

Language Norms: What and where are they?

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The notion of a language norm is far from clear. Lacking a conclusive explication, one may wonder what language studies are actually studying. Is it the experience of speakers? Is it their brains? Is it their behavior? Is it the product of expert intuitions? Even within linguistics the views seem scattered on this point, and no consensus has been reached on what the object of study in linguistics is supposed to be. The ontology of language norms is thus of high relevance, not only philosophically, but for the empirical implications of any potential ontological claim. In a question: what are we studying when we are studying language norms? This paper is thus an effort to, primarily with the help of Husserlian phenomenology, discuss language norms and their location in order to answer this question as well as to obviate or at least mitigate some of the concerning trends found in recent discussions on language norms.

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1. Introduction

The concern of this paper is mainly with the location of language norms and so I will need to delve into difficult ontological questions surrounding the notion of language norms.¹ Along the same lines, but from a meta-perspective, I also discuss ontologizing as a way to theorize about language. Now the ontology of language norms may be viewed as primarily the philosopher's concern, and in a sense this is right. But without being able to specify their location (which also determines their ontological status), it seems we would not truly be able to know how to study them. Examples of language norms that I have in mind here are various constraints on appropriate language use. That is, a language norm, roughly speaking, is the kind of phenomenon (in this case a "subject-verb agreement" rule of standard English) that leads us to think that "they sing" is correct whereas "they sings" is not. Examples are easy to come by. Explicating exactly what it is that makes up a norm, and where these norms can be said to be located, on the other hand, is a seemingly very obscure matter.

The question of *where* norms are is here taken literally, similar to something like "where are trees of type X?". Such a question is of course *prima facie* rather ridiculous. But the aim is not to list possible locations, but to clarify which types of locations wherein we can find realizations of a norm – in the same sense in which certain types of trees only grow in certain types of soils, and so on. The aim here is to give a preliminary account of the kinds of locations (involving both person-internal and person-external locations) that allow for the manifestation of language norms.

What is even worse is that without any sort of specification of the where and what of language norms, we would seemingly be stuck with "mere words", a sort of empty use of the term disjointed from experience, thus barring it from holding any meaning. So, in asking ourselves where language norms reside, and what their essential features are, I propose that we, in true Husserlian fashion, return to the things themselves as they are given to us in experience (Husserl, 2001, p. 168):

Logical concepts², as valid thought-unities, must have their origin in intuition: they must arise out of an ideational intuition founded on certain experiences, and must admit of indefinite

¹ "Language norms" as opposed to "linguistic norms" is parallel to the distinction made by Coseriu (1977) between *universals of language* and *universals of linguistics*, i.e., the distinction between norms of language use itself and the norms of the scientist researching them.

² By "logical concepts" I take Husserl to mean any concept usable in logical arguments, which I take to include norms.

reconfirmation, and of recognition of their self-identity, on the reperformance of such abstraction. Otherwise put: we can absolutely not rest content with 'mere words', i.e. with a merely symbolic understanding of words, such as we first have when we reflect on the sense of the laws for 'concepts', 'judgements', 'truths' etc. (together with their manifold specifications) which are set up in pure logic. Meanings inspired only by remote, confused, inauthentic intuitions – if by any intuitions at all – are not enough: we must go back to the 'things themselves'.

Before giving an account of what language norms are, let us review the ontological realms wherein language norms can be said to be located. The next step will be to set the stage for a phenomenological return in approaching the “what” and the “where” of language norms. The notion of a language norm has been suggested to exist in at least three different realms; either merely in one of them, or as involving more than one of them (as occurs when one says that language norms are found in the world of the mental, but where mental terms are viewed as translatable into physical terms, for instance). These different realms are presented well by Popper, although without pertaining to language norms in particular. According to Popper, there are three “worlds” (1968, p. 333):

first, the world of physical objects or of physical states; secondly, the world of states of consciousness, or of mental states, or perhaps of behavioral dispositions to act; and thirdly, the world of objective contents of thought, especially of scientific and poetic thoughts and of works of art.

The first two are rather intuitively understandable and claims as to the primacy of each constitute two major battling positions in the history of philosophy, so the focus here will be on describing world 3 in more detail. This “world” pertains, basically, to contents of thought that are not dependent on an individual mind for their existence (nor arguably for their production). They are, however, most often the products of human activity: the contents of scientific papers, mathematical/philosophical proofs, syllabi, libraries, etc., as they exist independently of both their production and use – even entirely independently of our understanding, as the objects of world 3, in principle, could be created with artificial intelligence and never understood by human beings. It is enough that they are in principle decipherable or knowable by anyone or anything. But this does not mean that they have to currently be known, it is enough that they can be known at some point in the future. Bolzano (1837, p. 48), referred to by Popper as an ally in arguing for the plausibility of a world 3, writes the following even more radical clarification regarding independent propositions: “I understand by a proposition in itself any statement that something is or is not, indifferently whether this statement is true or false, whether or not anyone has put it into words, whether or not it has even been thought.” The idea is thus that the products of human intellectual activity cannot be just for the individual producing it and it is not enough that it is understood by a community engaging in scientific activity; it is *essential* that they are in principle *intersubjective* in the sense of being understandable by anyone capable of understanding. It is not enough that one person understands, nor that a smaller group understands, it has to be in principle understandable.

