**The formation of meanings: language games as a determinant of foreign policy cooperation**

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**Abstract.** The EU recurrently faces internal and external challenges, potentially affecting its actorness in the foreign policy domain, and its capabilities. The challenges can determine a clash between the previously constituted intersubjectivity and new conceptions of the EU, following contestation of the EU’s norms. Through Ludwig Wittgenstein’s language games, it is possible to evidence how preferences among the Member States are subject to changes. Changes occur because the meaning provided to the norms governing their relations have an identity at a time, and identity through time, and meaning can be contested. The paper theoretically investigates how changes occur, directly affecting the EU’s ability in the field of foreign policy and the possibility for cooperation among Member States. Based on this, consensus on foreign policy is contingent and subject to change over time. A redefinition of the cooperation mechanisms at EU level becomes a contingency, requiring the establishment of a new intersubjectivity. This entails the EU to revise its foreign policy strategies and its mechanisms.

**Keyword.** Language Games; Cooperation; Norms; Contestation.

**Introduction: on the actorness and power of the EU**

The influence of the European Union (EU) in the international arena, along with the conferment of specific attributes through changes in the treaties governing the EU, have stimulated over the years a debate around the actorness of the EU, and about legitimacy as well (Duchêne, 1973; Hill, 1990; Whitman, 2011). As a matter of fact, the question about what kind of power the EU is and represents (Sjursen, 2006a) has produced a set of different answers, according to the scholars’ background, ontology of the research, approaches, and preferences. The answers have also been determined based on the historical period considered or in which the analysis has been made. Such a debate has not produced an unambiguous answer, since much of the attention on the study of the EU’s foreign policy has been solely focused on the internal dimension, that is the EU’s internal policy process (or policymaking process), while only a limited amount of literature has been focused on the real impact the EU exercises externally, through its foreign policy action (Smith, 2006).

At the basis of this paper, which has a theoretical aim, there is the question about how foreign policy cooperation can occur within the EU, based on the characterisation of the process defining the ontology of its norms and, consequently, allowing to identify the EU as a Normative Power (NP). As said, the issue has been subject over the years to extensive research, including elements of actorness, power, and legitimacy (Duchêne, 1973; Hill, 1990; Whitman, 2011). The attention has been mainly placed on the internal dimension of the EU, while only a limited amount of the literature and research has been focused on the external dimension and the impact of the EU in international politics (Smith, 2006). From another perspective, also the possibility to combine the internal and the external dimension of the EU within a single framework of theoretical analysis presents remarkably interesting potentialities, but also challenges, possibly leading to a more comprehensive understanding of the EU. In this regard, the definition of the EU as a normative kind of actor, or a NP, as developed by Ian Manners (2002), provides the initial ratio for this paper, aiming at defining the process characterizing the ontology of the EU’s norms as a normative kind of power. The aim is to contribute to the debate on NPE, through a multidisciplinary approach that takes into account elements of politics and the philosophy of language of the late Ludwig Wittgenstein, defined with the language games.

Such an approach has been determined based on the need of finding a theoretical justification to the plural ontological realities of the EU and what the EU brings together, so to effectively assess its actions and positions in the international arena, but also why defections can occur while interacting within an institutionalized framework. Within this context, the concept of ‘change’ takes on a preeminent role in the analysis of the EU as a NP. Specifically, if the focus has to be placed on what the EU is, an evolution in time must be observed, since the concept of ‘power’, as discussed by Manners, can be described as an entity in which change is a core element (Diez and Manners, 2007, p. 175). Owen Parker and Ben Rosamond (2013, p. 231) have also evidenced two specific features of the concept of NPE, being an ontological reality and a critical ontology, where both norms and realities promoted and diffused by the EU are plural and contingent social constructions. If these norms are socially constructed, then the meaning would be, too. Hence, what is the process leading to the definition of these meanings? Are these meanings fixed or subject to modifications?

On this basis, if change is a relevant feature, it is important to determine the process leading to said changes within the EU and how those changes may affect its external dimension and capabilities. The paper aims at assessing and verifying how change constitutes the main element defining the EU as a NP, legitimating and characterizing its actions in the field of foreign policy. Through this approach it is possible to overcome static perspectives of the EU, enabling a more holistic understanding of it, that takes into consideration the evolutionary and dynamic process of change at its basis.

