

Success Conditions for Normative Talk

(Abstract)

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In this talk, I want to suggest an approach to the phenomenon of normativity which differs sharply from the traditional forms of conceptual or linguistic analysis of normative concepts or expressions. I argue that by basing the analysis of normative notions on a teleosemantic theory of language, a quite different picture emerges; to illuminate the concept of normativity we have to investigate the (historical) success conditions for the communicative functions of normative talk in our ordinary social interactions.

The investigation starts with specific but paradigmatic normative practices: practical utterances of the form 'You ought to ψ '. A look at our ordinary practice will suggest – though the argument will not depend on – the following hypothesis on the function of such utterances:

(F_S^{*}) Ought-utterances have the (imperative) function of causing the addressee to realise the satisfaction conditions of the utterance.

(F_S^{*}) has two main deficits: (a) the term 'function' is not explained, and (b) it is obviously unable to capture the specific features of such utterances because all utterances with an imperative form share this function.

(a) Therefore, I will first specify the meaning of 'function' by following Ruth Millikan's *teleological understanding of functions*. Functions in this sense are (*historically*) *selected effects* of a type of feature, i.e. effects in virtue of which a feature was selected. Because, as Millikan argues, a language device remains in existence only if speakers use it and hearers – at least in some critical proportion of cases – respond in a uniform manner, we can expect a language device had one type of effect in the past which contributed to the speaker's usage and hearer's cooperation. To determine the function of a language, we can ask more precisely: What sort of effect accounts at the same time for the fact that speakers continued to use a language device (in regular ways) and hearers responded (in regular ways)? I will suggest with respect to ought-utterance, the answer is the following:

(F_S) When performed in the past, ought-utterances had – in a critical mass of cases – the effect the hearer realised the satisfaction conditions of the utterance, and the fact they had these effects is part of an explanation for the proliferation of ought-utterances.

(b) But even if it is true that ought-utterances have an imperative function, this function is certainly not a specific feature of ought-utterances: Commands, requests and threats have the same function. The basic idea to determine the distinctive features of ought-utterances is the following:

(S) The distinctive features of ought-utterances are not revealed by the function of such utterances, but rather by considering the specific way in which its function is normally fulfilled, e.g. by the normal conditions for its function.

Against the background of a brief explanation of this idea and the technical notion of 'normal conditions', I will approach the following question:

(S^{NB}) What are the normal conditions specific to ought-utterances, i.e. those conditions which were actually met in the (historically) successful cases of our ordinary practice and which play a role in explaining how the imperative function of ought-utterances was actually fulfilled?

A plausible normal condition of ought-utterances is that the addressee is able and in a position to realise the satisfaction condition of ought-statement. It is a normal condition in the sense that the existence of the practice of using such utterances can only be explained if there are past successful performances of their use. However, a successful performance – the fulfilling of the function – requires addressees to be able and in a position to realise the satisfaction condition.

But this normal condition is hardly specific to ought-utterances. Non-normative imperatives, for example, have the same historical success condition: their communicative success could only occur under the condition where the addressee was able and in a position to realise their satisfaction condition. Thus, to identify their specific conditions, I will contrast the normal conditions of ought-utterances with a class of non-normative imperatives which share the same function. Against this background, we can finally identify the conditions which are distinctive of ought-utterances.

In contrast to non-normative imperatives, I will argue that ought-utterances involve an implicit claim to justification – that it is right or justified to cause the addressee to fulfil the satisfaction condition. If this claim to justification is connected to the linguistic device or practice itself, then it must be part of its normal condition: it must contribute to an explanation of how the function of ought-utterances was fulfilled in the (historically) successful cases. But then *the fact the ought utterance was justified* must have made a difference with regard to the fulfillment of its function and thus a difference in the reaction of the addressee – at least in a sufficient number of cases. Otherwise, the dimension of justification or rightness could have played no role in the proliferation of the practice. Hence, for the aspect of correctness to be relevant to the practice (to have influence on the addressee), the addressee must have been able and in a position to *react differentially* to this aspect. More explicitly:

(S₁) The addressee must be able and in a position to (a) recognise and deliberate whether the ought-utterance is right or (at least) justified and (b) to act from this insight. [Autonomy Condition]

The more general point of my talk is that the distinctive normal conditions of ought-utterances are to be found in the *specific ways* their function was fulfilled in the historically successful cases. *One* of these is the condition that addressees fulfilled ought-utterances by recognising the correctness of ought-utterances and acting from this insight. But the fulfilment of this autonomy condition presupposes a whole set of further normal conditions, which will be systematically developed. Ought-utterances are then distinguished by this set of normal conditions. The talk will conclude with a discussion of how to generalise from the distinctive features of the specific practice of ought-utterances to a general account of the nature of normativity.