The parallels of this notion to language are clear, as Frege (1948) was among the first to stress. Meaning cannot simply be the ideas (*Vorstellungen*) of individuals, since these are unique to the person inhabiting them, whereas meaning (*Sinn*) remains the same across individuals. The same, it seems, goes for language norms. If they are not shared, and thus are not in a sense intersubjective, they cannot play the regulative (or according to some, even constitutive) role they in fact do. We are then seemingly forced to either posit a Popperian/Platonic/Bolzanoean world 3 (or a “normative domain”, see Kac, 2019) or, alternatively, explain language norms in terms of the other two worlds.

Attempts to collapse world 3 entities such as norms or meanings into one of the former two worlds have been made. Itkonen’s (2008) emphasis on the role of consciousness in the formation

of language norms can be read as an attempt to reduce the intersubjective nature of language to consciousness(es) where the norms are buttressed by the *empathy* and *mutual knowledge*, although this does not mean that the norms are themselves conscious entities.³ Lakoff and Johnson (1999) on the opposite end of the spectrum, can be read as collapsing language entities entirely into the physical brain with their notion of the *cognitive unconscious* – in the process saying very little about the intersubjective nature of these physical structures. Both views highlight that we should not feel forced to posit an additional world 3 in order to maintain the shared nature of language entities as long as the explanatory force that such a world offers can be equivalently provided by a single- or dual-world ontology. If such equivalences can be made, which seems to be at least logically possible, the problem is ultimately one of translation between different kinds of ontological approaches. The problem pertaining to which of the worlds that language norms reside in would, as a result, turn rather inconsequential and superficial.

The main argument of this article is that merely deciding on a type of world (physical, mental, Platonic) is an unhelpfully broad categorization to make and that it leaves the question of where language norms are largely unanswered. Although this conclusion is likely prone to endless counterarguments, it seems undeniable that we are faced with the need to be more specific when it comes to localizing our language norms if we want an informative answer to the question of what language norms are and where exactly they are to be found. My standpoint is that ontologizing alone simply cannot afford us an informative account of the location of language norms.

The structure of this paper is as follows: In Section 2 I discuss the value of bringing phenomenology into the discussion of language norms. In Section 3, the article turns to the essential characteristics of language norms in order to give us an idea of where they might be found. In Section 4, the discussion is brought back to the location of norms with the insights of their essential characteristics and in Section 5 I sum up with a brief conclusion.

2. The phenomenological turn

Let us begin by first discussing what phenomenology can offer us in the search for the essence and location of language norms. First, Husserlian phenomenology is a maximally anti-dogmatic approach in that it approaches philosophical (and scientific) issues without taking anything for granted. The idea is that if we divest ourselves of all assumptions, we are in a position to better understand the relevant phenomena. Secondly, phenomenology provides a framework in which to understand the different ways in which phenomena can be experienced, and thus revealing the different settings in which an object can be experienced. More precisely, if one is able to give an account of the *intentional object* (language norms, in this case), one is also in a position to analyze the different *intentional acts* that are directed at that object. This effectively means that the experiential underpinnings of language norms can be elucidated and broadened beyond the theoretical confines of any given ontological position that would, *prima facie*, prevent one from experiencing a norm, were one to, for example, insist that language norms are hardcoded in the physical brain, or something along those lines. Phenomenology can give us pause about overt ontologizing and instead let us approach the phenomenon in a way that limits our conception of it not through presuppositions, but through the *eidetic analysis* (Husserl, 1980, p. 26) of the thing itself. The different ways in which norms are experienced, then, are what can allow us to answer the question of where language norms are within the world of experience, the *Lebenswelt* or the life-world, as will soon be explicated.

