. Leppänen argues that linguistic variation should be studied employing statistical descriptions of spatiotemporal occurrences reflected upon the autonomous normative description. The author individuates three basic cases of norm change: 1) The appearance of a new norm; 2) the disappearance of an existing norm, 3) the replacement of an existing norm by a new one. Leppänen argues that variation goes through three stages: first of all, a novel linguistic structure appears (innovation); then, if the new structure is accepted by the speech community, it will spread among the language users (propagation); finally, if the structure becomes regular enough, it may be interpreted as an obligation, i.e. its occurrence becomes a rule (normativization).

The eighth chapter, contributed by Anneli Pajunen and Esa Itkonen, is entitled 'Intuition and

beyond: A hierarchy of descriptive methods.’ This chapter introduces the following hierarchy of methods for linguistics: intuition-based research > corpus research > experiment. After claiming that the objective of linguistic studies is the description of a representative corpus of utterances, they emphasize that each corpus necessarily passes through normative filters, based on the linguist’s own intuition. This means that intuition is logically primary to corpus analysis. However, given that intuition-based claims about structural relations may be misguided, they are liable to falsification by corpus studies. Then, linguists can resort to experiments. To test ordinary speakers’ knowledge of their native language, they can use questionnaires, whose results normally display inter-individual variation. Different degrees of intuitive certainty reflect the different levels of force of the corresponding norms. While questionnaires are experimental only in a weak sense because the subjects have conscious and voluntary control over their responses, other methods such as eye-tracking investigations are experimental in a strong sense because the subjects react involuntarily and subconsciously.

The ninth and last chapter of the book is entitled ‘Norms of correctness and rationality in research on code-switching’ and is contributed by Aleksi Mäkilähde. The chapter explores aspects of the ontological and epistemological foundations of code-switching, taking as a starting point the lack of consensus among researchers in the field. After a brief overview of syntactic research on code-switching, the author presents code-switching as a rule-governed phenomenon. With the aid of examples from contexts as different as Finnish-English code-switching in the United States and Latin-Greek code-switching in Cicero’s letters, Mäkilähde illustrates the role of intuition in linguistic behavior. Then, he discusses matters of terminological clarity, the testing/falsification of theories and their predictions, and the roles of different methods (and their methodological implications for the field). After demonstrating the relevance of rationality principles to both accounting for individual occurrences and explaining code-switching constraints, the author argues in favor of a methodological synthesis between intuition and observation.

EVALUATION

‘Normativity in Language and Linguistics’ represents a brave effort to contrast the long-standing tendency to describe and explain language - and human behavior in general - primarily in bio-physical and/or psychological terms. By bringing the normative aspect of language back to the fore, this collection of essays goes a long way in restoring a balance between the social and individual dimensions of language or, at least, advancing the debate on the true nature of the object. As such, this volume represents a fine contribution to the John Benjamins series ‘Studies in Language Companion,’ which includes authoritative contributions such as Viti (2015) and Behme and Neef (2018). The aims of the book are stated clearly in the introduction and pursued in the eight standalone contributions. Each chapter addresses a different topic in linguistic research, illustrating the inescapability of normativity in language and linguistics. Indeed, notions such as norm, normativity, and variation, represent the red thread which unites the discussion of philosophical, theoretical, and empirical issues where normativity is shown to play a crucial role.

The decision to include contributions addressing a range of topics situated at different ontological and epistemological levels provides the reader with an overview of the relevance of normativity to both language (the object of study) and linguistics (the study of the object).

This is especially important, in the light of the reiterated positivist attempts to assimilate linguistics to hard sciences (e.g., Derwing 1980). As a matter of fact, throughout the 20th Century (and the beginning of the 21st), the status of linguistics as an autonomous discipline has been constantly called into question. The viability of a non-empirical, “autonomous” linguistics (AL from now on), has been attacked from a range of different camps. Today, the lure of positivism seems particularly strong. Indeed, it is often taken for granted that linguistics, to progress, should become more and more empirically oriented. Against this background, the value of AL is often diminished or denied (e.g. Sampson 2007), sometimes even ridiculed (e.g., Tuggy 1999). Even when the legitimacy of non-empirical studies is conceded, it is normally implied that, from a scientific point of view, empirical linguistics is “superior” (e.g., Eddington 2008). This book spells out why these claims are unwarranted, and an alternative, more hermeneutic, perspective is necessary.