**On the intersubjective and intrasubjective dimensions of politics within the EU.**

A specific focus must be placed on the norms the EU promotes and their meanings. Meanings and their formulations are, in fact, sustained across a wide network of customary practices, as evidenced by the late works of the Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein, constituting the basis of the methodological framework of reference of this paper (Lawn, 2003, p. 281). The relevance of the philosopher is provided by the fact that in the late Wittgenstein’s works it is possible to locate many insights enabling to envisage how it is possible to establish allegiances to specific values, as a result of a plurality of language games rather than through rational argumentation (Mouffe, 2000, p. 11). Through this it is possible to demonstrate how and to what extent, through the implementation of language games, MS and the EU’s institutions, create and establish among them one or more shared intersubjectivities, where meanings are being provided to the norms, within an evolutionary institutional framework.

Different languages games codify a variety of perspectives on the reality where interactions among players occur, indicating the relativity of the language. This means that speakers – or players – prefer to see the world according to some specific categories shared by the community they belong to or, to put it differently, according to a specific matrix they bring in a context where relations take place (Arsith, 2011, p. 14).

Given the hybrid nature of the EU, interactions among the different players can occur according to different modalities, so that the outcomes might differ on the basis of the actors that are involved in the process. In other words, it is possible to affirm that each one of the interacting parties has a different sociological, linguistic, historical, and behavioural matrix, bringing it into the system of interactions, from where a variety of differing possibilities can arise. Within this framework of analysis and through these specific components, language assumes its ‘true’ meaning. From here, interactions take place, and, through them, it is eventually possible to create agreements, or shared views, among the numerous players, leading to establishing a common intersubjectivity among the parties involved (Stickney, 2008, p. 621). This is, however, one of the possibilities, since the previously defined meanings can be contested. A language game can be described as ‘a collection of games associated only by the weak and vague notion of family resemblance’ (Kopytko, 2007, p. 794), where the core is represented by their use in custom-regulated patterns of interaction occurring among the different players, where each one of them has their very own characteristics, rules, and goals. This takes place in a transformative process where new language games can come to life while others disappear, hence redefining the matrix at the basis of the language games being played. These language games can come to life in different settings and conditions, and the settings might have implications on the various outcomes of the language games, according to the extent the setting is institutionalized.

This peculiar view of the normative dimension of the EU is linked to the concept of intersubjectivity. As a concept, intersubjectivity has a fundamental function in the development of what can be called the EU normative intersubjective theory, specifically for the implications it can have in defining the actorness and the power in normative terms of the EU, also in relations to third parties. When analysing intersubjectivity, three elements have to be taken into consideration, specifically when linking this concept to the late Wittgenstein’s thoughts: the normative nature of language, the pragmatic understanding of normativity, and the social character of normative practices (Brandom, 1994, p. 55; Sládeček, 2013, p. 245). As evidenced by Edmund Husserl (1991), different perspectives of the world are necessary if the aim is to establish the objectivity of the world, where the objectivity is intersubjective (Crossley, 1996, p. 3). As highlighted by Nick Crossley (1996, p. 3) ‘it is a view of the world arrived at through mutual confirmation and negotiation between different and independent perspectives’. Hence, when taking into account the combination of the structure of things and the different possibilities arising from the relations occurring within the structure, that is defined as a form of life, it is also necessary to consider how it relies upon the so-called interworld, that is made of shared meanings, transcending the individual actor (Crossley, 1996, p. 4).

This view allows to understand and verify how, and for what reason, change is a core component in the definition of the power of the EU. In fact, it is through an actual change, defined by the creation of shared meanings around specific norms, that it has been possible to empower the EU as normative kind of actor in the international arena. Moreover, the formation of the meanings is also highly relevant: in fact, it is the act of constructing the concepts that makes them normative, so that the actions implemented by the different actors are based on certain (held) norms (Sládeček, 2013, p. 246). Based on this account, if we take into consideration a variety of speakers, having their own systems of beliefs as previously assessed, the creation of a common meaning or understanding is the result of a specific process where different perspectives of the world are voiced and have to be taken into account.

On this basis, the relation between intersubjectivity and power becomes highly relevant: in fact, it can be claimed that power needs the intersubjectivity to create and produce its effects, so that all the power relations can be defined as intersubjective, and dependent on the intersubjectivity eventually established among various parties, substantiating the power (Crossley, 1996, p. 127). Hence, the concepts of power and intersubjectivity must be jointly assessed, more than ever when analysing the EU as a normative kind of power, since the establishment of an intersubjectivity within the EU, and in relation to others, affects its normative-based kind of power, relying upon the creation of shared meanings. The main concern arising from this account is on how the power is constituted, through a progressive development of attributions, and effectively exercised. Starting from this premise, when analysing the EU as a NP, the focus should be firmly placed on how the EU has developed this kind of power, and to what extent it can effectively exercise it, both within and outside its boundaries. Through this it is possible to broaden the ‘mere’ power as a capacity held by a specific actor, by assessing the intersubjectivity elements within the EU, and to verify how the intersubjective dimension affects the power of the EU, within a transformative framework.

