

Language and Morality: The Influence of Language on Ethical Thinking

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Abstract

Language is not only a tool for communication but also a powerful medium that shapes human thought, including ethical reasoning. This paper explores the relationship between language and morality, investigating how linguistic structures and language use influence ethical thinking and decision-making. Drawing on interdisciplinary research from cognitive science, philosophy, and linguistics, the paper examines the role of language in framing moral issues, guiding moral judgments, and reflecting cultural values. It argues that the way moral concepts are expressed can significantly affect individuals' perceptions of right and wrong, influencing everything from everyday choices to complex ethical dilemmas. By examining linguistic relativity, moral language, and cross-cultural variations, the paper highlights how language acts as both a mirror and a mold for moral cognition. Finally, the implications of this connection for ethical education, cross-cultural understanding, and global moral discourse are considered.

Introduction:

Expressions in a language have significance. Sentences, which are composed of words and phrases, are used to communicate information about things, their properties, and global events. The study of linguistic meaning is crucial in the field of philosophy of language.

Language is an integral part of culture. It plays a crucial role in communication. It is present in every human activity. The foundation of civilization is language. Morality itself is essentially a cultural creation. Therefore, the ethical value system is restricted by culture. To put it another way, the moral value system is culturally anchored. It is important to note that morality is not a vacuum. Morality finds expression in the way we use language. According to some traditional wisdom, the morality of the language is inseparable from the morality of the society. The morality of the language always relates to the morality and behavior of the society. As a part of culture, the language is a stepping stone to the morality of the traditional society. Thus, the morality of language gives insight into the moral ideas or thoughts. Morality involves judging individuals and actions in terms of "good" and "bad," as well as what people should and should not do in accordance with moral principles. Language, therefore, has a significant role in the formation of morality.

American Semiotician Charls Morris, in his book *Logical Positivism, Pragmatism, and Scientific Empericism*(1937) provides a good place to start when organizing ethical issues pertaining to language. He claimed that signs have relationships with other signs, things, and people. He designated the disciplines dealings with these sign relations as syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. Philosophy of Language and linguistics have both influenced from the syntactic-semantic-pragmatics separation.

The term "syntax" (as used in philosophy) relates to the lexicon and sentence-formation norms of language. These norms are known as grammar of language and the construction of a complex expression from words and atomic sentences are guided by these norms.

Semantics is the study of literal meaning in language. There are two main definitions of semantics. First, semantics is the study of the representational role and meaning of linguistic expression and second, semantics is the system of meaning connections that exist between language and reality. Semantics is the study of the relationship between expressions and their referents in this latter sense. Thus, semantic studies focus only on the internal characteristics of language, including terminology, syntax, and logical relationships between terms and between sentences.

Pragmatics is the study of how language is used to convey meaning, frequently meanings that are substantially different from the literal meanings of the words employed. For instance, the uses of language, as well as people's intentions and interests in using language, might be the subject of a pragmatic study of language. The relationship among various language practices, context, and meanings is frequently another focus of pragmatics. Pragmatics thus investigates the issue of how context and various applications of the same verbal statement affect meaning.

Ethical issues regarding Syntax

Most people undoubtedly believe that the syntax and grammar of languages are essentially morally neutral. This supposition states that it would be problematic to evaluate vocabulary or grammar in moral terms apart of its usage and user. The fact that the majority of people would find it ludicrous to claim that a grammatical rule is morally good or harmful is evidence of this. That can be questioned, at least in part. For instance. Because the grammar of the Finnish language (as well as numerous grammar of many other languages) uses the same pronoun for both the masculine and feminine genders, it has been morally lauded in discussions of the differences between men and women. This commendation at least hints at a moral undertone or hue. Therefore, failing to distinguish between masculine and feminine is seen from a specific perspective as a morally good and valuable trait of a language.

Some of the language used in all cultures is considered reprehensible, and people can be blamed for bad language, taboos or curse words. Criticism must not, in these cases, be regarded as insulting or offensive. Thus, although the criticism concerns syntactical units, individual words, or longer expressions, the criticism is directed towards the use and users of them. In that case, the nature and direction of criticism is pragmatic as opposed to syntactic.