Phenomenology, taken in its stricter “anti-ontological” Husserlian origins (1980, 1982, 2001), represents the idea that ontological concerns are inconsequential and are possibly best bracketed, though not necessarily doubted or rejected, in order to return to a focus on the things

³ A better representative of the mentalist view would be Talmy (2000).

themselves as they appear while experienced. In other words, if we do not experience an object's ontological status, introducing any kind of metaphysical talk is unhelpful and potentially misleading. In relation to this, I propose that phenomenology provides a framework within which to understand the meaning and experiential grounding of the tripartite distinction of "worlds" discussed in Section 1 and offers a more informative approach to the "where" of language norms. Note that we lose nothing in moving away from more naïve ontological claims of the kind that states that language norms are to be found in one of the Popperian realms. The natural scientists or metaphysicians are not deprived of anything; it is simply asked that we consider the meaning of these ontological claims in terms of their experiential underpinnings, and in the process hopefully apprehend language norms more directly. That is, not by denying these ontological categories, but by simply not departing from them (Husserl, 1982, §32).

What is the search area phenomenology leaves us with? In short: *the world of experience*. All judgments, in order to be meaningful, must be in some way connected to the life-world. As Husserl (1970, p. 130) writes regarding Bolzano's "propositions-in-themselves":

But this or any other ideality does not change in the least the fact that these are human formations, essentially related to human actualities and potentialities, and thus belong to this concrete unity of the life-world, whose concreteness thus extends farther than that of "things." Exactly the same thing is true, correlative to this, of scientific activities – those of experiencing, those of arriving at logical formations "on the basis of" experience – activities through which these formations appear in original form and original modes of variation in the individual scientists and in the community of scientists: the original status of the propositions or demonstrations dealt with by all.

The idea, in a word, is that we find all things – ideal or not – in the life-world and that all superstructures are grounded in this life-world. Not only that, the superstructures themselves, that is, all theorizing, due to their intimate coupling with the life-world, must also be said to be part of the life-world (ibid., p. 131). This connection is necessary for the "founding validity", implying that idealizations that lose their connection to the life-world are invalid. The life-world, however, is a difficult notion that needs to be expanded upon. So, before moving on from this section, an attempt to clarify the term will be made.

There are two predominant interpretations of the notion, as pointed out separately by Carr (1970) and Beyer (2020). The first notion in its short version is: "The life-world is a realm of original self-evidences" (Husserl, 1970, p. 127). The longer version is captured in the following longer quote from *The Crisis of European Sciences* (ibid., pp. 104-5):

In this world we are objects among objects in the sense of the life-world, namely, as being here and there, in the plain certainty of experience, before anything that is established scientifically, whether in physiology, psychology, or sociology. On the other hand, we are subjects for this world, namely, as the ego-subjects experiencing it, contemplating it, valuing it, related to it purposefully, for us this surrounding world has only the ontic meaning given to it by our experiencings, our thoughts, our valuations, etc.; and it has the modes of validity (certainty of being, possibility, perhaps illusion, etc.) which we, as subjects of validity, at the same time bring about or else possess from earlier on as habitual acquisitions and bear within us as validities of such and such a content which we can reactualize at will. To be sure, all this undergoes manifold alterations, whereas "the" world, as existing in a unified way, persists throughout, being corrected only in its content.

The life-world, taken in this sense, is a unified whole of experiences, a collection of intentional acts (*noesis*) directed at intentional objects (*noema*). No matter the alterations of these experiences, they constitute a whole and together make up the life-world.

The second notion of the life-world hints at something like an equivalent to Popper's world 3, containing objects of science as well as cultural institutions of various kinds.⁴ But contrary to the second notion ascribed to Husserl by Carr (1970) and Beyer (2020) and how the notion is often used in the literature, there seems to be no merit to the idea that these are distinct for Husserl. To him, all objectivity, as well as each homeworld's cultural landscape, is constituted by what is commonly given – in the *subject-relative* sense – in the experiences of the inhabitants of these worlds. It is when subject-relatively valid experiences are *shared* that intersubjective validity is established. In this sense, the second notion of the life-world seems to emanate from the first; there is no second notion without the first notion.

Thus, if we accept that ontologizing of the kind discussed in Section 1 is but one way of framing the life-world, it seems that we should approach language norms not from the starting point of possibly invalid idealizations, but from the originally given source.⁵ Of course, in some contexts, social interactions are taken for granted, and the intersubjective elements of life are not to be questioned. But being able to take the intersubjective for granted does not mean that it is absolutely basic. Consider Schutz (1962, p. 116):

To give just one example, all social sciences take the intersubjectivity of thought and action for granted. That fellow-men exist, that men act upon men, that communication by symbols and signs is possible, that social groups and institutions, legal and economic systems and the like are integral elements of our life-world, that this life-world has its own history and its special relationship to time and space – all these are notions that are explicitly or implicitly fundamental for the work of all social scientists.

