

Ethical Problems Related to Language and Linguistic Practices

Tommi Lehtonen

*Faculty of Philosophy
University of Vaasa*

Mitä tahansa kielellistä käytäntöä voidaan aiheellisesti tarkastella moraalin näkökulmasta ja mikä tahansa viestintää on potentiaalisesti moraalisesti moittittavaa esimerkiksi, jos se kuullaan, luetaan tai ymmärretään väärin. Tällaisissa tapauksissa moraalinen moite syntyy sattumalta viestin vastaanottajassa. Toinen ryhmä kielen moraalisesti moittittavia käytöjä ovat ne, jotka viestin lähettiläjä tarkoittaa sopimatomiksi tai loukkaaviksi.

Yleisesti ottaen sanasto ja kielioffi voivat olla moraalitarkastelujen kannalta relevantteja vain suhteessa niiden käyttöön. Kielellisiin käytäntöihin liittyviä moraaliongelmia lisää merkittävästi se, että sanomalla jotakin voimme tosiasiassa tarkoittaa jotakin muuta: vihjata ilkeämielisesti, mustamaalata, uhata, syylistää ja nöyryyttää.

Keywords: ethics, syntax, semantics, pragmatics, implicature

1 Introduction

We would be committing a serious intellectual and perhaps also a moral error if we were to think that some human practices are beyond moral criticism. It would be equally problematic to assume that some linguistic practices cannot or should not be evaluated from a moral point of view. Thus, the point of view of morality encompasses all human acts and practices, linguistic as well as non-linguistic.

The Oxford philosopher John L. Austin is the father of the theory that considers linguistic practices as speech acts (or language acts). His posthumous work *How to Do Things with Words* (1976) significantly impacted linguistic philosophy, especially the study of the use of language. If the use and functions of language are interpreted in terms of human action, as Austin suggests, it is appropriate, even necessary, to morally evaluate language and its use.

This article aims, first, to identify and classify ethical problems related to language and linguistic practices, and second, to explain the origin and consequences of these problems.

2 Syntax, Semantics, Pragmatics

A suitable starting point for the systematization of ethical problems related to language is offered by the American semiotician Charles Morris. In his book *Logical Positivism, Pragmatism, and Scientific Empiricism* (1937), Morris came to the conclusion that signs have relations to other signs, to objects, and to persons. He named the disciplines dealing with these sign relations as syntaxics, semantics, and pragmatics (Morris 1937: 4). The syntax-semantics-pragmatics division has been influential both in linguistics and philosophy of language.

Although syntax, semantics, and pragmatics are much-used terms, not only in philosophy, but also in linguistics and other disciplines studying language, it is necessary, for the special purposes of this study, to represent brief characterizations of these terms.

Syntax (in the philosophical use of the term) refers to the vocabulary and the rules of sentence formation of a language. These rules are called the grammar of language and they guide the construction of complicated expressions from terms and atomic sentences.

Semantics has two major meanings. First, semantics is the system of meaning relations that are obtained between language and reality; second, semantics is the study of the representative function and meaning of linguistic expressions. In this latter sense, semantics is the analysis of the relationships between expressions and their referents. Thus, semantic studies pay attention to the representational capacity of language, whereas syntactic study focuses solely on the internal aspects of language, especially on terminology, grammar, and analytical and logical relations between terms and between sentences.

Pragmatics is the study of the use of linguistic signs, especially sentences, in actual or imaginary situations. A pragmatic study of language can concern, for example, the users of language and their goals of and interests in using language. Often pragmatics also concerns the relationship between different linguistic practices, contexts, and meanings. Thus, pragmatics studies the question of how meanings depend on a context and on different uses of the same linguistic expressions.

