

Rules and regulations: is culture-learning like language-acquisition?

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Abstract

The article attempts to tease apart Regulative, Constitutive, Prescriptive and Descriptive Rules, and pinpoints their respective role in First and Second Language Acquisition as well as in Culture Learning. It is proposed that the proportion of Regulative Rules is generally under-estimated, while the incidence of Constitutive Rules tends to be over-estimated.

The paper puts forward the Rule Category Substitution Fallacy, a hypothesis suggested to be of use in exploring what fuels other-culture intolerance. The Fallacy is demonstrated to be a practical manifestation of the Terror Management Theory (e.g. Greenberg et al 1997) and a compensation-strategy doomed to failure.

Finally, alternative terror-management strategies are proposed.

Keywords: Constitutive Rules; Regulative Rules; Rule-category Substitution Fallacy; culture-distance; Terror Management Theory.

The words *language* and *culture* are often used metaphorically (e.g. "he speaks the language of women" or "the gang-culture of inner cities"), sometimes they are almost interchangeable ("the language/culture of politics"). This points to a *common denominator* behind the two notions: both language and culture can be construed as a *set of rules* one can either be familiar with or ignorant of.

At their most general, rules are defined by the Longman Dictionary of the English Language as an "established procedure, custom, or habit" (1984).

Linguistics hones in further by differentiating between "descriptivism" (describing what occurs) and "prescriptivism" (authoritarian recommendations about correctness) (Crystal 1987).

Rules, it seems, come in different *categories*.

Taking football as an example, we find a large number of rules applying to the game, from needing a ball that players kick to ruling out verbally abusing the referee. It is easy to see how these rules are indeed very different: kicking the ball (rather than throwing it) makes football what it is, while not voicing blasphemous thoughts merely modifies what goes on during the game.

Rules that constitute something, like ball-kicking does football, can be termed *Constitutive Rules*.

Violating a Constitutive Rule, say, on the football-pitch, is penalised - but, more importantly, such a rule-violation negates the thing itself by removing indispensable ingredients from its very definition.

The "no swearing rule", on the other hand, does not constitute football: it only regulates how it is expected to be played. Rules of this order can be termed *Regulative Rules*. Violating them is also penalised, but the penalty will be the result of a pre-arranged consensus rather than the unavoidable disintegration of the thing itself as seen with Constitutive Rule violations.

Both Constitutive and Regulative Rules can be either *Descriptive* or *Prescriptive*. Descriptive Rules simply state what is observed (e.g. un-supported objects will fall to the ground) – while Prescriptive

Rules are in effect orders to choose one alternative over another (e.g. "Thou shalt not kill.").

Constitutive and Regulative Rules also apply to *language* in general as well as language-acquisition in particular. Constitutive Rules of languages ensure a grammatical, so potentially less ambiguous, conveyance of meanings, while Regulative Rules take care of what is deemed to be appropriate usage under the circumstances.

It would appear that Constitutive Rules can be construed as "more important" than Regulative Rules: indeed, it feels as if violating Constitutive Rules should be avoided "at all costs" while Regulative Rule violations are to be avoided "if at all possible".

This would seem helpful towards a finer distinction among rules: after all jeopardizing the very existence of something poses greater "danger" than "simply" modifying it along a continuum...

What decides, however, whether the extent of modifications (quantitative change) has or has not effected a qualitative change, a change beyond all recognition in the original?

Furthermore, is it true that one man's Constitutive Rule can easily be another man's Regulative Rule and vice-versa?

These fundamentally relevant questions are not any easier to answer with regard to language than they are with regard to culture.

It might not be unreasonable to argue that, as often as not, what decides is whether a *descriptivist* or a *prescriptivist attitude* is adopted.

What complicates the issue is that a "*universally shared consensus*" as to *which rules are which* seem to be *lacking*! Instead there appears to be an eagerness to look upon rule-violations as if they were all the same: equally important and equipotential in their destructivity.

This is not helped by the fact that *psychological universals* (the features that unite humankind – anybody's idea of a Constitutive Rule) themselves come in three categories, according to different levels of potential universality. Thus we can differentiate among *existential universals* (using the same psychological processes but for different functions, e.g. arithmetic reasoning strategies with abacus users only); *functional universals* (same processes, same use but different accessibility, e.g. gender-effects in mate-preferences vary in size); and *accessibility universals* (same processes, same use, same degree of accessibility, e.g. quantity estimation). It is worth noting that while most psychological processes are generally assumed to be accessibility universals by far not all of them are (for related definitions see Norenzayan & Heine 2005). Accessibility universals (the most "universal universals" available) are indeed made up of Constitutive Rules but even there treading carefully between Descriptive Rules (e.g. walking upright, having language, being aware of mortality) and Prescriptive Rules (e.g. "Thou shalt not kill" cf cannibalism) is advised.