The intersubjective element of power is peculiar in the work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault who highlighted the elements at the basis of a power relation:

‘[that] the “other” (the one over whom power is exercised) be thoroughly recognised to the end as a person who acts; and that, faced with a relationship of power, a whole field of responses, reactions, results and possible interventions may open up’ (1982, p. 220; Crossley, 1996, p. 136).

What emerges from this account is an intersubjective view of power that is in line with the definition of the form of life, in Ludwig Wittgenstein’s acceptation, defined the combination of the structure of things and the different possibilities arising from the relations occurring within the structure. From this perspective, power becomes a more fluid concept rather than being single faced, it becomes multifaceted, since it can be exercised in various forms, and with very different results across the board, and it can be assessed as an evolutionary attribute of the EU, characterising it as a NP. On this basis, it is possible to understand the power of the EU from a less monolithic perception, where at its core there is the concept of NP, while including a variety of perceptions, responses, reactions, and results, where the concept of power is assessed as an intersubjective force based in meaning (Crossley, 1996, p. 137). Nonetheless, as mentioned, norms can be contested, also evidencing the relevance of the intrasubjective dimension in relation to the development of the power relations within the EU, and in its relations towards third parties. The intrasubjective dimension can be defined as the ‘plurality of existential possibilities’, as a result of the relations in terms of conflicts and cooperation occurring within a single unit (Henry, 2013, pp. 210-211). Thus, it emerges as a complex and multidimensional self, that can be directly referred to the different recipients of the EU’s norms (Henry, 2013). In other words, the same norms whose meaning can be defined within an intersubjective dimension, can be contested when transposed to the intrasubjective dimension, because of the multidimensional characters of the different recipients. From here a transformative process can occur, since new definitions might be needed, leading to establishing a different intersubjectivity. The transformative process occurs through language games, as previously defined.

**From intersubjectivity and NP to an EU normative intersubjective theory**

If it is true that the EU as a NP needs the intersubjectivity dimension to create and produce its effects, the power relations can be defined as intersubjective, and dependent on the intersubjectivity eventually established among the different parties (Crossley, 1996, p. 127). As an intersubjective force, the EU enables the conditions for the cooperation among different entities having different values-based systems, aiming at constituting one or more power relations, affecting the internal and the external dimensions of its actorness. This process occurs through the institutionalisation of its norms, which finds its basis in the process of the formation of their meanings, occurring in the first instance within an actor. This process is shaped horizontally, involving all the actors and their systems of values and beliefs. These norms are defined as mobile, social constructions, whose meaning can vary, having the norms as an ‘identity at a time and identity through time’ (Forbes, 2014, pp. 16-17). Hence, while analysing the process determining the ontology of the EU’s norms, it can be defined as an active process of mutual knowing and learning, through which different entities define the meaning of the norms as a result of social practices, occurring within an institutionalised environment.

The institutionalisation process can occur at two different, to some extent also concomitant, stages: an internal one, that is within the EU, and an external one, towards the third parties. The internal one refers to those actors that are already members of the EU; the external dimension refers, as in the case of enlargement, to the applicants or candidate countries. The internal institutionalisation is verified when those entities that are already part of the EU continuously accept and comply to the shared norms, rules, and beliefs, hence when there is an effective internal diffusion, and acceptance of the significance of the norms. This theorisation places a further problem on the identity of the meanings. In fact, if it is true that for any class of entity it is possible to make a distinction between ‘identity at a time and identity through time’, this means that questions can arise about the intrasubjective and the intersubjective identity of the content – in this case the meanings and understandings of norms, beliefs, and rules – in a cross-temporal pattern (Forbes, 2014, pp. 16-17). This can potentially affect the identity and actorness of the EU, both internally and externally, creating the conditions for a redefinition of the meanings, where the acceptance of the norms can be challenged, producing intersubjective effects. It also means that the power relations within the EU might be modified, while interacting within the institutional framework represented by the EU itself.