Ethical issues regarding semantic

Due to ignorance and incorrect attitudes of language users, a particular ethical problem is related to the Semantics. The issue concerns the capacity and competence of language users to refer referred intended objects or concepts. The primary requirement of a successful communication shall be fulfilled if the language user has managed to identify the referring entity for the phrase in question. However, in the absence of a reference, there is uncertainty or a misunderstanding in the audience. However, there is an uncertainty or confusion within her audience if she does not refer. It is precisely because of the common need for communication in a way which an audience would be able to correctly understand what they are saying that this issue arises. Accordingly, when a writer or the speaker does not identify an object for which they are going to speak, it could lead to ethical difficulties in terms of language semantics. For example, if the writer or the speaker does not know the relevant object in question, either by

acquaintance or by description, such a failure can easily occur. Therefore, it may be ethically questionable to talk about a topic which the author has no knowledge of. Therefore, it is our moral duty to be particularly careful about what we say, and to make it clear that we are not experts, to avoid speaking or writing about topics that we are ignorant of, or at least in such cases. However, all philosophers are concerned that the very potential source of moral problems is the lack of precise meaning of words. But some philosophers, on the other hand, consider that ignorance a very normal feature of language use.

Ethical issues regarding pragmatics

Linguistic issues related to pragmatics, such as the use of languages, are the most important category of ethically appropriate language matters. We've already seen, in situations where moral problems arise with regard to syntax and semantics, there is also a pragmatic dimension. The use of language as a means for social inclusion and exclusion is an essential feature of languages that makes the moral evaluation of linguistic practices important.

Language users may also be subject to ethical criticism for behaviours like slander, boasting, double speaks, and the improper use of rhetorical devices like metaphors, similes, and hyperbole. Furthermore, criticizing experts for employing their particular professional jargon might be annoying in general, but it can also raise ethical concerns if the language prevents clear communication and hides crucial information. Such can happen, for example, when doctors, lawyers, or civil servants use special terminology with which their customers, ordinary citizen, are unfamiliar. As a result, understanding ability can not only be an intellectual virtue but also an ethical requirement in the use of languages.

The cognitive framework of morality

The cognitive framework of morality refers to the mental processes and structures that guide how individuals understand, reason about, and make judgments regarding moral issues. The central idea of the cognitive framework of morality is that our moral reasoning is shaped by how we categorize and make sense of the world, often through the lens of language. This framework includes the cognitive structures that help individuals organize, interpret, and evaluate ethical issues and dilemmas. Language plays a crucial role in this process by providing the terms, categories, and metaphors that influence how we understand moral situations.

The cognitive framework of morality is also influenced by cultural differences in languages. Different cultures may have distinct moral concepts and structures, which are reflected in the languages they speak. For example, languages in cognitive cultures, such as many Asian languages, often emphasize social harmony and the welfare of the group, which can shape moral thinking to priorities communal wellbeing over individual rights. In contrast, languages in more individualistic cultures, like England, tend to focus on personal autonomy, individual rights, and freedom. These linguistic variations influence how individuals from different cultures engage in moral reasoning. A person raised in a collectivist culture might approach a moral dilemma with a focus on the consequences for the group, while someone from an individualistic culture might prioritize personal rights and freedoms. The structure of language, with its emphasis on particular moral values, helps shape the cognitive framework of ethical thinking within a given culture.

Moral emotions- such as guilt, shame, anger and empathy are the integral to the cognitive framework of morality. These emotions are not only responses to moral situations but are also shaped by the language

we use describe them. Cognitive linguistic explores how emotions are often linked to specific metaphors and linguistic expression. For example, feeling is guilt are often described as “weighing heavy on the conscience,” a metaphor that reflects the cognitive structure of burden or heaviness associated with moral wrongdoing.

British philosopher **David Hume(1711-1776)** argues that moral judgments are grounded on human sentiments- our emotional reaction to action or events. For him, language plays a crucial role in expressing moral sentiments. He posits that “*Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.*” (Hume 1739, p.445) Hume suggests that emotions play a central role in moral decision-making, and reason serves as a tool to express and justify those emotional judgments.

When we say something is “good” or ‘bad’, “right” or “wrong” we not referring to objective properties of the world but expressing emotional reactions or feelings that arise from within us. In this sense, moral language serves as a medium through which we communicate our approval or disapproval of particular actions, people, or events.