3 The Concept of Ethics

In the case of our theme (i.e., ethical questions related to language), it is also important to have at least a tentative understanding of the concept of ethics. The following characterization attempts to take into consideration several often-mentioned dimensions of ethics. First, ethics refers to valuations and prescriptive (i.e., commanding or prohibitive) notions that aim to regulate the action and behaviour of all people irrespective of gender, origin, social class, or another specific characteristic. Second, based on these prescriptive notions, acts, intentions and consequences of acts are judged to be good or bad, right or wrong. Moral evaluation, which is an essential aspect of ethics, is also (and often primarily) directed at the doers of acts who are praised or blamed (as the agent of the act) and are called good or bad, just or unjust.

One could expect that insofar as ethics concerns human practices, action, and behaviour, the consideration of ethical questions related to language must primarily revolve around the pragmatic dimension of language. Thus, there is at least a tentative reason to think that of the three dimensions of language, pragmatics is the most relevant for ethical considerations. However, it is worth considering whether there are any special ethical problems related to syntax or semantics. As an advance answer, it can be said that yes, there are some special cases of philosophically interesting, ethical issues that concern syntax and semantics. Those issues also concern the pragmatics of language, but nevertheless they are primarily related to syntax and semantics. Such issues are, for example, swearing, translation mistakes, the choosing of words for a dictionary, and ignorance of a language. In what follows, examples of these issues are considered more closely.

Thus, borrowing the division presented by Morris, we can structure the ethical questions related to language into syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic categories. Accordingly, the questions of syntactic category concern the ethical problems related to the vocabulary and grammar of a language. The questions of semantic category concern the ethical problems related to the linguistic representation of reality, and the questions of pragmatic category concern the ethical problems related to linguistic practices.

4 Ethical Problems Related to Syntax

It is probably a common assumption that the vocabulary and grammar of languages are more or less strictly non-moral as such. According to this assumption, to evaluate vocabulary or grammar, apart from their use and users, in moral terms would be problematic. An indication of that is that most people would consider it absurd to say that a grammatical rule is morally good or bad. Or is it so? That can be, at least to some extent, questioned. Let us take an example. In the discussion of the equality between men and women, the Finnish grammar has been morally praised because the grammar of the Finnish language (as well as the grammar of many other languages) makes no distinction between masculine and feminine pronouns, using the same for either sex. This praise has at least a slight moral tone or colour. Thus, from a certain perspective, it is regarded as a morally good and valuable feature of a language that it fails to make a distinction between masculine and feminine (although, for avoiding the ambiguity of the reference of third-person pronouns, such a distinction is useful).

However, there are not many cases in which the moral evaluation of the vocabulary and grammar of a language is considered to be relevant. Perhaps one might suggest that we can praise, in a sense, the grammar of a language for its consistency and simplicity and that we can blame, in a sense, the grammar of a language, for example, for its inconsistencies and complexity. However, if we were to perform such evaluations from a moral point of view, we would commit a categorical mistake because for moral praise or blame to be pertinent, the activity under evaluation should involve the possibility of refraining from doing it or the possibility of doing it in a different way. No one should be blamed for doing something that is unavoidable, or at least so it is commonly supposed.

Now, we cannot normally choose the grammatical rules for a language, but rather we have to use a language largely according to its established grammatical and other rules if we wish to be understood in that language. The rules of grammar of natural languages can change (and have changed), to some extent, over time, but such changes are often slow and largely uncontrollable. In addition, grammar changes are generated and implemented by a collective of language users, and accordingly, for such changes, the ‘responsible agent’ is the whole of language users rather than any individual.

Nevertheless, one might suggest, based on communication benefits, that people should primarily use languages that are most commonly spoken or languages that are supposedly the easiest to learn for most people and therefore the easiest to be mastered as everyone’s means of communication. The ease of learning a language is often assessed in terms of the simplicity and consistency of a language’s grammar. Accordingly, one might suggest that people should generally learn languages whose grammar is relatively easy and straightforward. To this, we might like to answer that for cultural reasons and because of the internal value of any language (as part of the human cultural heritage), we cannot generally choose which languages are the most recommendable to be used. However, for special purposes, such as in international conferences, there may even be moral reasons to choose a certain language as a common working language if all participants have mastered the language in question. Thus, it might be morally questionable to choose as the sole working language of a conference (or any gathering) a language that only some participants can speak.