Non-universals (going differently about things, according to our respective cultures) are even more difficult to remain level-headed about. Culture-specificity renders these among Regulative Rules in the grand scheme of things, but individual cultures have their own "lesser order" Constitutive as well as Regulative Rules, both divisible into Verbal (i.e. language) and Non-verbal (i.e. existential and functional universals, cultural differences /NB. please note that the term "non-verbal" is used to mean "everything that is NOT verbal language"/) categories, with only Constitutive Verbal Rules (i.e. grammar) being Prescriptive. *Cultural differences* "proper" could therefore be described as *Non-universal Regulative Non-verbal Descriptive Rules* varying among cultures, resulting in the cultural diversity characteristic of the human species.

It is easy to see how culture and language continue to be intertwined, not least because language is of course part of culture. Culture-learning and language-acquisition are also parallel processes, whether completed at the developmentally usual age or take place later in life.

Before saying anything relevant about *language-acquisition*, differentiating between First Language (*1stL*) and Second Language(s) (*2ndL/s*) is necessary. *1stL* is the language the person acquires the

earliest, and, consequently, regards it as "mother-tongue" – while 2ndL/s are (all) the other language(s) the person acquires and reaches a level of competence in. Competence may vary from minimal to bi-lingual command.

Culture-learning is in many ways *similar*. It is meaningful to distinguish between First Culture (*1stC*) and Second Culture(s) (*2ndC/s*), and define each along the same lines as with languages. Thus 1stC is the earliest-acquired, so-called "mother-culture", while 2ndC/s are those acquired later to a varying degree of competence. However, the fact that language is part of culture renders the two acquisition-processes essentially *different*: culture-learning is, by definition, more complex.

This might be the reason why it is relatively easy to pass a value-judgement about an utterance, declaring it grammatical/appropriate or otherwise – and why it is by far more difficult to do the same when it comes to a cultural manifestation.

So how do we decide what to think of an "act of culture"? Whether it is reassuringly familiar, a bit strange, quite exotic, unheard of, or, indeed, downright unacceptable? A large part of the decision-making consists of surmising what rules the act is governed by and comparing these rules to the ones we adhere to. Rule-similarities foster a feeling of familiarity – rule-differences alienate, as measured by the well-known index of *culture-distance*, providing empirical confirmation to the hypothesis that cultures' relative location on this dimension is a major determinant of the extent to which culture-shock is experienced, as well as that of the ease with which the respective cultures can be learned through contact (Furnham & Bochner 1982).

But before we declare the difference between the two sets of rules intolerable, should we not make sure that what differs is important enough?

According to our hypothesis, insufficient awareness of the fact that there is a difference among various categories of rules appears to create a *bias*. The result seems to be a general tendency to *over-estimate the incidence of Constitutive Rules* while *under-estimating the proportion of Regulative Rules*: as if what tends to happen in a certain way could not/should not happen another way. This bias, which could usefully be termed the *Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy*, would, in effect, be two fallacies rolled into one. Firstly, the assumption that all rules deemed important by the individual are equally and enormously important (i.e. *all rules are "constitutive"*), and, secondly, that any violation of these rules threaten the culture with disintegration (i.e. *all rules have to be "prescriptive"*).

Failure to be able to distinguish between Constitutive and Regulative Rules might occur with the best of intentions: the difficulties of deciding where on a continuum qualitative change sets in are considerable, as discussed earlier.

It would appear, however, that lack of mindfulness of the difficulties involved renders the individual *incapable of being open-minded enough* when considering which rules are truly essential and which are merely based on preferences. If the automatic assumption is that "*a rule is a rule so it must not be violated*", this inevitably results in over-reacting to any rule-violation, regardless of the potential danger such a violation might pose to the culture in question. Whoever is perpetrating rule-violations of any kind is, therefore, hugely threatening and undesirable – the end-result is *other-culture intolerance*, the ultimate non-acceptance of the "otherness of the other".

As suggested by the *Terror Management Theory* (e.g. Greenberg et al 1997), one of the main functions of culture is to buffer against mortality-awareness. Culture, therefore, is rather important, - so much so, that mortality-salience demonstrably increases other-culture intolerance as stated by the *Mortality Salience Hypothesis* (e.g. Rosenblatt et al 1989). Safeguarding our culture above all else thus does appear to be a proirity. It is a mute point, however, by what means this is deemed achievable.

The *Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy* can succesfully be construed as a *practical manifestation of the Terror Management Theory*, its function being to ensure that the culture remains intact. Failure to recognise differences among the significance of various rules results in hyper-vigilance: no form of dissent is deemed tolerable, be it radical change or modest modification. By ruling out progress in any shape or form, the Fallacy thus becomes a *compensation-strategy ultimately doomed to failure*.

It seems important, however, to recognise how very strong the motivation for finding terror-management strategies really is. The globally increased awareness and juxtaposition of various cultures, the Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy would be a product of, now more stringently than ever before, necessitates the finding of *alternative terror-management strategies*.

The obvious candidate, once again, is *Culture-Learning* on an individual level, leading to a population-scale *Intercultural Dialogue*, resulting in an increased familiarity among various cultures. A better understanding of other cultures, indeed a "*democratic plurality*" (Collin 1992) cannot but inevitably make rule-category appreciation more discriminating, leaving room for delighting in the "otherness of others". This would render the Rule-Category Substitution Fallacy less likely as a process, as well as more redundant as a strategy.

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