The level of horizontal institutionalisation will be reformulated as a result of an eventual change of the meanings. When assessing the intrasubjective and intersubjective levels a specific dichotomy can also arise, having important implications in terms of power and power relations, also from a normative perspective. In fact, changes can occur within subjects, that is the intrasubjective level, and between subjects, representing the intrasubjective one. From this perspective, changes occurring within an actor can cause effects at the intersubjective level, and the opposite; these intrasubjective and intersubjective changes can also follow different paths and have differing effects. This evidences how change is a core element in the process of definition of the actorness of the EU and its evolution as a NP, so that it is not possible to predetermine the specific meaning of norms and beliefs *a priori*, or to what extent their acceptance will be challenged, and the consequences arising from it, both internally and externally of the EU.

Although such a process can be perceived as a limit, it constitutes the essence of the NP of the EU, where norms and their meanings can be transformed, contested, and undertake a process of internalisation and externalisation. In fact, with these norms being mobile constructions, different acceptations may arise over time, along with multiple coexistent intersubjectivities within the same framework of political cooperation defined by specific institutions. This framework serves as an arena where the different actors engage with language games in the forms of social practices. It follows that the NP of the EU is better defined by its ability to bring together within the same political arena a variety of entities that together are part of an evolutionary framework of a different system of values and beliefs. In this case, being normative refers to the power of the EU to create the possible conditions for the definition of the meanings of the norms and for setting the conditions for possible cooperation among a plurality of heterogeneous actors, bringing within the context a variety of (competing) perspectives The EU facilitates the possibility to shape ‘conceptions of the normal’ (Manners, 2002, p. 240), defined as a normativity that is followed and accepted but also to some extent, imposed (Belardinelli, 2002, p. 18). Hence, it is through this process that the EU defines what normal is, also allowing the coexistence of different intersubjectivities that might arise when the meaning of a norm is contested. In this regard, the EU provides the institutionalised framework for such a coexistence and for the re-definition in time of the norms, that occur through the language games.

The NP feature of the EU resides in its ability to bring together a plurality of values-based system within the same framework of possible political collaboration, where different actors can interact with the intent of establishing an intersubjectivity, starting from different and, to some extent, competing understandings of the norms and views of the world. These actors need to adapt to contextual change to reach this goal, which might vary according to the extent that meanings around these norms are shared among them.

On this basis, common actions might become possible. Meanings are firstly defined through social practices, in the form of language games, and shared among the parties involved. This produces its effects in intersubjective terms, by establishing newly defined power relations, and in intrasubjective terms, by yielding its effects within the recipient of the norms which will have to accept these norms.

This does not mean, however, that defections would not occur, both in terms of the creation of shared meanings, acceptance of the norms, and their effective institutionalisation. Hence, it is possible to combine, within the same framework of political cooperation, contested norms and the intersubjective dimension. From another perspective, this combinatory possibility also allows to answer the research question on what defines the process characterizing the ontology of the EU’s norms.

By considering the complexity to effectively converge towards shared meanings, this process can be explained through the implementation of an active process of knowing and learning, also termed as ‘social practices’, where a multitude of different actors are involved, operating within an institutionalised framework. Language games contribute to defining the significance of the norms, since their use occurs in custom-regulated patterns of interaction, within a transformative process where new language games can come to life. Hence, the overall process can be better defined by the social practices, or language games, undertaken by the different parties, which contribute to defining the EU as a NP, with a normative identity, and normative interests, acting accordingly to the norms and having a normative means of power, with normative ends (De Zutter, 2010, p. 1108).

Within the EU, this NP is exercised through the institutionalisation of specific mechanisms of cooperation, such as the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), where the involved parties can implement and exercise those social practices needed to define shared meanings around the norms, possibly leading to common actions, within a common intersubjectivity. This does not mean, however, that this will lead to effective actions or to a unique and shared intersubjectivity among the parties. The results and the effectiveness of actions and decisions might vary, in fact, especially if we consider the complexity of the language games and the outcomes arising from them. It is within this context that multiple intersubjectivities can emerge if no shared meanings are found. Consequently, the actions that will be implemented will also vary, in terms of scope and effectiveness. Does such an outcome still allow to characterize the EU as a normative kind of actor? The EU is a NP to the extent that it enables the possibility to create shared meanings around norms and the coexistence within the same framework of multiple intersubjective dimensions.

The intersubjectivity is expressed, in the first instance, through the definition of shared norms among the different actors, constituting the ontological basis for common actions. In the absence of this, the intersubjectivity itself would lack a specific foundation, because there would be no correspondence between the ontological foundation of the norms and the possibility to undertake common actions. In case of multiple intersubjectivities, common actions might become difficult to be agreed upon, despite coexisting within the same institutional framework. From here, the two features of the EU as a normative kind of power identified by Parker and Rosamond (2013, p. 231) are validated, defined as an ontological reality and a critical ontology, according to which the system of norms and realities promoted and diffused by the EU can be considered as ‘plural and contingent social constructions’.