In general, vocabulary and grammar can be relevant for moral considerations only in relation to their use and application in linguistic practices. The moral relevance of terminology and grammar requires, first, their use in linguistic practices and, second, moral rules concerning linguistic behaviour and communication. For example, if someone uses bad language, curses, or cusses in public, she may be reproached for bad manners and for disrespect for other people. This is certainly a different reproach than, for example, being blamed for flawed pronunciation or grammar mistakes. On the other hand, if a professional translator makes terminological or grammatical errors, she may be taken to task for performing bad work. This reproach can also have a moral tone

because for representatives of different professions, it is regarded as a moral duty to be professionally skilled and accurate in their work. If a profession is such that language is its central tool, the lack of the skill and will to use that tool in the right way (including communicating effectively in speech and writing, selecting an appropriate genre, style, register, etc.) is a relevant basis for moral criticism of the work in question.

In all cultures some linguistic (and non-linguistic) expressions are considered reprehensible and people can be blamed for bad language, taboo words, or curse words. In such cases, the criticism is placed not necessarily on certain words as such, but on the use of the words if the use is thought to be intentionally insulting and 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 such cases, the nature and direction of the criticism is pragmatic rather than syntactic.

A similar problem of impoliteness and rudeness that is related to taboo words also concerns other words and expressions that have an offensive, sarcastic, or discriminatory tone (and that are used intentionally to insult or offend someone). While it is almost a truism that colloquial language contains many rude expressions, it is also a truism, at least among linguists, to say that words take their tone from the context. Thus, an expression that is completely acceptable or even affirmative in one context can be offensive and objectionable in another context. So, words as such are not impolite or offensive, but words can become offensive when used in certain contexts and with bad intentions.

However, some people might prefer to exclude bad words not only from actual use but also from dictionaries, because some words as such are considered to be morally wrong. For example, the Finnish language has sometimes been morally reproached for having many curse and dirty words. On the other hand, the richness of any vocabulary can be regarded (in a sense) as a cultural value. For this reason, among others, compilers of a dictionary can be (morally) reproached for leaving out some words, explanations of words, or examples of using words.

5 Ethical Problems Related to Semantics

Moral evaluations related to language can concern semantics insofar as the ethical consideration is directed to the analysis of the representative function of language and the way language refers to the world. We have already pointed out that the work of a translator (and of an interpreter) can be morally evaluated for syntactic errors, but it can also be morally evaluated for reasons related to the semantic dimension of language. If a translator is careless with her work and does not adequately take into consideration different possible interpretations of a text, she can be morally blamed for neglecting the relevant meaning or semantic considerations. A translator can also be criticized for making a too literal or ‘static’ translation instead of a more dynamic and clear one, and this criticism can also have a moral tone (relating to the accusation of unprofessionalism).

A special ethical issue related to semantics arises from the ignorance and erroneous beliefs of language users. The issue in question concerns the ability and competence of language users to refer to intended objects or to intended views or concepts. If a language user manages to refer to the referent of the expression used (and to the object she intends to refer to), then the basic requirement of a successful linguistic communication is met. However, if she fails to refer, an uncertainty or a misconception is created among her audience. This issue is related to the general demand to communicate in a way that the audience can rightly understand what is being said. Thus, it is potentially an ethical problem related to the semantics of a language if a writer or speaker fails to refer to the object to which she intends to refer. Such a failure may easily take place, for example, if the referent-object in question is not known to the writer or speaker herself either by acquaintance or by description. Consequently, it may be ethically questionable to speak or write about a subject matter that is totally (or largely) unknown to the author. Thus, one should avoid speaking and writing about topics of which one is ignorant, or at least, in such cases, our moral duty is to be especially careful about what we say and to make clear that we are not experts.

