

The Normativity of Meaning: Empirical Sources of Counterevidence

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A distinctive theme in philosophy after Wittgenstein concerns the normativity of language. In its standard form, the theme is developed in two interwoven parts: first, it is asserted that our meaningful use of words must necessarily be underwritten by specific lexical norms (e.g., ‘green’ means *green*); second, it is asserted that to seek the provenance of these norms, we must look beyond the individual language user to social conventions in his or her language community (e.g., to the convention that assigns the semantic content *green* to the word type ‘green’.) Variations on this view can be found in the works of Kripke, Dummett, Wiggins, Wright, Stroud, and others. More precisely, the target view can be articulated as follows:

[Lexical norms thesis:] For an individual speaker to be able to meaningfully deploy any word $\langle w \rangle$, there must be a lexical norm $\langle w \text{ means } m \rangle$ which governs the use of that word in his or her language community.

Whereas most discussions of the lexical norms thesis – pro et contra – rely largely on a priori considerations, I believe it can be shown to be false on empirical grounds. To this end, the bulk of my paper is devoted to exploring and offering a new interpretation of empirical data concerning the linguistic abilities of congenitally deaf children who have never been exposed to a public, conventional language.