He continues, in the same Husserlian spirit adopted in this article:

But how does it happen that mutual understanding and communication are possible at all? How is it possible that man accomplishes meaningful acts, purposively or habitually, that he is guided by ends to be attained and motivated by certain experiences? Do not the concepts of meaning, of motives, of ends, of acts, refer to a certain structure of consciousness, a certain arrangement of all the experiences in inner time, a certain type of sedimentation? And does not interpretation of the Other's meaning and of the meaning of his acts and the results of these acts presuppose a self-interpretation of the observer or partner? How can I, in my attitude as a man among other men or as a social scientist, find an approach to all this if not by recourse to a stock of pre-interpreted experiences built up by sedimentation within my own conscious life? And how can methods for interpreting the social interrelationship be

⁴ See for instance, §34b in Husserl (1970) where he conducts a phenomenological analysis of “objective knowledge” without thereby making ontological claims).

⁵ One of the best possible cases for Husserl having a second notion of the life-world that is primarily intersubjective can be found in the Appendix of *The Crisis* (1970, p. 358): “Living wakefully in the world we are constantly conscious of the world, whether we pay attention to it or not, conscious of it of our actual and possible interests and activities. Always standing out against the world-horizon is the horizon of our fellow men, whether there are any of them present or not. Before even taking notice of it all, we are conscious of the open horizon of our fellow men with its limited nucleus of our neighbors, those known to us. We are thereby coconscious of the men on our external horizon in each case as “others”; in each case “I” am conscious of them as “my” others, as those with whom I can enter into actual and potential, immediate and mediate relations of empathy; this involves a reciprocal “getting along” with others; and on the basis of these relations I can deal with them, enter into particular modes of community with them, and then know, in a habitual way, of my being so related. Like me, every human being – and this is how he is understood by me and everyone else – has his fellow men and, always counting himself, civilization in general, in which he knows himself to be living.” But even this is based on the experience of empathy in the subjective-relative sense, that is, on the subjective understanding of others as experiencing what we are experiencing. Of course, one may argue against this account of the life-world on a non-Husserlian basis; we are not forced to be Husserlians. But in that case, it could still be argued that such a maneuver is a potentially invalid idealization of the notion of the intersubjective. So, in short, it is not an easily settled matter any way you slice it.

warranted if they are not based upon a careful description of the underlying assumptions and their implications?

So, while we all take social life as a given, as a pre-existing and unpuzzling phenomenon in one sense, we are nonetheless capable of making that very pre-givenness thematic and submitting it to philosophical analysis. As the many questions Schutz asks serve to illustrate, what is taken for granted is often highly puzzling once made thematic and analyzed (phenomenologically or elsehow). Starting with an ontological claim in the study of language norms is arguably, in the Husserlian spirit, to begin with an excrescent idealization as opposed to going straight to the things themselves. Similarly, taking the intersubjective for granted seems to merely sidestep the fact that it is in fact rife with puzzling phenomena.

To summarize the points made in the previous and this section: we have four positions. Language norms are primarily (1) physical phenomena, (2) mental phenomena, (3) objective contents of thought, or (4) these distinctions are initially irrelevant in the search for the essence and location of norms and should be replaced by the results of a phenomenological analysis. While (4) may sound dismissive of the other positions, it need not be understood in such a way. The phenomenological approach does not deny these ontological realms dogmatically but aims for a conciliatory approach that preserves each category with the aim to explicate them where this is possible and deny only that which is not explicable in terms of the life-world: that is, that which does not hold subject-relative validity. If we adopt this method, we can already say that language norms, as well as everything else, is in the life-world. Note that this as a standalone answer is as uninformative as any other kind of ontologizing. We still have to maintain all relevant distinctions as well as ask where language norms are within the life-world.

In order to answer this, let us now return to the question of *what* language norms are, or what is essential to them, in order to afterwards discuss *where* they may be located. The jury is still out on where norms are located. They may be in the external life-world, understood as interactions of people and thus as something beyond the individual, or they may be located in the minds of individuals, understood either as subject-relative experiences, private but not unique or impossible to share, or as third-person constructions of a physicalist theorizer who chooses to prioritize that which is spatio-temporally localizable.

3. Language norms – the “what” and other essentials

Itkonen (2008) gives an account of language norms that fits very well into the phenomenological picture, although with crucial differences. Other than expanding on the essence of language norms, this section will aim to explicate the difference between the phenomenological approach suggested in the previous section and Itkonen’s. But first, some similarities between Itkonen and Husserl. Itkonen (2005, p. 187), for instance, similarly dismisses the naively ontological question regarding the mode of existence of norms:

Very few people seem to know what a meaning is, but everybody knows that an instrument has both a form and a function (= ‘use’); everybody also knows how instruments are (meant to be) used (even if they may be misused now and then); and it would be odd for anybody to be puzzled about the ‘ontological question’ as to how the use of e.g. a hammer ‘exists’. Seeing linguistic units as instrument-like entities consisting of form and function, and equating meaning with function, is likely to produce conceptual clarification.