Language as a Medium for Expressing Moral Value:

Language enables, extends, and maintains human value systems. It is also the primary means by which individuals and societies express, debate, and transmit moral value. Through language, abstract ethical concepts become accessible, shared and actionable. From early childhood, people learn the vocabulary of morality; words such as right, wrong, duty, justice, honesty, compassion, and fairness. These terms are not mere labels; they carry with them complex sets expectations, norms, and emotions that shape how individuals interact with one another and understand their responsibilities within a community. English philosopher J. L. Austin in his book ‘*How to Do Things with Words*’ hold that “*In saying what we do, we not only state things, but we do things.*” (Austin 1962, p.99). His theory of speech acts emphasizes that language is not merely a tool for describing the world, but a means of performing actions. Ethical language does not just express beliefs about right and wrong; it can also influence actions and behaviors. The perlocutionary effect of a speech act involves the impact it has on others. These effects can have moral significance, particularly when they influence others’ emotions, behaviors, or well-being. The speaker can be held responsible for the consequences of their words, particularly if those words cause harm. For example: If a person says, “You’re terrible at your job,” the illocutionary act is the act of criticizing or insulting someone. The perlocutionary effect could be that the person feels hurt or demoralized. The speaker is morally responsible for how their words affect the other person’s emotional state and may need to apologize or correct their actions. In some cases, speech acts can cause emotional or psychological harm, leading to moral responsibility for the effect the speech has on the listener.

Everyday moral judgments are almost always articulated through language. When someone says, “It is wrong to lie,” or “You should help those in needs.” They are expressing moral value and inviting others to reflect upon and possibly adopt those standards. In this way, language becomes a vehicle for moral education, allowing communities to reinforce shared beliefs and guide behavior.

Moreover, language allows for the codification of moral rules in written form, such as laws, code of conduct, religious texts, and ethical charters. These written moral frameworks serve as references for acceptable behavior and as tools for resolving moral disputes. Without the medium of language, the

transmission and preservation of complex moral values across generations would be virtually impossible.

Importantly, the language used to express moral values can influence how those values are understood. For example, describing an act as “brave” or “cowardly” not only conveys a factual description but also make a value judgment that can shape social attitudes and and self-perception. The nuance a moral language—such as tone, metaphor, and cultural context—can further enhance or diminish the impact of moral messages.

Orwell warns that the manipulation of language can influence moral thinking. The way we use language has a powerful role in shaping our ethical views, either clarifying or distorting our sense of right and wrong. He holds that “*If thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought.*” (Orwell 1946, p. 12). Ozumba reflecting on the role of language in ethics, empathetically holds that “*our problems in the realm of morality have been that of a confused understanding of terms. Our clear-sighted apprehensions of the terms we use bring about a dimension of the disagreements that abound in our ethical arguments. We are exposed to the meaning of terms like, right or wrong, good or bad, etc.*” (Ozumba 2001)

Language as a Reflection of Societal Morality:

Language is not just a tool for a communication; it is a mirror that reflects the moral values, ethical norms, and cultural priorities of the society that uses it. The word we speak, the structure we use, and the narratives we construct are all shaped by and help reinforce the collective moral consciousness of a culture. This relationship between language and morality is evident in how certain concepts are framed, the specific words available to describe moral actions, and how language is used to encode or challenge societal values. Language can be understood as a vehicle through which moral norms are both expressed and reinforced. The vocabulary of society –its term for right or wrong, justice fairness, and responsibility- illustrates the moral beliefs held by its members. At the same time, language also plays a role in perpetuating these beliefs, as the way of society talks about moral issues often serves to solidify collective values and guide individual behavior.

Philip Pettit, an influential philosopher argues that moral reality is socially constructed through language and collective practices. While moral norms may have a degree of objectivity in that they are widely accepted within a particular social context, they are not inherently fixed in the way physical facts are. Rather, moral norms are the result of social agreement and are sustained through social practices and linguistic interaction. He claimed that “*A republic, if it is to be a true republic, must make room for the idea of the common good in the shape of the institutions through which we pursue our common purpose.*” (Pettit 1997, p. 142) Meaning that Pettit stresses how moral language helps shape societal institutions that reflect the common good. The language used in a society influences how people understand their ethical duties and obligations.

