Sanctions and Rules of Language

Language can be thought of as a system of expressions the use of which is underlain by certain rules. To speak a language is to engage in a rule-governed form of behavior. Rules constitute linguistic performances as correct or incorrect. Successfully participating in discursive practices, thus, hinges on the evaluation and behavior of others. Linguistic behavior can only be correct or incorrect insofar as speakers treat it as correct or incorrect. Let us refer to behavior that speakers exhibit by classifying the behavior of others as correct or incorrect as *sanctioning* behavior. Sanctions indicate how correctness conditions for the usage of linguistic elements emerge.

However, the explanation of linguistic rules in terms of sanctions is subject to a simple but compelling objection. It reads as follows: sanction*ing* and sanction*ed* behavior are essentially of the same kind. In each case it is a matter of normative linguistic behavior. In the paradigmatic case one assertion sanctions the other. If, however, the sanctioning behavior is of the same kind as the behavior whose correctness it evaluates, it is something that can be classified as correct or incorrect itself. It turns out that sanctions themselves can be subject to sanctions. From this perspective the account becomes unsatisfactory since it leads to a vicious regress.

I argue that sanctions nevertheless can be helpful in explaining rules of language. In order to show this, however, it is necessary to draw a distinction between two kinds of sanctions. The first kind is internal to the system of norms that it helps to explain. Sanctions of this kind can only be specified in normative terms, i.e. in terms of correctness or incorrectness. Thus, they can be called *internal sanctions*. A paradigm case would be an assertion sanctioning another assertion. The other kind is external to the system of norms being discerned. Sanctioning behavior of this kind responds to a performance in a way that is specifiable in nonnormative terms. Thus, sanctions of this kind can be called *external sanctions*. Examples would be sanctioning an assertion by leaving the room or by refusing access to a certain place.

Now, the above-mentioned regress would arise if internal sanctions were the only way to indicate correctness conditions in linguistic usage. Obviously this is not the case. Discursive practice is always embedded in extra-linguistic and nonnormative contexts. Assertions always exert influence on the behavior of others and enable the coordination of one's own behavior. Accordingly, external sanctions play a vital role in classifying linguistic usage as correct or incorrect. Therefore, they can be seen as regress-stoppers in a sanction-based explanation of linguistic rules.