Based on this, the ontology of the norms can be furtherly defined, and verified, through the act of reshaping the previously constituted intersubjectivity, based on language games. The result is that norms are provided with a different acceptation, allowing the actors to implement new or modified actions in the field of foreign policy. This implies that the overall process is not static, but it can undergo several evolutions over the years, defining a dynamic ontology of the norms the EU relies upon, defining it as a NP. Consequently, this directly affects the EU as a normative kind of actor, since it theoretically creates the conditions for the establishment of a fluid international entity, based on the concept of change and eventually being able to exercise its power of attraction towards a variety of heterogeneous actors, which will all contribute to defining and redefining meanings, and consequently the common intersubjectivity. Since the intersubjectivity is expressed and revealed through the definition of shared norms among the different actors, meaning that a common significance is provided to them, in the absence of this, a common intersubjectivity is lacking, evidencing the coexistence of multiple ones. This also determines a lack of correspondence between the ontological foundation of the norms and the possibility to undertake common actions, since different meanings will be competing.

**Possible applications of the theory**

As widely known, on the 23rd of June 2016, the UK held a referendum, asking voters to choose whether they should leave or remain in the EU. As the ‘Leave’ got 51.89% of the votes, this event has been defined as one of the ‘most important political event in Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall’, leading to Brexit, that is the withdrawal of the UK from the EU (Fabbrini, 2017, p. 1). The provision allowing a MS to leave the EU was inserted in 2009 in the Lisbon Treaty, in Article 50, stating that ‘any Member State may decide to withdraw from the Union in accordance with its own constitutional requirements’ (Fabbrini, 2017, p. 1). No one ever thought that this Article could have been used by a MS, as reported by Giuliano Amato, the author of Article 50 (Fabbrini, 2017, p. 1). By exploring the process, it would be possible to verify how the presence of an axiological hierarchy, producing norms contestation, directly affects not only the NP of the EU, but also its effectiveness in horizontally institutionalising its norms, and it effects in the international arena. The use of the theoretical framework can be used to assess the intrasubjective evolution of the UK towards the EU, so to evaluate how norms have been challenged and meanings redefined, creating different power relations between the EU and the UK. It would also be possible to trace specific patterns of interactions towards the EU, while at the same time analysing the intrasubjective effects occurred in this regard.

Also, if it is true that it is not possible to detach the notion of Europeanness from the concept of NP (Haukkala, 2011, pp. 47-50), this means that the current contestations to the EU (and its norms) also produce effects to the concept of Europeanness. From here the identity, actorness, and power of the EU can be questioned and needs to be eventually redefined. In 2019, Europe celebrated the 30th anniversary of the fall of the communist regime, an event that caused a contextual change, leading to the democratic transition of the countries, previously under communist rule, and their accession to the EU. Since 2015, however, the government in Poland has been creating forceful pressure on the separation of powers and the judiciary’s independence, highlighting a change in the acceptation of these two concepts (Matczak, 2019, p. 407). Consequently, two issues arise from here: an intersubjective one, on the basis of the redefinition of the meanings of the rule of law and democracy in Poland, and an intrasubjective one, on the lack of horizontal institutionalisation of the EU’s system of norms and beliefs in the country, signifying a lack of acceptance of the norms. Is the EU allowing the coexistence of liberal and illiberal democracies within the same institutional framework? To what extent is the coexistence of dichotomic intersubjectivities sustainable within an NPE?

Also, Hungary is currently experiencing a deterioration of its democracy, respect of the rule of law, pluralism, functioning of the civil society, also going against the principles of the liberal economy (Kornai, 2015, p. 34). The same two issues, as in the case of Poland, arise here. However, combined, the cases of Poland and Hungary represents a further important normative challenge to the EU. In fact, if a plurality of actors starts to recurrently challenge the significance of the norms, deviating from liberal criteria they initially adopted, what will be the consequences for the EU?

Moreover, in February 2022 Russia has invaded Ukraine. Since then, the EU has defined several sanctions against Russia; however, MS such as Hungary and Slovakia, did not support the sanctions. Their positions evidence a lack of common positions within the EU towards Russia, affecting its ability in the field of foreign policy and actions to be undertaken. Is this a clash between liberal and illiberal views of the norms at the basis of the EU? Does this affect the ability of the EU to effectively act as a NP?

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