Language also plays a crucial role in constructing this moral reality by providing the means through which people negotiate and reinforce ethical norms. Through the use of moral language, individuals engage in the ongoing process of moral construction, shaping what is considered right or wrong, just or unjust, within a given society. Furthermore, language helps individuals to engage in shared moral reasoning, where the community collectively decided on what moral values to uphold. For Pettit, moral norms are central to social cooperation, and language is the medium through which people express and agree upon these norms. It helps ensure that individuals within a society are accountable to each other,

fostering cooperation and collective ethical behavior. He posited that “*The world is not just a collection of things; it is also a collection of facts. And facts, in turn, are the objects of our thoughts, expressed in language.*” (Pattit 2002)

The Influence of Language in Multilingual Individuals:

Multilingual individuals offer a unique perspective on the relationship between language and morality, as they often navigate multiple linguistic and cultural frameworks. The influence of language on ethical thinking becomes particularly pronounced when multilingual switch between languages, each associated with different social and moral system. The languages they speak do not merely serve as a tool or communication; they also shape the way they perceive and make ethical decisions.

Each language is embedded within a particular cultural and moral framework, which influences how its speakers understand and interpret the world. For multilingual individuals, the linguistic tools they have at their disposal are often tied to different ethical systems. These systems reflect distinct cultural values, priorities, and ways of thinking about morality. For instance, some one who speaks both English and a language from a collective culture, such as Japanese, may approach moral dilemmas with different ethical frameworks relying on which language they are using. In English, which often emphasizes individualism, a person might frame a moral decision in terms of personal rights, autonomy, and personal responsibility. However, when speaking Japanese, which places a greater emphasis on social harmony and group welfare, the same individual may be more inclined to consider the impact of their actions on others and the broader community. The way that multilingual individuals conceptualize concepts like justice, fairness, and responsibility can shift relying on cultural background associated with each language. For example, while western cultures may emphasize fairness as equality and individual right, many Asian cultures may frame fairness in terms of balance and group cohesion. These differences in cultural framing show how language acts as a lens through which individuals evaluate moral situations.

Multilingual individuals often find their identities tied to the languages they speak, which can have an impact on their moral reasoning. The linguistic identities they adopt may be linked to different ethical system and values. For instance, a person who speaks both English and Spanish may have different moral responses when interacting with people from the English-speaking world versus those from the Spanish-speaking world. This shift is not just based on language proficiency but on the deep-seated cultural and ethical norms embedded within each language.

Furthermore, language plays a role in group dynamic and social identity. Multilingual may feel a sense of allegiance to the moral framework of the culture associated with the language they are currently speaking. When they switch to a different language, they may more likely to adopt the social and ethical norms of the group associated with that language. For example an individual who switches from speaking English to Spanish may subconsciously adopt a moral perspective that aligns more closely with the collectivist values of their Spanish-speaking culture, even if they were raised in a more individualistic culture. This aspect of multilingual moral reasoning highlights the fluidity of ethical thinking. Multilingual individuals may not hold a single, static moral framework but instead experience a dynamic interplay of ethical systems that switch depending on the language and social context.

Conclusion:

The relationship between language and morality is intricate and vital. Language is not merely a neutral

vehicle for expressing moral beliefs; it actively shapes how individuals and societies perceive, reason about, and act upon ethical issues. Through language, we name and transmit moral values, construct and challenge arguments, and collectively negotiate the boundaries of right and wrong.

Clear, honest, and precise language can clarify moral truths, encourage ethical reflection, and promote social justice. Conversely, vague, euphemistic, or manipulative language can obscure moral reality, weaken accountability, and enable wrongdoing. The words and concepts we choose have real consequences for both personal character and collective well-being.

Recognizing the power of language in moral life encourages us to be more thoughtful in our communication and more attentive to the words we encounter in public discourse. Nietzsche acknowledges that language is not only a medium for expressing ideas but has the power to shape others' thoughts, particularly with regard to moral values and ethical principles. By striving for clarity, openness, and respect in our moral conversations, we not only deepen our own understanding but also contribute to a more ethical and compassionate society.

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