“Meaning = use” holds when use is “determined by intersubjectively binding norms of language” (Itkonen, 2008, p. 19). Language norms, as stated in Section 1, can essentially be said to be the regulative constrictions on the use of any given language. Coseriu’s three levels of *dynamis* (Coseriu, 1985, xxix) become relevant here. The knowledge that regulates the use of a given language can be viewed as extending to all of the three levels of knowledge, that is, the universal

elocutional knowledge (corresponding to something like “principles of thought”), the historical idiomatic knowledge (knowledge of the rules of a particular given language), and the situated expressive knowledge (knowledge of rules of language use that are not about correct constructions, but appropriate use given a particular context). All of these levels influence language use, but it is not certain whether Itkonen wants to include each level as part of the set of “binding norms of language” specifically. The binding norms of language alone seem to be on the idiomatic level – the others are norms of thought and norms of conduct that influence language use but should perhaps not be viewed as *language* norms per se.⁶ In any case, the norms of language in Itkonen’s view are inherently social and only accessible through intuition. The latter is distinct from observation and introspection for the following reasons, according to Itkonen (2008, p. 20):

Because the meanings of cat, if, and so on are social facts, getting to know them cannot be a matter of introspecting the contents of my own consciousness. And because they are normative facts, they cannot be known by means of observation (of spatio-temporal entities), because it is the norms (as known) which determine whether what we observe is correct or not.

Itkonen is adamant that norms of language, as well as norms of logic, are “out there”, and thus not located in individual consciousness. The “out there” cannot, however, be observed as spatio-temporal objects either, since the system of language, *langue*, is not visible, whereas behavior is. That is, normative behavior is observable, the norms themselves are not. This leaves very few options as to where to really look for norms “out there”, and it seems to posit a special kind of consciousness that is somehow not individual. With reference to Husserl’s account of intersubjectivity (see Section 2), we can strengthen the view proposed by Itkonen by saying that it is essential that the apprehension of norms is not the apprehension of something that is essentially *private*. That is, others need also be able to intuit these norms, and thus they become norms of the shared life-world in that they are experienced as objects that we, through empathy, understand that others can experience as well. This may not fully answer the question of what it means to say that language norms are “out there”, but we can capture the essence of the argument Itkonen is making that language norms are necessarily intersubjective and in principle accessible to a speaker’s intuition.

Itkonen also argues for the necessity of the role of empathy in the apprehension of norms, furthering the similarities between his account and the phenomenological. In a way, his three steps of the emergence of language norms mirror Husserl’s idea of the shared life-world (*ibid.*, p. 26):

⁶ Zlatev and Blomberg (2019) include the individual (situated) and universal (or embodied, in their words) level as language norms due to their influence on language use, and it could perhaps be done here as well, but ultimately a choice on this will not lead to a different answer to the question of where language norms are. This parsing is done for the sake of focusing on language-specific norms. Principles of thought, I take it, can exist without languages, and norms on a discourse level have to do with conforming with non-language related constraints (Gricean maxims, politeness, etc.). But this is a discussion in and of itself.

- (i) I introspectively know⁷ that right now I mean ‘Y’ by X.
- (ii) I empathically know that also others can mean or have meant ‘Y’ by X.
- (iii) I intuitively know that X means ‘Y’ (i.e., that one ought to mean ‘Y’ by X).

Along with the “intuition = conventionalized empathy” (Itkonen, 2008, p. 26) formula, we can see how the intersubjective “ought” of language norms arise from one’s own experience of intimation (Bundgaard, 2010, p. 373) – the latter being the experience that others are expressing, intimating, something by way of offering some kind of sign.⁸

To sum up, Itkonen suggests that norms as intersubjective entities can arise from introspection and empathy, i.e., through understanding the other’s communicative intention as being similar to our own. This gives three necessary qualities that language norms need to possess: (1) they consist of rules of how to use a given language (2), they need to be shared, (3) the shared rules are inherently accessible to our conscious reflection (intuition).

The similarities to the Husserlian account of intersubjectivity in the life-world are noteworthy, but some important aspects are missing in Itkonen’s account. A number of these are brought up by Zlatev and Blomberg (2019) discussed below, but one that first needs isolated mention is that Itkonen seems to overemphasize the role of *reflective consciousness*. For when we consider the phenomenon of language norms in themselves, are we not first struck by the fact that they operate under the level of reflective consciousness and perhaps even without any conscious awareness at all? Especially in producing utterances, it is rare that we stop to think about language norms unless something has noticeably gone wrong which requires overt reflection. While the emphasis on the role of consciousness in norms is undeniably valuable, it threatens to distort the phenomenon of language norms as they function in the life-world. What Itkonen’s analysis fails to account for is the way in which language norms are there “in the background”, as the following quote from Husserl elucidates about experiences (“*Erlebnisse*” in the German original – Husserl, 1977, p. 95 – here translated as “mental process(es)”):

