



Avoiding emotivism: A sociolinguistic approach to moral talk



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ABSTRACT

The ways in which people use language to make moral judgements have long been the focus of debates in moral philosophy. But, despite the recent turn in socially and functionally oriented approaches to linguistics towards the study of evaluative language, little has been said within the linguistic tradition about morally evaluative language. The argument of this paper is that we can use the concept of register (as recently deployed by Agha, 2007) to explore linguistic attempts to index the activity of moral judgement – moral talk. In so doing, we might also be able to resist the reification of the idea that moral talk is a necessarily expressive, emotive, or interpersonal thing, and to view it as a multifunctional resource.

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1. Introduction

The capacity for moral evaluation in speech was, for Aristotle, central to the human ability to form deliberative communities and therefore central to politics (1951). Despite this, and despite morally evaluative language being a central concern of Twentieth Century moral philosophy (Ayer, 1938; Stevenson, 1944; Hare, 1952; Williams, 1985, Ch7), it has been paid little attention within the linguistic tradition. This paper argues for a quite specific sociolinguistic approach to moral talk – that is, language oriented towards making moral judgements (as opposed to aesthetic or pragmatic ones, for instance, Sayer, 2005). That approach is to view it as, in Agha's terms (2007) a *register*, 'a repertoire of performable signs linked to stereotypic pragmatic effects by a sociohistorical process of *enregisterment*' (2007: 80). This allows moral talk to be viewed as a culturally formed, and thus metapragmatically negotiated (Silverstein, 1993; Verschueren, 2000), resource for achieving the 'stereotypic pragmatic effect' of making moral judgements, and other associated activities beyond.

It is the issue of the associated activities beyond in particular which makes it particularly useful to view moral as a register. Metaethical debates continue about whether moral talk might work to say things about the world, or whether it is a purely expressive or emotive phenomenon (see e.g. Norman, 1998). Existing linguistic approaches to evaluative language, while not focussing on moral talk in particular, are perhaps likely to lead us to believe it is always the latter – an implicitly 'emotivist' position that suggests moral evaluation, or any other kind of evaluation, is always, to the extent that it is evaluative, an expression of something subjective. This is a problematic position because it would attribute little moral worth to moral talk, suggesting that it can only ever be used to express feelings, and not in activities oriented towards making claims about the world. And this is potentially limiting if we wish to capture the possibility that language users might be trying to say things about the world and taking each other to be saying things about the world in their moral talk (Sayer, 2006). The approach I am proposing allows for the possibility that such relations between moral talk and broader functional categories might be

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contingent, metapragmatically negotiated ones, that what moral talk does in one situation might not be the same as what it does in another (MacIntyre, 1985) and that this might have something to do with how language users engage in metasemiotic, or, more specifically, metapragmatic, practices to negotiate its function (Silverstein, 1993). How we treat moral talk – as lay people and as linguists – might be seen as having consequences for the kind of things that people are able to do with it, and thus for the potential for language to be involved in genuine moral deliberation. Beyond the issue of morality itself, a general theoretical consequence of this position is that, while we are by now used to the idea that metalinguistic practices affect the kinds of things that people are able to *be* with language (e.g. Wolfram, 1998; Johnstone and Kiesling, 2008), this paper outlines a perspective on the perhaps equally significant issue of the reflexive negotiation of what people can *do* with language, with reference to a specific kind of linguistic doing – moral talk.

The argument of the paper is made, first by discussing existing approaches to moral talk and evaluative language more generally and suggesting that while moral talk might seem to exist as a reflexive category – a register that people are able to talk about and reflect on – there are limits to what we know about both the *form-function* relations of this register, in Agha's terms (2007), its 'semiotic repertoire', and the *function-function* relations – once we have identified something as being moral talk, what is it being used to do? This second point will be discussed in some detail and the suggestion made that there is perhaps a tendency towards an 'emotivist' position in existing functional accounts of evaluative language. Second, the paper presents a case study of metadiscursive negotiation of moral talk as a register, in a speech given in 2008 by the then British Prime Minister Gordon Brown. This provides only an indicative sketch of ways in which the 'higher order' functional boundaries of moral talk are negotiated as part of the negotiation of political identities and activities more broadly. But I suggest that it does demonstrate an attempt to work on what moral talk is and what it can do. Third, some theoretical implications of the argument that moral talk should be seen as a reflexively negotiated register are discussed, and suggestions made for how further investigation of this might proceed.

The key arguments of the paper are thus that:

1. In developing a sociolinguistic oriented approach to moral talk, we risk being influenced by an 'emotivist' reification of its function, and that this can be seen as a fairly contingent metapragmatic stipulation, which we need not make, and which indeed limits the moral significance of moral talk.
2. In a case study of a political speech, a political leader uses metadiscourse in what seem to be attempts to locally negotiate the functions of moral talk.
3. We can gain a greater understanding of how people use language to do moral judgement and then use moral talk to do various other things by paying attention to the ways in which moral talk as a register is metapragmatically negotiated.
4. The attention paid to language users' metadiscourse, of the kind outlined in 2 might be one way of paying attention to metapragmatic negotiation, but that there might also be others, some of which are suggested.

2. Existing approaches to moral talk and evaluative language

To begin with, it is worth discussing how moral talk might be viewed in socially and functionally oriented linguistic work. I will suggest first, and very briefly, that we could know more about the *form-function* relations that are being identified when people reflect on the ability of language to make moral judgements, and, second, that we could rethink currently implicit conceptions of the *function-function* relations. Dominant is the idea that to evaluate, morally or otherwise, is to do something expressive, emotive or interpersonal, but is this the case?

So the first point is that while evaluative language has been subject to a great deal of investigation in the past twenty to thirty years (Stubbs, 1986; Biber and Finegan, 1989; Ochs and Schieffelin, 1989; Besnier, 1990; Hunston and Thompson, 1999; Martin and White, 2005; Engelbretson, 2006), very little of this has focused on *moral* evaluation. While moral and metaethical philosophers have discussed at length what the forms of moral evaluation are and how they work, and have often presented stylised instances of moral talk in their discussions, suggesting that the category exists as a reflexive linguistic category with some salience, (vivid examples being Nietzsche's 'workshop' where 'ideals are fabricated on earth', 1996 [1887]: 31–32, and Stevenson's 1944 stylised moral debates), such discussions are generally not informed by any investigation of actually occurring language (though see some recent works in natural language metaethics, e.g. Silk, in preparation). A recent argument for the universality of human morality – for an innate 'moral grammar' – is supported by the claim that the supposed universality of deontic modality as a linguistic phenomenon suggests a concomitant universal moral concern (Mikhail, 2007: 143–144). But relations between deontic modality and the act of moral evaluation have not been investigated in actually occurring discourse. We know little about how language forms relate to the activity or function of moral evaluation.

It may be that this gap is not best filled by extending existing linguistic accounts of evaluative language, since such accounts perhaps make implicit use of a quite specific 'emotivist' perspective on evaluative behaviour. Emotivism is 'the doctrine that all evaluative judgments and more specifically all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling, insofar as they are moral or evaluative in character' (MacIntyre, 1985: 11–12, see, among others, MacIntyre, 1967, Ch18; Warnock, 1978, Ch3; Foot, 2002; Putnam, 2002). This metaethical position is also a meta-pragmatic one, an account of what people do and *can* do with language, and, since it might be seen as articulating arguments

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