However, not all philosophers share the worry that ignorance of the exact meanings of words is a highly potential source of moral problems. On the contrary, some philosophers consider such ignorance a completely normal feature of the use of language. The advocates of the so-called causal-historical theory of reference (or the new theory of meaning), such as Kripke and Putnam, argue that language users are more often than not ignorant of the exact meanings of the words they use and that only experts know the exact, scientifically determined extensions of words. Despite their ignorance, people succeed in referring because a causal-historical chain (starting from the initial ‘baptism’ of the object named) links the use of a word at one end of it with an object at the other end, and this object is supposed to be the reference of the word (Kripke 1980). This phenomenon in which laypersons, despite their ignorance of the exact meanings of words, can ‘borrow’ concepts from experts is called a linguistic division of labour (Putnam 1975: 227). Because of this division of labour, our ignorance of the exact meanings of words does not necessarily prevent a successful referring act or a considerate communication. Thus, laypersons’ talk about issues of which they have very limited knowledge is not necessarily morally problematic.

6 Ethical Problems Related to Pragmatics

The largest category of ethically relevant, linguistic issues is related to pragmatics, that is, the use of language. We have already seen that in the cases in which moral problems relate to syntax or semantics, those problems also have a pragmatic dimension.

A general feature of language that makes the moral evaluation of linguistic practices relevant is that language is a means of social inclusion and exclusion. In books such as *Madness and Civilization*, *The History of Sexuality*, and *Discipline and Punishment*, Michel Foucault famously studied the ways in which certain social groups are marginalized by the discourses of more powerful groups. Foucault also studied social mechanisms that determine who can competently engage in a public debate on a given topic. These power mechanisms and positions of dominance are apt to be morally problematic. This does not mean, in any way, that all linguistic practices—even political or economic talk that obviously involves a power dimension—are morally wrong. Instead, it means

that all linguistic practices (and related power mechanisms and positions of dominance) can be meaningfully evaluated from a moral point of view.

Language users can also be ethically criticized, for example, for gossiping, boasting, double-speak, and the misleading use of rhetorical means such as metaphors, similes, and hyperbole. In addition, professionals can be criticized for using their special professional language in a cryptic way that is closed to laypersons. The use of highly professionalized language can be irritating in general, but it can also be ethically questionable if the jargon hinders communication and conceals important information. Such can happen, for example, when doctors, lawyers, or civil servants use special terminology with which their customers, ordinary citizens, are unfamiliar. Thus, understandability can be not only a technical virtue, but also an ethical imperative in the use of language.

In this context, the Cooperative Principle and the Maxims of Good Communication presented by the British-American philosopher Paul Grice are often mentioned. The Cooperative Principle exhorts one to ‘make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the state at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged’. Grice’s conversational maxims or the Maxims of Good Communication are as follows: 1) Make your contribution as informative as is required (for the current purposes of the exchange). 2) Do not make your contribution more informative than is required. 3) Do not say what you believe to be false. 4) Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence (Grice 1991: 26–27). These maxims are not only technical guidelines but also moral norms because in principle they are meant to be binding on everyone.

7 Ethical Problems of Implicatures

One much-discussed pragmatic aspect of language is related to another fact to which Grice paid attention. It is the fact that by saying something, we can actually mean something else. If a user of language means something else than the literal or conventional (sentence) meaning of the expression used, her use of that expression is potentially ethically questionable. Thus, our capacity to lead people astray not just by telling

(obvious) lies but also by leaving something unsaid and our capacity to be sarcastic in what we say are subject to moral criticism.

This phenomenon has been conceptualized by the idea of implicature. Implicature is a term coined by Grice, who developed a theory of what he called conversational implicature to help sort out the truth conditions of a sentence from other conclusions we might draw from its assertion. These other conclusions Grice called implicatures (Grice 1991: 24–26 and 30–31). Grice's view suggests that the literal content (sentence meaning) of an utterance may be only the tip of the iceberg: what is conveyed may depend on a complex network of social conventions governing how people expect each other to behave and how much information they expect them to convey for a given purpose. Thus, 'implicature' is a technical term for certain kinds of conclusions that are drawn from statements without those conclusions being logical implications or entailments.