⁷ Itkonen (2016) seems to subscribe to a *JTB* (*justified true belief*, see e.g., Ichikawa & Steup, 2018) conception of knowledge but says little about how he views *justification*. In modern analytic epistemology, justification is normally viewed either as *internalist* or *externalist*. The distinction consists, in the broadest sense, in whether justification implies conscious awareness of one’s state of knowing. In epistemic logic, this involves the question whether knowing implies knowing that one knows, the so-called KK-thesis (see for instance Hilpinen, 1970). Were one to interpret Itkonen’s notion of justification in accordance with externalism, subsequently making his conception of knowledge externalist, the criticism below that Itkonen over-emphasizes reflection in his account of language norms could be misguided. However, since each instance of knowledge here is coupled with conscious states (introspectively, empathetically, intuitively), it seems that Itkonen has an internalist conception of justification and knowledge in mind, which then faces the criticism below. Nonetheless, I want to acknowledge the possibility that this is in fact not how Itkonen views knowledge, which, if it were the case, would require an entirely different discussion.

⁸ Itkonen argues that norms arise by way of a *leap* (between “is” and “ought”). But this does not necessarily have to be by way of a non-descript “leap” in the case of language norms. Quine (1986, pp. 663-65) argues for how an “ought” may be derived from an “is” (that is, how normativity can arise out of a description) as long as one adds a “terminal parameter” to a subject’s activity (his argument pertains to epistemology but seems applicable here). For instance, if we add to Itkonen’s schema the assumption that “I want to be generally understood that by utterance U I mean content C”, normativity (the ‘ought’) may be said to emerge out of this desire to be understood along with the shared intuition that U means C. See also von Wright’s (1963, 1972) *Practical Inference* and Black’s *The gap between 'is' and 'should'* (1969) for more detailed elaborations of this idea.

“All mental processes [Erlebnisse] are intended to:” This signifies, then, that in the specific case of intensive mental processes not only are they conscious of something and present as consciousness of something when they themselves are the Objects of a reflecting consciousness, but also that they are there already as a “background” when they are not reflected on and thus of essential necessity are “ready to be perceived” in a sense which is, in the first place, analogous to the one in which unnoticed physical things in our external field of regard are ready to be perceived.

It is precisely this phenomenon of the pre-reflective “ready to be perceived” aspect of intentional acts that is missing in Itkonen’s reflection-only account of language norms. Language norms can be said to be part of what is “pregiven in passive certainty” (Husserl, 1973, p. 31), which is a notion Husserl grew to emphasize more and more as the foundation for all intentional acts. It seems essential, then, that norms are not only in principle accessible reflectively and even “supported by” such intuitive apprehension of them (Itkonen, 1997, p. 5), but need the capacity to be acquired and operate without reflective consciousness as well – the accessibility of language norms need to be due to the fact that they are already there before reflection, ready to be apprehended. The latter requires some form of explanation.

It is primarily on this point that Zlatev and Blomberg (2019) get closer to the phenomenon itself, in part by explicitly using Husserlian and post-Husserlian phenomenologist ideas. Using notions such as *passive synthesis* (Husserl, 2001, p. 275-76) and *operative intentionality* (Merleau-Ponty, 2012, pp. lxxxii & xiii)⁹, it becomes possible to account for this non-reflective functioning of language norms.

With operative intentionality Zlatev and Blomberg recount the ways in which language norms can be apprehended on a more basic level than Itkonen’s intuition-based method. They can be grasped by intentional acts that are (1) pre-reflective and non-theoretical (operative intentionality), (2) categorial intuitions that are pre-theoretical but reflective which allow judgments on the correctness of a given sentence, and (3) theoretical or eidetic intuitions aiming towards invariant language rules, which naturally are then also reflective.

Given their phenomenological framework, Zlatev and Blomberg conclude that language norms cannot be part of the physical world, nor be strictly in the mind, and yet not in some kind of Popperian world 3. Instead, language norms are said to be in the life-world and “exist as structures of operative intentionality, setting “invisible” conditions for what constitutes appropriate language use. They are thus inhabited, [...] rather than intuited, and are constantly being confirmed and sanctioned in interaction with others.” (Zlatev & Blomberg, 2019, p. 95).

Thus, language norms cannot exist in a Popperian world 3 since they exist as structures of operative intentionality and thus cannot be “objective” sensu Popper; Zlatev and Blomberg require a consciousness proper, not simply a potential future consciousness or future deciphering of signs. The fact that language norms operate pre-reflectively can be understood while maintaining their accessibility to both reflection and higher-level theorizing. In the following section, these perhaps more peripheral notions of language norms will be kept in mind when approaching the question of where they might be located. The fact that they can be apprehended by quite dissimilar intentional acts is especially noteworthy and raises the question whether the account given so far has not been too narrow regarding which kind of intentional acts can be said to apprehend language norms.