By emphasizing the role of normativity in language, the essays contained in this volume clearly show the qualitative difference between human and natural phenomena as different objects of study. This entails that the methodology of linguistics is necessarily different from that of the natural sciences. Since linguistics is a cover term with a heterogeneous referent, it is necessary to distinguish AL from causal linguistics (CL, henceforth): AL is represented by the non-causal description of the norms of a language. CL, instead, includes psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, historical linguistics, conversation analysis, and text analysis, and many other empirically oriented linguistic disciplines (see Itkonen 1983). All components of CL inquire into the causal mechanisms that bring linguistic norms, behavior, and knowledge into being. Both AL and CL are necessary to the study of language: they are situated at distinct levels and differ in terms of data, methods, and object of study. The claim that AL should be dispensed with denotes a certain lack of methodological self-understanding (Itkonen 1991a; Zlatev 2007) and is contradicted by the history of linguistics (Itkonen 1991b).

While the essays contained in this book show that normativity is ubiquitous in both AL and CL, epistemologically this has a particularly important consequence for AL, which addresses language as a system of social norms. Any synchronic grammar of a language ever composed is a description of this system. Since the linguistic system is a normative – rather than spatiotemporal – object and the normative principle which guides AL is correctness, a study in AL will not be primarily concerned with an analysis of actual linguistic behavior (which belongs to the realm of the spatiotemporal), but of the correct sentences of a language (which belongs to the realm of the normative). Indeed, not all sentences that are uttered are correct, and not all correct sentences of a language are necessarily attested. While the latter fall within the scope of interest of AL, the former do not. The core of AL is, therefore, the object of a non-empirical undertaking, whose corresponding epistemic act is the linguist’s intuition. This does not mean that AL can eschew the use of empirical data. Indeed, correctness is a continuum: there are clear cases, where the (in)correctness of a sentence is beyond question, but most cases are less than clear. These cases are characterized by the presence of variation, which implies that social control is less than absolute. This is where resorting to CL becomes necessary. However, the chapters by Leppänen, Pajunen and Itkonen, and Mäkilähde demonstrate that even in CL normativity plays an all-important role.

While my overall evaluation of the book is extremely positive, I must highlight that some chapters include controversial statements which may confuse the reader. The most striking example can be found in the introductory section of Chapter 6, where Mikko Laasanen claims that “[t]he purpose of this study is to argue against the attempts to replace the Saussurean

conception of language (understood in a wide sense) by a dialogical theory of language, by critically examining Voloshinov's critique of abstract objectivism" (p. 152) but then he goes on claiming, "Specifically, I hope to find out whether the Voloshinovian theory of language offers a viable alternative to the Saussurean position, as claimed by Voloshinov and the representatives of a dialogical approach" (ibidem). Presented in this order, these passages are problematic because the author first claims that he is going to argue against a specific position, and only later he claims that he is going to analyze the foundations of such a position. The reader may be led to conclude that the analysis is skewed by the author's pre-existent theoretical persuasions. Other less than ideal passages are also found in other chapters. For instance, in Chapter 2 the author argues that "[r]epresentatives of Cognitive Linguistics in general, and Cognitive Grammar in particular, endorse the position that meanings are individual-psychological (and largely unconscious) entities, which entails that semantics has to be replaced by psychology" (p. 41). As Itkonen himself specified elsewhere (e.g., Itkonen 2016: 36), this claim applies to the initial (though perhaps still prevailing) model of Cognitive Linguistics but more recent contributions have tried to reach a compromise between the psychological and the social, the neural and the cultural. It may have been appropriate to repeat this qualification in this chapter.

Despite these minor flaws, this book has the merit of emphasizing the all-important role of the social and normative dimension of language, warning us against the dangers of viewing language as a prominently individual, mental object. In so doing, the book also goes a long way in defending the dual nature of linguistics, by showing that the attempts to deny it are bound to fall into contradiction. Moreover, by repeatedly appealing to the history of linguistics, they also warn us that a lack of interest in the tradition may lead linguists astray, resulting in a misunderstanding of the ontological and methodological status of their discipline. As a result, along with bringing normativity back to the fore in linguistic studies, this book also represents a call to researchers to resist the positivist push and avoid falling for a misguided "empiricism at all costs," recommending instead that they select the methods and instruments to adopt in each study based on the nature of the phenomenon they aim to address.

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