

NORMS FOR CONSTRUCTING LANGUAGE IN HUMANS AND ANIMALS

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1. The normativity of background assumptions

When writing about the ‘language’ of non-human and human animals (henceforth: ‘animal’ and ‘human’), scientists apply the same term to different concepts. Some ascribe ‘language’ for communication others for thinking (e.g. Evans & Marler, 1995, pp. 370 – 374 vs. Scott-Phillips, 2015, pp. 79 – 83). The confusion can be explained by spelling out implicit background assumptions to the entire concept. Some assumptions follow normative attitudes. Those will be denoted as ‘norms’.

1.1. *The vocal modality of language: A norm from the recent past*

Norms signify what is ‘commonly done’ (i.e. descriptive norms), or they express what is ‘commonly approved’ (i.e. social norms). Norms may exist independently of behavior or empirical evidence, and in such cases be based on commonly shared values of a group.

Norms are involved in the ascription of behavior to a certain definition of ‘language’. That is why the process of ascription will be denoted as ‘construction’. Until the early 20th century some norms limited the ascription of ‘language’ to certain populations within the human group itself. An elucidatory example is the denial of ‘language state’ to the non-verbal communication system of deaf people. The responsible oral norm led people to identify human ‘language’ with ‘speech’. Physiological conditions were treated as precondition for the faculty. Although the aftermath of that norm are still observable in current publications, the vocal modality lost its normativity in the course of the 20th century in a shift towards a modality-free but still norm containing ‘code model’.

1.2. Two current normative approaches: The ‘code’ and the ‘mental’

Since the days of Darwin, there is an influential comparative evolutionary approach to ‘language’. It is often followed by excessive interest on birdsong, as well as the calling and/or gesture behavior of mammals. In this view, to investigate the animal’s ‘code’ is to find out about the biological substrate of human ‘language’. The underlying assumption is that human ‘language’ can also be understood as a system of complex codes. As such ‘language’ must have its gradual, evolutionary precursors. Since the code is the only observable entity of ‘language’ it is the only appropriate way for its investigation (e.g. Evans & Marler, 1995).

In contrast, opponents to this view deny a connection between code and ‘language’. An approach of considering ‘language’ based purely on mental capacity is often followed by interest on metacognition and/or metarepresentations. In this view, to investigate the code of ‘language’ is simply an inappropriate categorical mistake. The code and its communicative function are seen as a mere byproduct of mental capacity. Proponents of this view tend to validate ‘language’ as human unique without evolutionary precursors (e.g. Scott-Phillips, 2015, pp. 45–50).

1.3. Incompatible facts lead to progress, incompatible norms do not

By spelling out the normative background assumptions underlying the construction of ‘language’, one might be able to explain the resulting confusion on the use of terminology. Also, it may help to clarify the very role of norms. On one side norms motivate research in opposed areas, thus responsible for detecting incompatible *facts* in competing approaches. On the other hand, expounding on the normative assumptions of language incite discussion on incompatible normative *approaches*. However, as is intended to be demonstrated through this research, the discussion of incompatible *facts*, rather than that of normative *approaches*, can lead to progress in ‘language’ research.

References

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- Scott-Phillips, T. C. (2015). *Speaking our minds*. London, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.