But before that, let it be said that the rejection of the three Popperian worlds can be viewed as a natural conclusion given the phenomenological method of bracketing such potentially meaningless ontologizing. However, another aspect of phenomenology is to engage in an analysis of the actual meaning of terms like “mental” and “physical” as they are related to the life-world,

⁹ From (ibid., p.441): “beneath “act intentionality” – which is the thetic consciousness of an object that, in intellectual memory, for example, converts the “this-thing” into an idea – we must acknowledge an “operative” intentionality (*fungierende Intentionalität*), which makes the former one possible”.

where we may still find relevant distinctions between mental phenomena and physical phenomena and perhaps even the “world” of independent propositions or objects of “objective knowledge”. But this remains to be shown. So let us now turn to the “where” of language norms.

4. Locating language norms within the life-world

Is it possible to reformulate the notions of the Popperian ontology in a more experientially grounded manner in order to reconcile it with the phenomenological view of Zlatev and Blomberg (2019)? Arguably so, if we permit that each of the three worlds of Popper can be understood as aspects of the life-world. Additionally, making operative intentionality the primary way in which norms are apprehended answers some questions yet it fails to answer where the intentional object of the intentional acts is located in virtue of being a situated phenomenon, as well as how language norms are acquired if their primary structure is inhabited and invisible.

According to the tenets of phenomenology, everything is grounded and localizable in the life-world. Thus, when we ask, “where are language norms?”, we cannot simply answer “in the life-world!” without thereby stating the obvious. The two questions regarding language norms given the phenomenological approach, I believe, should be formulated as follows:

- What are the different manners in which language norms, as noema, are presented to us?
- Are there noematic differences in their modes of presentation?

So, again, we are not looking for the location of individual trees, but for the kinds of soil that bring them about. And for language norms, we are looking for the kind of intentional acts that buttress them, and the different qualities of the manners in which one may apprehend a language norm.

First, let it be said that Zlatev and Blomberg (2019) focus, importantly, on the noetic side of intentional acts. But what is equally important for the “where” of language norms is the context in which the noematic objects are presented to us – we have to bring the background to the fore, in other words. Zlatev and Blomberg (2019, p. 95) state the following about the “what” question:

Hence, our conclusion is that language norms, much like other implicit social norms, exist as structures of operative intentionality, setting “invisible” conditions for what constitutes appropriate language use. They are thus *inhabited*, in the words of Merleau-Ponty (1962, [1945]), rather than intuited, and are constantly being confirmed and sanctioned in interaction with others.

This conclusion stems in part from what was established by Itkonen, namely, the idea that norms are neither observable nor strictly speaking introspected. But here a seemingly serious question arises: how are language norms learned if they are not observable (through either of the five senses), that is, if there are no ‘public’ instantiations of them? It seems they must be instantiated by way of some public means.

For when Zlatev and Blomberg (2019) say that language norms are “invisible”, albeit in scare quotes, what do they really mean? Clearly, they must mean more than merely stating that norms are in the minds of speakers, as pointed out in the previous section. Is it not possible that there are indeed visible instantiations of language norms as well? The constraints language norms put on language use can perhaps even be instantiated in backgrounds entirely different from those associated with the structure of the operative intentional act, possibly even in backgrounds that are understandable in terms of a tripartite ontology.

Let us recapitulate the discussion so far. Language norms are, minimally, constraints on the appropriate use of language. These norms are primarily lived but can be apprehended through intuition and modelled through higher-level theorizing. But it was also claimed that norms cannot

be merely “invisible” (if this is understood as “hidden” in the minds of speakers), which requires further elaboration.

There are also two more aspects that need to be mentioned here which are brought up in Zlatev and Blomberg (2019). The first is that language norms are breakable, meaning they are not like natural laws, and if one breaks them, one is open to social sanctions (*ibid.*, p. 72), including simply not being understood. This should not be overlooked since it seems to uncover what the constraints are in their most concrete experienceable form. Constraints, after all, are only felt and actualized insofar as they are enforced. We thus cannot simply say that they are “invisible” without specifying how they can be *palpable*, meaning observable and learnable through the felt constraints, in the form of something like corrections and/or confusion of an addressee. Therefore, the constraining factors of language norms consist *inter alia* of the sanctioning activity of linguistic communities.

Now this does not mean that the constraints cannot be experienced differently, nor that one mode of experience takes primacy over another. The same intentional object (the matter) can simply be apprehended through different intentional acts (qualities), just as Zlatev and Blomberg suggest.