A statement is an implicature for another statement if the truth of the latter suggests the truth of the former, but does not require it. In general, an implicature is a conclusion that can be drawn from a sentence but does not figure into the truth condition of that sentence.

One can test whether or not a conclusion is a conversational implicature of the sentence simply by cancelling that conclusion—by stating its negation. If the negation logically contradicts the sentence, then the conclusion is part of the truth-condition or the meaning of the sentence. On the other hand, if the negation is compatible with the sentence, then the conclusion under discussion is an implicature of the sentence. It must be emphasized that if the conclusion is part of the meaning, then it cannot be cancelled by some further elaboration by the speaker (Grice 1991: 44–46). Take, for example, the following fictional conversation about the acceptability of fur farming (which is a topical issue in Finland, especially in Ostrobothnia):

- Are you for or against fur farming?
- Fur farming is a legal business in Finland.
- Are you thus saying that fur farming is morally acceptable?
- I didn't say that. Legality and morality are not one and the same.

Because in this case the statement that fur farming is morally acceptable can be cancelled without a contradiction of the opinion of the second speaker, it is an implicature (of the statement ‘Fur farming is a legal business in Finland’).

Moral problems related to linguistic practices are significantly added to by the fact that by saying something we can actually mean something else. This fact multiplies the possibilities for using language in morally questionable ways, including such wrongs as insinuation, denigration, intimidation, guilt by association, and humiliation.

For example, we can imagine a discussion, conducted in a university's institute, in which someone calls her colleague a talented administrator. However, the listeners understand, based on their earlier experience and knowledge of human nature, that the comment is ironic and that the speaker means, by implication, that her colleague is merely a mediocre researcher. This and other morally questionable examples of implicatures do not mean, of course, that all implicatures are morally wrong. Implicatures can also convey positive (and morally good) implications about people and things.

8 Conclusion

We have seen that any linguistic practice can be relevantly considered from a moral point of view and that any communication is potentially morally reproachable, for example, if it is misheard, misread, or misunderstood. In the latter cases, moral doubt or reproach arises accidentally (mainly for syntactic reasons) at the receiver's end of communication. Another group of morally reprehensible uses of language are those that the sender of a communication intends to be wrong or insulting.

Language is a means of excluding and including people. In Finland, we have an example of this in the topical discussion concerning the merger of different municipalities, of which some have a Swedish-speaking majority and others a Finnish-speaking majority.

Some people fear the loss of public services in their own language if a merger with a municipality that has a different language from the majority takes place.

Regarding the grounds for *pakkoruotsi* or the compulsory Swedish-language teaching for Finnish-speaking pupils in elementary and upper secondary school, it is often emphasized that language is a means of maintaining culture and is important in maintaining our personal identity. In Finland, it is generally believed that the Swedish language and the Finland-Swedish culture is a valuable and even priceless part of the Finnish culture. However, not all in the Finnish-speaking majority share this view. The issue of the legal and cultural status of the Swedish language in Finland is an example of the fact that language is also a strong means and indicator of social and cultural power. Because of this power dimension, among other things, linguistic practices must also be submitted to moral examination.

Ethical problems related to language and linguistic practices have very few general solutions. First, accuracy and clarity in communication can help to avoid ethical problems related to accidental misunderstandings. Second, intentionally bad acts, linguistic as well as non-linguistic, can be avoided only by a change of intention. This maxim accords with the fundamental principle of the natural moral law that good is to be done and evil avoided.

Works cited

- Austin, John L. (1976). *How to Do Things with Words*. Second edition. Ed. by J.O. Urmson & Marina Sbisa. Oxford paperbacks. Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Grice, Paul (1991). *Studies in the Way of Words*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Kripke, Saul (1980). *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Morris, Charles W. (1937). *Logical Positivism, Pragmatism, and Scientific Empiricism*. Paris: Hermann et Cie.
- Putnam, Hilary (1975). The Meaning of ‘Meaning.’ In: *Mind, Language, and Reality: Philosophical Papers*, Vol. 2. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 215–271.