But the focus needs to be shifted to the constraint itself and what it consists in experientially without forgetting that language norms are acquired. The problem of the genesis (on an individual level) of the operative intentionality that puts us in contact with language norms in our lived experience is a serious one, but it seems to be solved if one were to accept that language norms can be experienced (instantiated) in the interactions of speakers. It can perhaps be debated which kind of constraint is primary for theoretical purposes, that is, which gives the most accurate portrayal of language norms as they function in everyday language use. It could be the constraints as they are in interactions of speakers, as they are intuitively given to the individual, or as they are in the schematic and formal sense of the theorizer.¹⁰ Assuming that we can in fact accurately represent language norms as they are lived, since reflection and theorizing can pertain to the same object as our operative intentionality, where can they now be said to be located?

First, they can be said to be located in the concrete constraints on language use within a language community, consisting of the behaviors that result in these constraints, such as confusion, interruptions, corrections, disapproval, etc. Second, they can be said to be located within the embodied agent (as states of non-reflective knowledge) who has lived through these enforcements and as a result use their language with these constraints by way of habit. Third, they can be said to be part of the propositional and reflective knowledge of the mature speaker who has gained enough authority to themselves become enforcers of their non-reflectively acquired language norms. Finally, language norms can be said to be located in the institutional “objective knowledge” of the theorizers as they appear in the work of linguists. That is, in the literal artifacts of scientific papers, of the common knowledge of scientific communities, etc.

Taking all of these aspects, again, in the sense of the life-world, we find that these are not distinct “worlds”, but all parts of the unified whole of experiences available to us as human beings. However, we also find that we cannot merely say that language norms are not in the world of the physical, in the world of the mental, nor in the world of objective knowledge, as done by Zlatev and Blomberg (2019). Instead, we must say that they are instantiated in all of these places insofar as we in principle can experience them as distinctly physical, that is, concrete types of interactions that result in constrained use. But also, as embodied and lived, that is, as manifested in the unprompted adhering to language norms, as well as our own felt and reflected intuitions regarding

¹⁰ Here one could object and state with Coseriu (2000) that what is primary is the intuition of speakers. This may be so, but it seems to depend on the reliability of each account. The theoretician may consult many speakers, while a single speaker can normally only consult their own intuitions (and perhaps those around them). In that sense, one might see the theoretic account of norms as the more reliable and primary way of apprehending norms, in that it involves the intuitions of many speakers, studied systematically. Of course, this is still dependent on the intuitions of individuals. Ultimately, it is only a matter of which end-product is more likely to correspond to a sedimented norm.

the correctness or incorrectness of any given sentence of the languages we speak. In sum, they are instantiated in the normative behaviors and interactions of language communities, in the embodied minds of speakers, in the states of propositional knowing located wherever the reflective mind is located, and in the resulting artifacts of scientific research.

5. Conclusions

One way to evaluate if the account of language norms presented in this article has any bearing is to assess whether it is possible to establish correlations between different kinds of experiences of language norms. The study of language norms would then aim to answer the question whether they can genuinely be taken as the same structure or object throughout these rather different intentional acts. Questions abound. Does the theorized grammatical rule lie dormant in ordinary speakers? Can correlates be found in the brain? Do ordinary speakers uphold these language norms in everyday life? Do they uphold them in an experimental setting where language norms are intentionally broken? Are the language norms consciously “defended” by ordinary speakers? And do constitutive and regulative norms of language differ significantly for ordinary speakers? These are some of the questions that may guide empirical work on language norms. It is only through studying these phenomena that we may discard certain potential locations of language norms and affirm others as being valid; the matter cannot be settled a priori through ontologizing. Once the relevant constraint of appropriate use is identified, it becomes a matter of finding out where similar constraints are instantiated.

We may thus conclude by saying that we should be wary of ontological claims in language studies. But we should also be wary of going too far in the denial of ontological claims and instead see them for what they are: an emphasis (that may or may not be exaggerated) of one aspect, or mode of apprehension, of the phenomenon. We are not yet in a position to reject any “place” as being a suitable holder of language norms on the basis of conceptual concerns alone. Instead, it is only through a genuinely phenomenological approach that we may figure out which modes of access to language norms are primary in the experience of ordinary speakers. That is, only through a systematic study of the phenomena may we decide which modes of access are active, in the sense of being truly constitutive of norms. Having achieved this, one can then begin to posit more theoretical constitutive language norms and establish the correspondence between theorized norms and norms as lived experience. If nothing else, such an approach would be more holistic and may prove to offer a fuller picture of the nature of language norms, as well as the manner in which they can be said to exist while giving us theoretical backing in viewing different subfields of linguistics as studying essentially the same kind of object.

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